

Benjamin C. West

Press Gallery, U.S. House of Representatives (1942–1968)

Superintendent, Daily Press Gallery, U.S. House of Representatives (1969–1986)

**Oral History Interviews
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Abstract

Benjamin West joined the staff of the House Press Gallery in 1942 when he was 15 years old. His 44-year career spanned the pinnacle and the decline of the newspaper as Americans' primary source of information and the ascendancy of electronic media. In this series of interviews, West discussed the evolution of the House Press Gallery, particularly as the press sought to explain federal actions and policies that had become increasingly important in Americans' everyday lives. He described the structure of the gallery, related its early history, and detailed its daily operations under its second and third superintendents, William J. Donaldson, Jr., and Richard (Dick) Embly. West explained the role of the Standing Committee of Correspondents, mentioning many of its key members, and its dynamic relationship with the gallery. He recalled pioneering women reporters and African-American reporters in the 1940s and historic events such as the 1954 shooting in the House Chamber and the 1974 Nixon impeachment hearings, both of which he witnessed. West also provided insight into the complex role of the gallery staff—particularly the superintendent—in its efforts to serve “two masters”: the press and the Members and staff.

Biography

Benjamin C. West was born on December 27, 1926, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. He grew up near the Capitol and was educated in District of Columbia public schools, graduating from the D.C. Evening High School in 1945. West served in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II. At an early age, he began delivering newspapers to support his family. In 1942 at age 15, West took a three-month position as a part-time electrician's helper in the Office of the Architect of the Capitol. He then worked as a Senate elevator operator for four months and subsequently secured a position in the House Press Gallery, where he remained for the next four decades. West began as a messenger and worked his way up the ranks before becoming superintendent of the press gallery in January 1969.

West oversaw the daily operations of the House Press Gallery during his 17 years as superintendent. He also supervised the remodeling and the modernization of the gallery, implemented a detailed reference system to facilitate reporting, and played a leading part in major gallery functions such as providing on-site management for national political conventions before his retirement from the House in April 1986 during the 99th Congress (1985–1987). Benjamin C. West died on June 13, 2014, in Cheverly, Maryland.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* at <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

“Benjamin C. West Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, [date of interview].

Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is a senior historical editor for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008).

— BENJAMIN C. WEST —
INTERVIEW ONE

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Benjamin C. West, former superintendent of the House Press Gallery. It's August 24th [2005], and this interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center conference room, Cannon House Office Building. Mr. West, I was hoping we could start with some biographical information. When and where were you born?

WEST: I was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia, as a result of my parents' being on Christmas holiday. Otherwise, I was a Washingtonian and would have been a native Washingtonian. I was born December 27th, 1926. I had the bad grace to show up eight days earlier over predictions. My parents were married four years earlier and were residents of Washington, D.C., and as a result of that, until I was married in 1946, I lived essentially within the shadow of the Capitol dome—4th and A Northeast, 7th and A Northeast, and the 1300 block of North Carolina Avenue. So, much of my young life was spent within the shadow of the dome. I also served newspapers—the old *Washington Times Herald*—for two and a half years: 4:30 in the morning and 3:30 in the afternoon. And, indeed, my route went right up to the back door of the Supreme Court building and still within the shadow of the dome.

JOHNSON: How old were you at that time?

WEST: I was 14, not quite 15. I had it about two and a half years. And as a family note, I had the rather unusual childhood role of being the family breadwinner. That was our income during the Great Depression, as it was called. Twenty-eight percent of the workforce was unemployed, and another 20 percent was underemployed. So a paper route . . . even adults, in some

cases, were utilizing that income opportunity. I came to the Capitol building at age 15, I was a little over 15. My initial employment was 90 days as an electrician's helper in the Capitol basement on the Architect's office payroll. The then-building superintendent, Mr. Augustus Cook, took a liking to me, and when that patronage appointment expired, he arranged for a four-month appointment to operate the Senators' elevator at the Senate door on the other side of the building. And from there I went to the press gallery and stayed 44 years.

JOHNSON: So when you first arrived at the press gallery, what was your job? What was your position?

WEST: At that time, the staff was only four members. And my title, which essentially was a historic title, was messenger to the press gallery. The other three jobs were superintendent and first assistant and second assistant. And if you examine the *Congressional Directories* from 1942 to 1948, you will not find me listed. Nor would you find the equivalent job in the Senate Press Gallery listed. It was the custom then that only the assistants were listed in the *Congressional Directories*, as part of the press gallery staffs. In 1948 a fifth position was created, actually as a promotion for me, and carried the title of third assistant superintendent. Also, the title of "messenger" was eliminated. And interestingly, over the many years, the bottom staff position at one time was—I found in an old journal—described as messenger to the press gallery, which kind of was ongoing, even when I joined it. But in another document I once saw, it was listed as Page to the press gallery. So apparently there were some assorted titles over the span of time. Apparently, the original staffing of the press gallery took place sometime in the early 1870s. The first superintendent, Mr. Charles H. Mann, he served from 1879 to 1913. And,

as far as I ever encountered, he was the only staffer up until about the last year of his tenure. And my first boss, Mr. William J. Donaldson, Jr., was his Page to the press gallery. And that appears to be the first additional staffer to the press gallery that I've ever come across. In some conversations with Mr. Donaldson as his now assistant, he indicated it was a two-man staff for a number of years during his early tenure. He served from 1913 to 1960. I would have to add an asterisk to that because in 1960 he was asked to retire, and Speaker [Samuel Taliaferro] Rayburn, who was very fond of Mr. Donaldson, said no, that he would retire from the position of superintendent, and a position of special assistant to the superintendent was created at the same salary for Mr. Donaldson. So he served another 10 years in that capacity.

When I became superintendent in January of 1969, that post had become controversial with a couple of Members of the House. Wayne [Lever] Hays of the House Administration Committee was one. And Sam [Samuel Leeper] Devine, his Republican counterpart, was another. Their main complaint was that Mr. Donaldson had only been in the office one time in the 10 years that he had that title. And I made no defense of it, beyond the fact that it was Speaker Rayburn's wishes that Mr. Donaldson have that position during his lifetime. But I could not quarrel with the premise that it couldn't be justified any further. And so through his son, Mr. Donaldson was asked to retire, which he did quite willingly. So he technically served from 1913 to 1970 on the active payroll. But the last 10 years he was inactive to be sure.

JOHNSON: And he was a Page before he worked in the press gallery.

WEST: I notice you listed that. And he is the only Page that I'm aware of, either in the Senate Press Gallery or the House Press Gallery, that originally started as a Page. Now Mr. Donaldson was not the most communicative fellow that I ever met. But he did mention that he was reassigned from the floor to the press gallery because there was a rather rigid rule—I don't know if it was a rule of Speaker Joe [Joseph Gurney] Cannon or what—but if Pages got so tall, out they went, see.

JOHNSON: Oh.

WEST: So, and Mr. Donaldson, incidentally, was not a very tall individual. He only came up to about here on me.

JOHNSON: So he wasn't as tall as you were.

WEST: No. But apparently in those days if you got over about five foot, essentially that was it. Your career ended right there {laughter}, unceremoniously, no doubt. There were three Pages that found their way to careers, however, Mr. Donaldson being one of them. The clerk of the House Rules Committee when I joined the press gallery was a gentleman of the name Humphrey "Scottie" Shaw, and he was a fellow Page with Mr. Donaldson in 1912 during the last—I think that was the last year of Speaker "Uncle Joe" Cannon. And also there was kind of a triumvirate. James P. Griffin, a fellow Page, spent some 45 years as a legislative floor employee, most of it in a position then called minority pair clerk.

In the earlier years of my tenure, there was a majority pair clerk and a minority pair clerk, and the device was if a Member knew he would be absent

on a particular vote, he would seek out the pair clerk and say, "Pair me voting 'aye' for this," and then, of course, the pair clerk would be obliged to find a negative vote to pair him with, and at the conclusion of the roll call, the pairs are read: "Mr. Smith, for; Mr. Jones, against." And sometimes it would be a page-long list. Jimmy was an habitu  of the press gallery and a frequent participant in our almost daily poker games. Those three started out as Page boys in 1912 and continued their careers. Scottie Shaw was clerk of the Rules Committee for many years, up until the 80th Congress and the Republicans took over. And then, I believe, he stayed as a Minority Clerk as well. But the chairman, Adolph [Joachim] Sabath, from Chicago, was a Member of the House for 46 years. So Mr. Shaw almost had a guaranteed employment. And not just the fabled stories of Chicago politics, but the machine kind of kept you. As long as you had their blessing, you really had a lifetime tenure in the House, as Mr. Sabath enjoyed and many others in the Illinois delegation [enjoyed] over the years. And so as a consequence, why, Scottie Shaw, a former Page, had a longtime career with the House of Representatives.

And so, continuing kind of the sequence of the superintendents, Mr. Mann served from 1879 to 1913; Mr. Donaldson, from 1913 to 1960 as superintendent; and Mr. Embly, from 1960 to January 1 of 1969. And then myself from January 1969 to April 1986, roughly about 18 years. Mr. Embly was not a Page boy. He was the Western Union messenger assigned to the House Press Gallery. And his job as a uniformed messenger, was if a reporter was typing in one of the rooms, he'd say "copy," and the field was very competitive, however, because there was also Postal Telegraph. They also had a messenger stationed in the press gallery, both on the Senate side and the House side. And a reporter would say "Copy, Western." And Dick

would grab the copy and take it back to the west room. And the west room was devoted entirely to telegraph companies until about the middle '50s. So Embly started as a Western Union messenger, and on the Senate side, Herbert Hall, who was in the fourth position over there, also was a Western Union messenger. So two of the press gallery staffers came, in effect, from industry outside, just there in the right place at the right time. And of course they knew all the reporters, which is useful when you're hiring someone.

JOHNSON: I wanted to step back a little bit. Can you describe an average day in the press gallery. What sorts of things happened there?

WEST: Well, it couldn't be condensed to a single thought or sentence, but the press gallery that I joined in 1942—well, to be honest about it—was a very squalid facility. I can remember if you came in after dark for some reason or another, you unlocked either the east door or the west door and you reached in, turned the lights on, so all of the mice and cockroaches could flee to their lair, literally. You stood there for a moment and allowed the floor to clear. And if you came in from either the west end of the facility or the east door, it was a solid blue haze of cigarette smoke, tobacco smoke. There was only one single ventilation withdrawal unit in the press gallery to service the—well, the Architect describes them as five rooms. And, actually, the fifth room is just a small connecting enclave with a men's room and a ladies' room. But they describe it as a room. And even in 1942, the press gallery was only about 60 percent suitable for the need, because initially when the south wing was constructed, it was meant to be the southern corridor for the House Chamber.

The cockroaches were everywhere. If you opened a desk drawer they would scatter. If you opened a file cabinet, the same. And there was only a reflected two incandescent lights going up into the ceilings, and the lighting was quite inadequate. The noise level was deafening. In fact, my daughter asked me here recently if my early years in the press gallery could possibly have contributed to my diminution of hearing. And it possibly could, because the telegraph companies in those days, they operated—well, they used to call them “bugs.” It was Morse code. And there was a sounder on the ledge of their enclosure which they received by. But they were quite loud.

And then there was a teletype system in both Postal and Western Union that created a tape about an inch wide, and essentially it was a Braille, that if they needed to find a telegram from two hours earlier or something, they’d just run the tape and it would reappear. And, indeed, the wire services also had essentially the same equipment [but] much larger. And they were punching tape with every word they dispatched to their office downtown. So the decibel level was just overwhelming, and there was no treatment on the walls; they were just painted plaster walls. And I’ll get into it later, when I did a total remodeling of the press gallery in the ’60s.

But, so in the overall, it was a very squalid place. Cigarette butts all over the landscape. I don’t recall seeing a single ashtray {laughter}, and we had cuspidors in each room because there were some chewing-tobacco users. Our old janitor, while he was on the architect’s payroll historically, even in my tenure, he was permanently assigned to the press gallery full-time. And he took pride in those brass cuspidors. They sparkled all the time. He never would tell us his age. His name was Robert Boston. I’ll always remember it. And he was a very fine gentleman. And he was also very devoted. Eight

o'clock at night, despite having arrived at 4:30 to 5:00 in the morning, he'd be over in the back row of the east part of the chamber, waiting for the House to adjourn. He wouldn't leave for home until the House adjourned. So it was not uncommon to see Mr. Boston in the back row of the gallery over there just, in effect, killing time. And he probably was secretly an expert on the House of Representatives by now. {laughter}

In the overall, it was a really squalid, inadequate facility. There was no communication system. You manually answered each telephone. There were 10 telephone booths on the north wall of the press gallery. And there was no linkage. There was a separate number for each one. You got up from your chair and walked to the booth, answered the phone, laid it on the ledge, and walked from one end of the press gallery to the other: "Call for Kathleen Johnson, call for Ben West." And if the House was in session, you went in the chamber and looked to see if that reporter was in the chamber. So it was a very laborious day if you do that 100, a couple hundred times a day.

JOHNSON: Was that one of your assignments as a messenger?

WEST: Yes, as did the other staffers to a lesser degree. Well, in 1967, I went to Mr. Embly and told him of an emerging idea I had been working on. I'm a self-taught draftsman and also a fair illustrator. And I told him, "We're working in chaos here." We did have a five-button phone set on the staff desk by then, but we only had one staff desk. And we did have a very primitive PA system by about 1958 or '59 that was put in. But there were wires everywhere. If you sat down at a typewriter in the public areas, the floor would look like this mass of wires right here. And you would disentangle your feet to get up and, in effect, extricate yourself. So I went to Dick one

day, and I said, "I have a master plan." And I had some sketches made that I had done at home. And he looked them over. "Well," he says, "I like this." But Mr. Embly was not [one of] the most energetic people you've met. He said, "I'll bless this, but I'll have nothing to do with it." He says, "You're on your own." But he added, "To whatever tribunal necessary, I will state it has my blessings, and you are the authority on this, and you are in charge of the undertaking."

JOHNSON: At this time you were an assistant superintendent?

WEST: I was his deputy then. And I'll say at this point that I was very loyal to Mr. Embly, as was Tony Demma to Mr. Donaldson—and Tony's predecessor, Chester Thrift, who was there only about a year and a half of my early career and died of a stroke one morning. And I was very loyal to Mr. Embly. (In the latter years of my tenure, I did not enjoy that luxury—without further elaboration. But I did not know that luxury.)

So in the nine years that Mr. Embly was superintendent, I think only twice we had a quarrel or a difference of opinion. But he relied on me quite extensively. I think I wrote everything that Mr. Embly ever put his signature to. And sometimes if the Standing Committee of Correspondents would assign him a project that he wasn't comfortable with, I would assist or sometimes do it in his behalf, and then he would sign under his name. And no one was the wiser. So the remodeling is really a separate topic I'd like to set aside for a minute or two. . .

JOHNSON: That's fine.

WEST:

. . . and kind of continue the sort of the evolving of the superintendents. So among your various topics that you've set forth here in this memorandum, you ask at one point the relationship between the Senate Press Gallery staffs and the House Press Gallery staffs. It was well integrated, and somewhat dependent on the other, because obviously you're dealing with a common product: legislation, same reporters. Although in later years, bureaus tended to assign exclusively to one gallery or another. Although, on occasion, if you needed the manpower you'd double up and cover both galleries. But, and work from both galleries.

The Senate Press Gallery, one, had a larger staff as a result of a Sergeant at Arms' placing an appointee into that staff operation. Unlike the House of Representatives, where the superintendent and the Standing Committee of Correspondents is responsible to the Speaker of the House, on the Senate side, it is the Senate Sergeant at Arms and, ultimately, the Rules and Administration Committee that they are accountable to. And I personally thought it was wrong that such an appointee be placed into what basically was an autonomous, apolitical operation. But that opinion wasn't shared on the other side, and I was not superintendent at the time. And a time or two, I was thrust into circumstances where I was sort of speaking as superintendent.

In the last four, approximately four, years of Mr. Embly's tenure, he started commuting to his farm up in Cecil County, Maryland. Actually, it belonged to his wife. They had no children, and they were intensely devoted to one another. And they traveled the world. That was their one project per annum. And so Dick started commuting, which meant that he would leave about 3:15 in the afternoon to catch his 4:00 train, and he didn't arrive until

about 10:30, getting off of his morning train. So for roughly four years I was acting superintendent much of the time, and as a consequence I found myself a time or two in circumstances where I was sort of presumptuous, perhaps, but as the deputy, that was my role: to fill the gap. And so, I think, technically, I would fancy myself as superintendent for about 22 years.

JOHNSON: Okay. What were your responsibilities as superintendent? What did the job entail?

WEST: Well, they were extensive. But, now, it depends on the quality of superintendent you wish to be.

JOHNSON: Well, what about for you, specifically?

WEST: Well, now Mr. Donaldson, I knew many of the old reporters in my early tenure who grew up in Mr. Donaldson's "dynasty," if you will. And I never heard anything but compliments about him. And he was an energetic fellow. He was not an innovative fellow. Now, I turned out to be an innovative superintendent. But Mr. Donaldson was a workhorse in his time. And you must realize, too, that in the pinnacle of his career, it was the Great Depression era and, in 1937, Congress passed what was called the Economy Act of 1937, and everyone in government, including Members of the House and Senate, took a 25 percent pay cut. So Mr. Donaldson, with a young family and so forth . . . and the press gallery by comparison to other offices was not well paid, which I will elaborate on a little bit later, and so he did what was needed at the time.

And one of my favorite stories of Mr. Donaldson, his nickname was “Raskob,” R-A-S-K-O-B—and I asked him a time or two, because these old reporters had been there in the ’20s and the ’30s, and now into the ’40s, and sort of in the twilight of their careers, but he never would explain the occasional nickname “Raskob.” So one day, I believe it was Bill Flythe of the old Hearst newspapers, came in one morning and said, “Hi you, ‘Raskob,’” and Mr. Donaldson kind of turned and walked away. I said, “Mr. Flythe, where does ‘Raskob’ come from?” And so he tells me this story that it originated at the 1924 presidential nominating convention. The then-Republican chairman was a multimillionaire by the name of John J. Raskob. And it seems during the convention period, Mr. Donaldson and a number of his cronies went to a very famous restaurant, and apparently the national—it was frequented by national committee officials and so forth—and Mr. Raskob was there that evening, as it turned out. So Mr. Donaldson and the several reporters had themselves a raucous evening, and when the check came, they found themselves somewhat impoverished and unable to meet this sum. So Mr. Donaldson is reputed to have taken the check, wrote: “Okay. Raskob.”

JOHNSON: Oh. Very clever.

WEST: And handed it back to the waiter with a generous tip. And from that day forward, according to Mr. Flythe, it was: “Okay. ‘Raskob.’” So that’s how he drew his name. But Mr. Donaldson in his latter years was kind of coasting, if you will. When I joined in 1942, he’s already a 30-year man, and I remember on his 35th anniversary, which would have been 1948, Speaker Rayburn came into our main room, the general room, with a photographer and summoned Mr. Donaldson and congratulated him on 35 years of service

in the press gallery. And it was a devoted service, I would describe it, from the hearsay of yesteryear from the old inhabitants around there who kind of grew up with him, so to speak. And so Speaker Rayburn congratulated him. And again, later in 1948, the National Press Club threw a big gala called “Bill Donaldson Night,” in which they gave him one of the first television sets in Washington. And the Speaker was there, Minority Leader Joe [Joseph William] Martin, [Jr.], was there, I was there, and hundreds of reporters. So he was well respected in the newspaper community. He was a name. He was a symbol.

But in his latter years he got to spending maybe an hour or two a day at the office. And I don't know of anyone who begrudged him that opportunity. But it did create a problem or two in that it sort of stymied everyone in rank and, plus, you were operating a man short all the time because the deputy was basically serving as the superintendent almost full-time. So it did have its interoffice disappointments, I'll say. And in fact, ultimately, as I mentioned earlier, it led to the committee inviting him to retire, and Mr. Rayburn intervened and made another—an alternative—arrangement.

JOHNSON: You mentioned a couple of times the Standing Committee of Correspondents. Can you explain who they were and what they did?

WEST: Well, I think this would be a good point to go back to the origin of the press gallery. In 1857, the House of Representatives adjourned for the final time in Statuary Hall and relocated to what was then described as the south wing, not as the House Chamber or House wing. And in the course of the first several sessions, perhaps the Opening Day—that's unclear, at least I've never found it, and I've talked to my longtime good friend Bill Brown, the House

Parliamentarian, and he had never unearthed anything to the contrary—but in 1857, a gentleman from Arkansas—and I am embarrassed I no longer remember his name, I did know it once—a gentleman from Arkansas was recognized to offer what in effect was a housekeeping resolution.

And a part of that resolution stated that that portion on the third level behind the central motive, which we now call the Speaker's Rostrum today, would be set aside for reporters—letter writers—and be furnished with papers, bills, supplies, and telegraphic services. And it was approved. And so for approximately 15 to 17 years—and that's more speculation than accuracy, but it's close to the mark—that area was unsupervised, unattended, no credentialing system in place. A group of reporters assembled one day and appealed to the incumbent Speaker that the area reserved to the press was overwhelmed with claim agents, lobbyists, petitioners, and pickwomen. And so they went to the Speaker then, and I could only speculate on his name, but I think it would be roughly about 15 to 17 years from 1857.

JOHNSON: It was 1879 when they first formed.

WEST: Well, that is the first record of staff, is 1879, see, but somewhere around '70, '72, somewhere in there, I think. And so they appealed to the Speaker to deliver them from this chaos and overwhelming population. And he responded by—and it's unclear exactly the precise mechanism employed—but it created what was the forerunner of the Standing Committee of Correspondents, which would be the governing body of the press gallery, including accreditation to weed out the undeserving and the pretenders, if you will, the journalistic pretenders.¹

And the first evidence that I ever ran across—the introduction of staff—was with Mr. Charles Mann, the first superintendent, in 1879. Now there was prior to that a Page to the press gallery, [a position] which Mr. Donaldson held for slightly over a year. And prior to that a time or two—looking at old payroll ledgers one time, there was an item described as “messenger to the press.” It didn’t say “press gallery.” So it was never clear if that was an assigned staffer or if a Member just wanted him to take a note up to the reporter and then come back down and take his seat on the floor or something like that. So it was never clear.

But the genesis of the Standing Committee of Correspondents is roughly in the 1872 to 1875 range, in there somewhere. And that mechanism was put into place. And the subsequent appointment of staff apparently was rather erratic, if at all, until 1879. And Mr. Donaldson shows up as a Page, transferred to the press gallery a little less than a year and a half prior to Mr. Mann’s departure. And I’m unsure if Mr. Mann died on the job or perhaps died at home or something. As I say, Mr. Donaldson was not all that communicative. And he was a treasure-trove, well, possibly a tinge like me as well—someone comes up years later and they’re suddenly interested in closing a gap. But I never was that successful with Mr. Donaldson. I did learn many things from him. But the continuity of superintendents on both sides is now a matter of, obviously, official records. I was the fourth superintendent in [the] history of the press gallery, and I noticed another category you listed was the various positions and rank that I held in the press gallery. I’m the only one in history who served all five ranks in the press gallery staff. I never found any other payroll or any listing disputing that.

JOHNSON: What are the five ranks?

WEST: We were a five-man staff, and I served in all five positions: messenger, 1942–1948; third assistant superintendent, 1948–1958; second assistant superintendent, 1958–1960; first assistant superintendent, 1960–1969; superintendent, 1969–1986.

JOHNSON: You began as a messenger.

WEST: I started off as messenger for the first six years, and then in 1948 in the 80th Congress, the Standing Committee petitioned for another staffer because the press gallery when I joined . . . the war was barely six months old. And the press gallery membership at that time was about 550 to about 600. When I retired, it was slightly in excess of 1,500, in 1986. And so by the end of the war, a new government is in place, so to speak. Prior to World War II, there weren't all these government agencies. As a Member of the House of Representatives once said on the House Floor—I was present when he said it—“There's nothing more permanent in Washington than a temporary bureau.” And goodness knows, that's very prophetic.

And so, as government expanded, Washington coverage expanded. And of course an obvious population growth. Our work indeed was increasing meaningfully. So in the 80th Congress we ran into some opposition—not so much on the need—but in the 80th Congress the slogan was, “*sine die* by July.” Well, and indeed, we did in 1948. And Mr. [Harry S.] Truman had the bad taste to call us back in special session later that month. But that was the slogan in the House: “*Sine die* by Fourth of July.”² And so given that fact, the House Administration Committee—actually, it was the old Accounts Committee then. And no, I'm mistaken, the Accounts Committee

had been merged into the House Administration Committee. They were troubled by the roughly five-month shutdown of Congress. Indeed, I can remember in '47 we closed the House Press Gallery and adjourned and operated out of the Senate Press Gallery. Just that one year. But apparently that had been the custom before the war, to close one gallery. I ran across something about Chester A. Thrift, who was the first assistant when I joined the staff. His obituary listed him sort of concurrently as an employee of the Commerce Department.

I asked Mr. Donaldson about that one day, and he said [due to] the Economy Act of 1937, when Congress adjourned, many people went off the payroll for the balance of the year. So Chester had found employment downtown as a temporary aide—I never knew the category or designation of his other employment. That ended, of course, with World War II. So the superintendent's tenure from 1879 through today has remained uninterrupted. It's an ongoing office. And it's subject to appointment by the Standing Committee of Correspondents, by and with the approval of the Speaker.

JOHNSON: The Standing Committee of Correspondents are reporters who are elected for this body?

WEST: They are reporters. They are reporters elected from the accredited membership, and they serve for two years. The way that it worked numerically is, if you led the ticket the year you ran for office, you served as a member that year, but then the next year you were automatically chairman. Now there was a vote, and I can only remember one departure from that practice. And that was the gentleman [who] didn't want the full

responsibility of being chairman, so we had co-chairmen that year. And thankfully never again. Just not administratively functional. But, so the membership of the Standing Committee of Correspondents is drawn from the overall membership—accredited membership of the press galleries . . . of the daily newspaper press galleries.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And they serve two years. And it's a bit of a prestige post. It's something of a vote of your peers if you succeed in your bid for election. And it's almost like appointing a fellow to the Supreme Court. I remember reading in the memoir of Mr. President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower; [he was] expressing his disappointment in his Earl Warren appointment. In fact, he described it as the "worst mistake I ever made." Well, on occasion, the electorate in the galleries found their newly elected member something of a political chameleon. He was doing other things than what they thought he had promised or had advocated.

But that wasn't rampant, but it did happen now and again. I remember in one case one reporter who was elected to the Standing Committee [of Correspondents], and he was assigned to the House side regularly, and he said, "I've been watching, and you're one of the real workhorses around here. And you do your homework." And he says, "I'm going to see that you get a pay raise." Well, after he got onto the Standing Committee and he got a look at the payroll, I had to struggle to hold on to what I had. I onto what I had. I say that in jest.

JOHNSON: So you didn't receive that promised raise.

WEST: Yeah, no raise. So one had to be a little cautious in the membership-elect. But it is a responsible position. My credentials as a sought-after staffer to join the House Press Gallery were twofold. One, I was a speedy touch-typist, there not being one on either House or Senate staff; and two, it would be about two years, four months before I was subject to the draft. Those were my outstanding qualities. But I was scrub-faced, and my hair was combed. That was about it. And so as a consequence of that skill, many times I found myself being borrowed from the House Press Gallery over to work in the Senate Press Gallery office for the superintendent Harold R. Beckley. The 1944 presidential nomination conventions were approaching and I practically lived in the Senate Press Gallery for six months. Also, I found myself basically the clerk to the Standing Committee. Now in latter years, back in 1954, they hired someone with the designation “secretary” who took over all of those duties. So as a result of my typing skills, I spent many, many hours, many days, over in the Senate as a borrowed staffer from the House side.

JOHNSON: Did that relationship continue, the good relationship between the House and the Senate press galleries?

WEST: Well, it was a part of it. I do know at one point—I couldn’t help but overhear Mr. Donaldson grouching about the frequency of my absences. And I think he was complaining to a member of the Standing Committee. I’m not sure about that. But I did overhear him grouching about the frequency of my absences. But the sheer fact of the matter was that I could turn out ten times the work of a two-fingered, four-fingered typist on the Senate staff. It was just a matter of good logistics. And I kind of enjoyed the work as well. In fact, it gave me a tremendous background for a very young staffer. I learned

the inner workings of the Committee, the Standing Committee, some of its politics, and there were inner politics. And I enjoyed a very retentive memory. I believe that exposure enabled me to be a first-class superintendent in future years.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example? What exactly—what were you typing? What was your work?

WEST: Oh my goodness. Well, for example, in preparing for a convention—and it's far more extensive, far more elaborate in latter years than it was then—for example, security, there was a war on, and the President of the United States was going to be in the Chicago Amphitheater for his fourth term, and obviously a fourth term is a most newsworthy historical event. So the demand for space and accreditation was immense. I think I attended only one meeting with the superintendent at a national committee office downtown. I think only once. But the arrangements are discussed. Will the press platform be on each side of the rostrum in Convention Hall? How many seats will there be on each wing? Where will the workrooms and workspaces be? What is the travel time from the rostrum side to the workspace area? Particularly as the evening unfolds and you have A.M. papers with deadlines to meet. So these were all crucial questions. And so a lot of times I'd just be typing up a memorandum for the superintendent, outlining all these various questions. Or, like myself at the moment, he would just be talking out loud and I would be typing five- or six-word sentences just to capture his thoughts, and he'd fold it up, stick it in his pocket, take it with him.

Then you would officially create a notice to send on the wires nationwide. Nineteen forty-four, that would have been United Press, International News Service, and Associated Press. And you invite them to write you telling how much space they wish—which generally only the Washington bureaus responded to the space request. Now, in latter times, much more of that was taken over by the home office because it became so complicated and very complex. Then you would await the response from your wire-service invitations. The letters would come in by the hundreds. And you would have to physically open them and read each one. You start categorizing them. You start making a master list, alphabetically. Ultimately, you have to make a list cross-referencing it, because if someone walked up to you and said, “Where is the *Chicago Tribune* located?” you would look up *Chicago Tribune* and it would say Section 1, Row B, Seats 1–10. Or if a security man came up and he asks, “Who’s that sitting in Seat 1 A–10?” then you’d have to have your other index to go down that would say *Chicago Tribune*.

JOHNSON: You had to be incredibly organized.

WEST: Right. So you had to reverse them. And it was quite essential in those days, because covering conventions in that era—and I attended them from 1944 to 1980, and that’s another topic area I wish to get into with you because there is some considerable historical factor involved in that—so you have this immense paper volume and I would have help from a couple of staffers, even though they’re typing only two fingers at a time. But at least they’re typing envelopes for me. I would type the original letter and hand it to that one, and of course the address would be on it, and he or she would copy it onto the envelope. And we would send out probably, eventually, about in that

period of time about 800 replies in '44 and '48. Would be about 1,200 reporters that were officially accredited to each event.

JOHNSON: Okay. This was for both party conventions, Republicans and Democrats?

WEST: And this would be both party conventions. And I learned, I think from Mr. Donaldson, that the genesis for this began in 1904 with the Democratic National Committee petitioning the Standing Committee of Correspondents to take over the accrediting role and the on-site management. And, I think, clearly—obviously I wasn't there at the time—but I think the national committee was trying to divest itself of a very unpleasant task.

JOHNSON: And time-consuming.

WEST: They weren't satisfying anyone. They were alienating far more than they were satisfying. And then, in 1912, the Republican National Committee made a similar request of us, "us" being the Standing Committee. And, when I say Standing Committee, I refer to the Standing Committee of Correspondents of the daily- newspaper press galleries. So, 1912, we inherited the responsibility of both. (With regard to that date it has been my long belief—perhaps from Mr. Donaldson—that the Democrats made the initial request. However, in his paper on the Standing Committee, Professor Marbut lists them in reverse order.) And that went unchallenged until 1980. And I'd kind of like to set that aside at this point and get back to it.

JOHNSON: Sure.

WEST: Once the mail-out and response to the convention credentialing requests, then you get into the local workspace factor, which you have negotiated with the two national committees beforehand. But you have to have some link and communication with the various companies—Western Union, Postal Telegraph, ITT, ATT, anything that moves press copy from the convention site to a home office. And we would reserve places for on-site Western Union telegraphers in the back row of our daily press section. So that an independent reporter who may be just one fellow representing his hometown paper could walk to the back row, and there would be a messenger, and the messenger would take that copy and race it to the workspace, wherever Western Union or Postal was set up. And if it was urgent, there was usually three Western Union telegraphers and Postal telegraphers there sending it by Morse code.

JOHNSON: How long were the telegraphers there in the press gallery?

WEST: The telegraph companies? The best that I could establish was, apparently, very much after the press gallery section was set aside, because the original resolution spoke of telegraph services. Now whether that meant somebody hauling it off to a building downtown or—but the most people that I've talked to, actually a limited few, they interpret that as meaning on-site telegraphic capability. And in my very early press gallery years, it was a flourishing enterprise in both galleries. As I mentioned earlier, I believe, it contributed mightily to the decibel level in the press gallery rooms. My goodness, you ought to wear earmuffs or something. So in 19—I think 1948, Postal Telegraph merged with Western Union and went out of business. And the space being vacated in the west room of the press gallery was then turned over and occupied by a new service the Associated Press was

establishing called the “Regional Service.” And in most cases they were homegrown reporters who came to Washington. And I think initially there was 21 of them. Three or four of them were on the desk downtown in the old *Washington Star* building. In my early press gallery years, the Associated Press was on the second floor of the old *Washington Star* building at 11th and Pennsylvania Avenue Northwest. And that little enclave in the west room was given to the Associated Press for their regional reporters. And they had, in effect, set it up by region. Now, a handful—Pennsylvania, for example, one man covered Pennsylvania. New York, one man covered New York. But then in the case of, well, say, Oregon, Washington, Alaska . . . one man covered those. And in some of the midwestern states, one AP reporter would cover six states. It was based basically on population. And so, that Postal Telegraph space in the press gallery was absorbed by the AP regional service. And United Press did not attempt to imitate that or to match it. They did years later. And, in fact, it became a part of the remodeling problem for me. But not in the large scale that the Associated Press had introduced it.

So the Postal entry on both sides went out about 1948. And the Postal had a big triangular glass globe that sat on about a four-and-a-half-foot-high wall that enclosed their office. And right on the corner of it was this triangular, lighted—I remember Mr. Wallace (his nickname was Wally), who was a manager, he would come in the first thing in the morning, he’d hit the little pull-chain and the light would come on, and Postal Telegraph would be illuminated all over the room. Well, not surprisingly and shortly thereafter, not to be outdone, the Western Union, they put one up with a pull-chain. So the west room was aglow with commercial announcement and invitation {laughter}. Mr. Wallace was the head of that. And then after he left, a gentleman by the name of Joseph Berlinsky was the last manager of the postal

service in the—Postal Telegraph service—in the press gallery. And [at] the Western Union, his counterpart was James O. Mathis, who I was particularly friendly with. We became rather good friends. Western Union stayed on my side until about 1960—about 1970. And by then, a program I had introduced—I mentioned earlier that I was the energetic superintendent, so there's going to be a number of programs that I'm going to mention to you that I introduced in the gallery. But the telecopier system was now popular in a rather primitive stage. Some of the bureaus had computers in their infancy. And there just wasn't the traffic, the press copy, for Western Union. Now, they closed the House Gallery, and when Walter Shearer, the manager of the Western Union office on the Senate Press Gallery side retired, Jim Mathis moved over there to become the manager.

And they kept that office open quite some time. I remember that when Frank Hewlett was chairman of the Standing Committee, upon learning that they were closing that office, the Standing Committee intervened and wrote letters to the corporate board in New York—as I recall, asking that there was still some patronage for daily-press rate emanating from the Senate Press Gallery and that it would justify keeping it open. And it was a token response. I think six months later they finally closed it. There was something of a small office maintained in the Russell Office Building for the convenience of Members of the Senate. But press copy was a thing of the past. No longer was Postal and Western Union the primary delivery of press copy.

JOHNSON: And the Standing Committee oversaw the House and the Senate press galleries?

WEST: Yes. It was . . .

JOHNSON: It was just one Standing Committee for both?

WEST: Well, I think initially—again from what I can glean from old, dusty records—and I should mention, I think, at this point that on slack days and nonevent days I used to spend a lot of time in the attic of the Capitol building. Not many people know there was an attic. And I would rummage through old ledgers—and I’m surprised I have any respiratory system left—but I used to rummage through these old payroll records. And, in fact, nationwide I know my mother’s small town of Martinsburg, there was sort of bookbinders who traveled the country. And they would stop in a city hall, and they’d take the papers for the year and bind them and letter them, sometimes with a bit of gold etching and so forth. The House of Representatives was no exception. A lot of the old payroll handwritten records were bound, and some were not. Some were just stacked. Some would be in an old paper bag that disintegrated when you lifted it. And so I spent a lot of time rummaging through those things. I had the help of a couple of fellows whose offices abutted those attic entrances. So I was able to glean here and there things that probably never found their way into a written text or reference service.

The result of all that kind of rummaging about is that it manifested itself into an intense interest in the House of Representatives as an institution. And also as kind of a press gallery historian. I don’t dub myself that, but I do know that a number of times I was informally referred to as the “third floor parliamentarian” and also the “walking historian.” And what compensation it had beyond personal pride was a lot of telephone calls at night at home. Can you think of anything comparing to this, you know?

JOHNSON: This would be from Members of Congress calling you, or reporters?

WEST: No. It would be from the Washington press corps.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: By and large, most Washington bureaus could get something into the final edition as late as 11:00 at night. So it was not uncommon. One, in particular, comes to mind—was back I think in the middle '70s. The Senator from North Carolina—I believe his name was [John Porter] East—went in one Saturday afternoon to his office, locked the door, and shot himself to death. He was in very failing health. And apparently it wasn't discovered until 9:00 or so. And my phone rang several times. And the *New York Times* called and the reporter I knew who had been a regular House man and was now the night editor in the Washington bureau. "Can you think of anything like this?" And I said, "yes." I said, "Back in the late '50s"—I said, "I'm not positive of the name." I said—"I think it was [Lester Callaway] Hunt, but a Senator from Wyoming did the same thing, shot himself to death in his office." Well, that made the front page the next morning of the *Times*. But it was just tidbits like that that just kind of stay in the memory, some circumstance on the House Floor of the moment. And not to relegate everything to memory, a part of my information system that I created in 1958 was a book of past occurrences or historical occurrences, and I had them labeled: "Last Quorum Call Exceeding Thirty Minutes" or "Members Being Seated," "Words Taken Down." And so, and I did that—most of it I walked around with. But I wanted my staff—or my staff colleagues at that time—to be able to have the same potential if I'm not there

or I'm tied up in the chamber or elsewhere. The House Press Gallery gained an immense reputation for efficiency and productivity. And I'm intensely proud of that because I, immodestly, was responsible for most of it. I devised and introduced the files for our information system, which was heavily utilized and highly trusted.

Now when I went to the press gallery in 1942, Tony Demma, who became the first assistant following Mr. Thrift's death, had a filing system involving about three or four standard-size filing cabinets.

JOHNSON: I'm going to ask you to elaborate on that in a minute, but I need to switch CDs.

WEST: Oh, surely.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: You were just talking about how you were innovative on your job and about your filing system.

WEST: Well, Tony Demma, who took over from the late Chester Thrift, had his own file system. But it was under lock and key, and no one else on the staff was allowed to go into it. And that's the way we operated. If someone came in to ask you a question. . .

JOHNSON: And just to back up a second, who would be asking you questions? Would this be staff, or reporters?

WEST: The reporters.

JOHNSON: The reporters? Okay.

WEST: Oh, yes, yes.

JOHNSON: And congressional staff, too? Or was it mainly reporters asking questions?

WEST: Well, it was mainly reporters. And Tony enjoyed a bit of a reputation for his file system. But if a question came to you, the point that bothered me is that many times the question was a rather simple one, and you would appear rather imbecilic because you couldn't respond. And that used to bother me.

JOHNSON: Do you have an example of what kinds of questions would be asked?

WEST: Well, for example, they might ask you the status of a bill. I'll manufacture a title: "Military Construction Authorization." Where is it? Is it in committee? Or has it passed the House? Well, that's a rather simple question, but if you can't get in the drawer, it makes you look a bit of a nerd. Well, anyway, that's how we operated for several years. And, tragically, in 1958, Mr. Demma had a postoperative hemorrhage and died. And so Mr. Embly became the deputy, and I become the second assistant. And a new staffer was hired. Among my many suddenly inherited tasks was this information system.

So we opened the drawer and, as I remember there were two four-drawer file cabinets in the east room. And we opened them, and only the originator

could fathom what the contents actually were. There was some alphabetizing, but there was no basic structure. For example, one of the features I introduced in my system was the so-called “additional reference logo.” Underneath the main index on the file, I would—in uppercase—put A-D-D-R-E-F, Additional Reference. And then I might say, “H.R. 10, Authorization 1949.” So that way you knew that the money bill had a genesis with the authorization bill. But there was nothing like that in his system. I mean, it was a system unto him. He could go back there, and I can remember him struggling a time or two to find it, but it was unto him. And much of it, Mr. Embly and I decided, we would discard.

After Tony’s death, I would sit home in the evenings, kind of thinking on my responsibilities and new responsibilities. And so the file system was one of my preeminent thoughts and priorities. So Mr. Embly and I convened for hours and hours, and we went through this, envelope by envelope, and some of it I retained. In particular, he would have newspaper clippings from the morning paper following a passage or some episode or something. So, those clippings I retained and transcribed, using a record-size manila envelope. That was the heart of our system, of my system. And the upper right-hand corner would be the name of the text and label. At the end I would always put “77/1,” 77th Congress, First Session. That made it much easier to trace back to other documentation. Maybe three years later, you want to pull a file jacket for 77/1, and there it all is in detail. I mentioned earlier the AddRef logo under that. And I set this all up in two forms. One was legislation pending and, ultimately, previous legislation, and two, statistical and historical. I kept all that separate. But it was intermingled with a cross-reference system. And one led to the other. It put you on the trail.

Dick and I spent the better part of our spare time—I'd say, two or three weeks—going through all these old files and discarding them. And I ended up with about a stack of record-size envelopes, maybe seven or eight inches high, and I was starting anew. My method was not all that complex. I would make up a jacket, and it would be "APPROPRIATIONS"—uppercase, comma "legislative" lowercase "77/1," and then the bill number would be underneath of it. And then, with each step of that legislation, when the Appropriations Committee reported it, a copy of the printed report would go in that envelope. A copy of the reported bill would go in that envelope. And then, as it proceeded to the House Floor, the first entry typed on that jacket would be, "Passed House, 336 to 29," whatever the date. And then a copy of the bill as passed by the House would be substituted for the original reported bill. Because I had to worry about volume. I couldn't let them get too voluminous. So, step by step, it was marked on the face of the jacket. So I could hand that jacket to a reporter, and he doesn't even have to open the contents. It all unfolds right there, right there on the cover. And so, as the several years progressed, so did our file system, and so did its reputation.

JOHNSON: Was this something that everyone in the gallery could access? The staff could gain access?

WEST: No. Only staff.

JOHNSON: But anyone on your staff could access the files?

WEST: Right. That was part of my program also. You see, I had to live with the era of—you were the, well, not the village idiot, you were the gallery idiot.

{laughter} To make an analogy. And so I knew a long taste of that, and I made sure that every staffer knew how to use this system. And they also knew that Mr. Embly was absent with some frequency, and I was the unofficial boss. So everybody was cooperative and, in fact, I would say with one exception, and that's not quite a fair classification, they were enthusiastic about it. But it did make you work harder, because some of it you had to walk around with. Because as its depth grew, the mechanics of it expanded. So you just couldn't say, "Well, all I have to remember is A to Z." It got more complicated than that. But manageable. And so it got an immense, favorable use reputation. And, as I say, it added to my traffic at home a lot of the time. And so that was one of the innovations.

Then I started another system, of what I call the "odddity book." If something unusual or unique developed, it went into that oddity book. Many times I wrote it up myself in almost reporter's fashion, or news format: "The House of Representatives today enacted legislation," etc., etc. So whenever we had that unusual circumstance—for example, one night we had—well, I say "night," as I remember—I was on duty in the back row 29 consecutive hours. Yeah. You try that sometime. On coffee and cold hot dogs.

JOHNSON: Why were you there so long?

WEST: {laughter} And so Speaker [John William] McCormack—the gimmick in this equal-time dispute involved George Wallace as sort of a coequal candidate. And it wouldn't be just a debate between a Republican and a Democratic candidate. Wallace would be a part of that. Well, the opponents were just utilizing one point of no quorum after another. And, of course, upon

completion of the point of no quorum, many of them would flee to the cloakrooms or out in the Speaker's Lobby, and some of the fellows popping up: "Point of order, Mr. Speaker." Well, Mr. McCormack got a little annoyed at this because this has been going on now for about 10 hours. And he ordered a Sergeant at Arms to lock the chamber doors. Well, right away, these reporters: "When did that happen? When did that happen?" Well, I must say, it was not in my book of oddities, and I never did locate it after the event. But there was one episode that suggested that somewhere during the debates in the Civil War era of the so-called Missouri Compromise that the presiding officer had ordered the doors locked, but it wasn't that definitive. And so, as far as I know, Speaker McCormack, is in fact, the only one who ever ordered the chamber doors locked.

There was an episode with Speaker Thomas [Brackett] Reed. He was beset one day with a controversy, and the Members continued to disappear. And points of no quorum were made. Tiring of this tactic the Speaker counted the hats hanging on the back wall of the chamber and announced that a quorum was present. A gentleman jumped up in protest. He said, "Mr. Speaker, I have counted the chamber, and there's not a quorum present." And the Chair said, "it is a nasty day out there, and the Chair feels that Members would not have left without those hats." {laughter} So that went into the oddity book; when I first read that, I put that in the oddity book, but that was kind of apart from the doors being locked, but somewhat akin.

So, anyway, the information system grew to be a respected institution, and I can remember—not frequently, of course—but I can remember two or three times the House Parliamentarian called me, and Bill Brown and I were immense close friends. We were institutional relatives, actually. And I can

remember, two or three times, he would call to ask if my memory was regarding this episode, or there was an impending request to be made of the Speaker—do you run across anything in history? And two times, it'd click. I remember, two times it clicked.

JOHNSON: You had a reputation as a historian.

WEST: Well, my reputation was, as I think I mentioned earlier, at least among the journalists—I didn't know it had spread, kind of, throughout the House wing—that I was a very competent third-floor parliamentarian. And, also, that I was a walking historian of the House. And, immodestly, I felt entitled to those informal designations, because I worked and studied rather hard on it.

I neglected to give you a bit of my personal background. So in my school years, from grades one through nine, I was a straight-A student. So that summer, when I graduated from the ninth grade, my mother said—after about a month, because for about two years I'd been living off of my paper route, to be honest. And we weren't starving, but we were getting awfully close. And, of course, now the war is on, wage and price controls are not going into effect yet. So she gave me about a month to play ball down at the school yard a couple blocks away. And one day she took me aside and she said, "We're not going to make it on this, and you're going to have to find a full-time job and go to school at night." So through a neighbor down the street who was a doorkeeper on the Senate side, and my mother knew—just casually talked to him now and again, when the mailman comes by or something. He said, "Well"—apparently she must have run it by him or something—"Well, I'll ask about it." Well, a day or so later, why, he told her

that there was an opening in the Architect's office, and that he had arranged for—I still remember the name—Senator Josiah [William] Bailey of North Carolina to give me a letter of introduction. Which in those days, given our patronage system, was virtually a command performance: “I'd like to introduce Benjamin C. West.”

JOHNSON: That's all you needed.

WEST: But, between the lines. And the Architect, being a very shrewd fellow, I'm sure read it that way. So that's how I got my first job as an electrician's helper. And so, as a consequence, my first job was 7:30 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon. Well, fortunately, in that period of time, the District of Columbia had an excellent evening high school system. And so I enrolled. So, I entered high school at night. Well, it created problems because [of] the rule of the House and the rule of Mr. Donaldson: when the House was in session, you stayed. And I never understood why, when the House was in session at 8:00 and 9:00 at night, that the finance office, which was on the first floor of the Capitol in those days, was open. The dining room, yes. The post office, why? But that was the rule. And the same was true in my first press gallery job, which was not uncommon, was Monday through Saturday. On Saturday afternoon, about 4:30, if the boss said, “Well, why don't you take the rest of the day off,” that was like a holiday. The hours during nonsession days were 9:00 in the morning to 6:30 at night. And then if there was a poker game going or a reporter still writing, the little man—to wit, me—you stayed.

Well, this was creating quite a complication in my educational pursuits. So I went to Mr. Donaldson one day, and I said, “You know, I go to school

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.” As I remember, it was 7:00–11:00. And, of course, in that period, the streetcar went right down Pennsylvania Avenue, and one of the evening high schools, which was then Hine Junior High School during the day, was a D.C. high school at night. And high school at night is not great fun; I mean, there are no cheerleaders, there’s no art, there’s no music, there’s no assembly. And it was just drab learning.

JOHNSON: And then after working all day, having to go to school.

WEST: And after working all day—nice of you to refresh my memory on that. See, I’m fatigued even today from that experience. So I went to Mr. Donaldson and I said, “Is there some way. . .” I said, you know, “If the House is in session, that’s important. . .” “But,” I said, “waiting for a reporter to finish, or stand[ing] there watching the poker. . .” I became an excellent poker player, kibitzing.

JOHNSON: Was that common?

WEST: Almost every day.

JOHNSON: These were reporters and the staff playing poker together?

WEST: Well, there was some staff involvement, but it was mostly reporters. Now, Tony was an habitu  of the game, I’ll say. And Jimmy Griffin, who I mentioned earlier, as a Page boy back under “Uncle Joe” Cannon, he was an habitu  of the gallery, and he spent many hours in the poker game. And so did the tally clerk. But mostly reporters. And then, usually at the other table in the main room there would be a hearts game going, too.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay.

WEST: But never when the House was in session. That was Mr. Donaldson's rule and it was my rule as well. Although the poker games had long disappeared in the late '60s. It started dying out in the late '60s. So I went to Mr. Donaldson and I said, you know, "I'm here." He said, "Well, you live nearby." Well, that's true. At that time, I lived on Carol Street, which is dead center in the middle of the Madison Library now. But he said, "That's the rule. You have to stay." So I was missing quite a bit, but I managed to get through. So anyway, Mr. Donaldson was unrelenting, but I got through and graduated. But it started to telegraph itself further, because now, as a former Marine in World War II, I'm entitled to what is called the GI Bill of Rights. And also that GI Bill of Rights stipulated that your former employer had to rehire you for one year, assuming you gave credible service and the like. And I wanted to come back, I enjoyed it. The pay was terrible. My starting salary in the press gallery was \$960 per annum.

So, with the GI Bill—now, I did take some college courses, a few. The Marine Corps, now the war is over, had what was called the Marine Corps Institute. And you would write and they would send you the subject—similar to this, they would send you paperback textbooks, that sort of thing. So anyway, I'm back to work. And I enroll. And it's the same old thing. We've got all the postwar legislation going through Congress. We would meet many nights. And so after one semester I went to a professor that I kind of liked, and I said, "I'm wasting the taxpayers' money." I said, "My schedule is so erratic and so unpredictable." And I said, "I'm just going to have to make other arrangements." And he said, "Well, let me give you one parting piece of

advice.” He said, “During your lifetime, you read a couple of thousand good books, and you’ll be just as intelligent as the rest of us.” Well, I thought about that, and I suspect—I’m only speculating—but I suspect I pictured a room with 2,000 books stacked up awaiting me. Very foreboding scene.

But not long thereafter, I learned that—and this is before the East Front of the Capitol, which I think was 1958, that was put on—I learned that there was a one-room Library of Congress substation right off of Statuary Hall. I remember to this day: You took two steps down, and there was a little trolley that ran underground from the East Front of the Capitol to the Library of Congress. And department heads had privileges to check out books.

JOHNSON: You became well read.

WEST: I became well read. My duties, particularly as the years progressed, would lend itself to some sort of on-site reading because I’d be working the back row of the chamber, keeping our log of activity, and along about the 20th Member who’s saying the same damn thing, I would pull my book out from under the shelf. And I would give them the benefit of one ear, but that’s about all he enjoyed. And I just read book, after book, after book.

JOHNSON: So one of your responsibilities was to keep a log of activities on the floor?

WEST: That was one of my main responsibilities. That activity in my early years, and apparently during the ’20s and ’30s, was not maintained. Now, a time or two I remember Tony Demma would go in the chamber and take notes, like on appropriation bills, particularly War Department or Appropriations. You see, there was no defense unification during World War II. But absent

that, it was rare that we had anyone on the staff working the chamber full-time. But at the same time, the reporters were more in-resident than today. One reporter may cover Justice Department, House Judiciary, a far-flung empire. But in those days, the reporters were more in-house and not specialty-topic beats.

But in 1947, as things were taking on, sort of, new dimensions, and the government is obviously expanding, the suggestion was made on both the Senate side and the House side to maintain a log of activities—proceedings of the House of Representatives: the date, Tuesday, or whatever. And the one-minute speeches were listed and the subject matter. You didn't attempt any verbatim note taking, but it was the subject matter that sort of opened the door to a reporter who may have been elsewhere. He comes in at 1:30, he's leafing through the one-minute speeches, and say he represents the *Omaha World Herald*. Mr. [Roman Lee] Hruska of Nebraska is listed. One minute, dash, subject matter. He is now aware. Generally, he would ask, "You remember kind of the substance of what he said?" which usually you did. Or he would say, "I'm going to go down and talk to him." You would send your card in or request, you want to talk—and the Member would come out and speak with you. So that helped him. Well, that became very popular almost immediately. And at one time the superintendent was going to divest himself of it. Bad idea. It had already gained an acceptance, shall we say. It gave a little extra leverage to the reporter, who could be a little less diligent as the day progressed, because he now has a backup system.

JOHNSON: They could rely on your log.

WEST:

Nothing is ever going to elude him. So it became very popular. And initially Mr. Embly took it as his main responsibility, and I was his relief man. He and Elizabeth lived at the 300 block of East Capitol Street, and he'd go home to lunch every day. So, I would relieve him for about an hour, hour and a half. And sometimes he was doing something else, or he just was tired or something or other. So he and I handled the proceedings for the press gallery and the reporters. And that's a very demanding task, and as the years progressed, it became even more demanding. One, you very quickly learn to be a good parliamentarian. Because the proceedings of the House are extremely complicated. To an outsider, or even a veteran reporter, he can lose it right there, just on a turn of a technicality. Numerous times there are legislative circumstances in which a "no" vote means, "I approve a proposition." And for a reporter, you know, he's just sort of floundering about in that maze of complexity.³

You have to recognize all 435 Members of the House. Some fellow jumps up in the back row and says, "Mr. Speaker, you're a nogoodnick!" And a dozen reporters say, "Who's that?" So you had to know all the Members. And so it was quite a prelude of study, to arm yourself with the essentials to bring good discharge to your responsibilities. Absolutely. You didn't just walk in cold.

Over the years, particularly during my tenure as a department head, it would be seven, eight months before I would leave the gallery with a new staffer at the desk alone. Six to eight months' background before I would leave anyone alone.

JOHNSON:

So that's a sign of the complexity. . .

WEST: Sometimes I would even stay myself just to avoid that circumstance.

[A 2-minute, 32-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

After Mr. Embly became superintendent, we reversed roles and I became the full-time occupant assigned to the chamber.

JOHNSON: In what year?

WEST: That was January 1960. Mr. Embly was the deputy, for two years—from 1958 to 1960—he was pretty much occupied being acting superintendent. Because Mr. Donaldson was in his privileged days and was on board maybe an hour or two each day. And his long habit in, I guess about—well, actually, beginning with my start there—he came to the gallery at 11:30 in the morning to be on time for Speaker Rayburn’s pre-session noon press conference every day. And a quick note in that regard—the left-hand corner of the Speaker’s desk was always reserved as a standing position for the press gallery superintendent. That was kind of a tradition, I’m told. And, indeed, during my tenure I always stood on the corner of that desk. So, Dick is largely acting superintendent much of the time, because Mr. Donaldson would come back from the Speaker’s press conference. He would give us, most of the time, an outlook on the schedule that day. We didn’t have the formal Whip operations that we know today, and have for many years—program announced a week in advance and almost instant communication if there’s a change. We didn’t have those luxuries that you folks now enjoy. And I’m sure it’s a valuable tool, I don’t criticize it at all. So I assumed that job almost full-time. Dick would relieve me for lunch, and occasionally, if there was a night session, he would spell me around 7:00. And I would go

down—I had privileges both on the floor and in the cloakrooms—and Helen Sewell, who I knew as a little junior high school girl, helping her father, Ben Jones, who tended the concessions stand.

JOHNSON: From the Republican. . .

WEST: Yes. And do you know Helen is still living?

JOHNSON: Yes. She worked in the Republican Cloakroom.

WEST: She worked in the Republican Cloakroom. And it was not that I had any Republican bias—the old fellow who worked over in the Democratic side, he was so incorrigible, even the Members didn't like him. So I kind of struck up with Mr. Jones, and we became very friendly, and that's how I knew her.

So Dick would spell me, and I'd go down to the cloakroom and Ben Jones would fix me a sandwich. And then they had one refrigerator. It wasn't quite as elaborate as in recent times, it was just a refrigerator. My furniture nomenclature's a little rusty. I think that's called a breakfront, where you have a cabinet up front, some drawers—well, that's what he worked from. So I'd go down and get a hot dog or a sandwich and a soft drink or something. But for practical purposes, I worked the chamber full-time.

JOHNSON: When you were in the cloakroom and other places, did you have a lot of interaction with Members?

WEST: In large degree, particularly if they were standing at the counter. Now, it was understood that kind of the back portion of the cloakroom was not off-limits,

but kind of respected as a Members' little whispering area. I rarely saw any whispering, but that was the fashion of the place. But my goodness, yes, I had developed numerous friendships there, standing at the counter, having a plate of cottage cheese and a half-smoke or something. I became very good friends with Bob [Robert Joseph] Dole when he was a Member of the House. He would eat there frequently at Helen's counter.

So as the years progressed, I did develop a number of friendships, just as a result of staying there and having a sandwich or a piece of pie or something. And to help Dick out, almost immediately I started bringing my lunch, and I would eat lunch around 11:20 for a noon day session. And that way, that would keep him free too, because I say, he had considerable responsibilities and, to this day, I do not begrudge Mr. Donaldson his luxury and job description as he rewrote it, not at all.

JOHNSON: Earlier you mentioned the preparation that the staff in the press gallery had for the national conventions. What kind of preparation was necessary for Joint Sessions?

WEST: Well, you would have to break that in about three different segments. Because initially and as the years progressed, security progressed. And the complexities and the volume of meetings and the preparation. It all just mushroomed. President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt, [Jr.] was here to address a Joint Session to report on Yalta. And so, as was the custom, 500 copies of the President's address (usually 500 copies) were sent to the House Floor for the Members' use. And 100 copies were sent to the press gallery for reporters' use. Well, on this day our copies didn't show up. Mr. Donaldson told me to go down to the Speaker's Lobby and see if our copies have

mistakenly been left there. And he added, "I don't want to see you walking." So I did. I took off, and the press elevator—it was sort of a combination Members and press elevator on the east end—was just coming up. So I opened the door and I go charging in, and I go down to the second floor. Well, immediately to the right of the press elevator are the two doors leading into Speaker Rayburn's private office, in which Mr. Roosevelt was waiting to go into the Joint Session. As the elevator doors open, this young, enthusiastic, under-instruction staffer leaps at the same time that one Secret Service man pushes Mr. Roosevelt's wheelchair immediately in front of me. And I had the physical dexterity in those days to turn sideways, and on the wall—I suspect it's still there (it's an antique)—is a huge cast-iron mailbox. It sits about two feet away from the face of the elevator. And I went in there and I hit it and my head caught the corner of it. And I was slightly stunned, and I'm sure the President was too, to be honest. I think it was a shared emotion here. And I remember him saying, "Are you all right, young man?" I said, "Yes sir, I think so." And he extended his hand, and I shook his hand. And it turned out later that it kept intact: I shook hands with and/or was introduced to and/or personally knew every President from Franklin Roosevelt through Ronald Reagan.

JOHNSON: That's a great story.

WEST: But that bizarre event, in the pursuit of my duties, had almost toppled over the President. And he looked terribly bad that day. I'll always remember it. I'll always remember the haunting features. In fact, I don't think I'm too far off in recalling he died about six weeks later at Warm Springs. I think I'm correct.

JOHNSON: Not long after.

WEST: Yeah, right.

JOHNSON: Did you find your copies?

WEST: And the copies were—thank goodness, right. My sacrifice wasn't all for naught. So I brought them back up. But to answer your question about preparations—apparently there was a Secret Service man stationed at the Democratic entrance to the Speaker's Lobby, and this one Secret Service fellow wheeling Mr. Roosevelt out, and that was his security complement. Now, perhaps one or two in the galleries, but that was his security complement. Whereas, today, I used to almost dread the pre-Joint Session security meetings, because I knew they were going to be lengthy, prolonged, very complex. And sometimes there's always some fellow that doesn't get the word and your great planning goes awry. Yeah, it just suddenly went awry. But that was his security.

But now, as the years progressed, the press gallery has 90 seats assigned to it within the chamber. And we had two doors leading into it, unlike the Senate; it only has one. The Senate, incidentally, enjoys many luxuries over the House, but the Senate Chamber, being much smaller, allowed for a much larger press gallery. Oh my goodness, I used to drool when I walked in there. And also, because of that kind of patronage appointment, although it was only summer help, but I didn't like the precedent being established, which has come back to haunt them, which I'll tell you about later. It haunts them more so today. The 90 seats—there is a pre-fixed, assigned list of those entitled to entrance to the chamber. And as a part of the preparation for the

Joint Session, or a Joint Meeting, you post that notice in the House and Senate press galleries. But it's a House event, obviously. And you issue a special ticket which you provide samples [of] at the House door, the south door, so that reporters coming in that night have access—you still have their actual ticket of admission to the chamber in your possession. As a security measure, you don't distribute that early. But they come in: "I'm covering the Joint Session." They have an interim pass or their congressional press gallery card. Well, that brings them into the press gallery. I borrow two staffers, and usually the Senate superintendent comes with them. I borrow two staffers so I can have a House staffer on the outside of the chamber—I'm sorry, have a Senate staffer on the outside of the door to the chamber—and a House staffer on the inside. I double-teamed it, always. And even though you may be in the press gallery 300 days a year, you do not get through that door without showing the separate ticket I have issued you from my back office in the west room.

JOHNSON: How did you decide how to issue the tickets?

WEST: The list on which the issue was developed over many years—inherited, if you will. And, indeed, until I revised it—with some controversy, I might add—there was obviously some favoritism involved. And so I revamped it, essentially, one seat per bureau. Well, in one case, Scripps Howard, which is a news chain, they had five entries. Newhouse, which is a chain, they had four or five. But they were listed as individual papers, but they were Newhouse-owned. The reporters were working out of their Newhouse News bureau in Washington. And I didn't think that was fair, to have people . . . I also issued standing tickets, except the first row. Second row, back row—you leaned against the wall. And I didn't think it was fair that people were

standing against the wall, when bureaus had more than one ticket. So I revamped it, and I put it into effect, and it made several people angry. But they got over it.

[A 1-minute, 54-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

And, fortunately, we had an ally in [Speaker Thomas Philip] Tip O'Neill, [Jr.], who happened to also be a very warm friend and fellow golfer.
{laughter}

JOHNSON: Did you and Speaker O'Neill golf together?

WEST: We were going to, but our schedules never blended for a date. And so once in my case, and once in the [House] Radio-TV Gallery's case, we went directly to the Speaker, as Rule 34 gives us the license to do. Section 930, I believe, in my office. And a highly placed staffer to Tip O'Neill reported to us later that the Doorkeeper was instructed to lay off. That was not his jurisdiction. But unfortunately, there were other times—he was undeterred.

JOHNSON: I read an article, and it mentioned that the Doorkeeper at one point was upset that all the seats weren't filled in the gallery that were allocated for the press.

WEST: There was one episode—and I don't remember who the—it was a Joint Meeting of Congress.

JOHNSON: It was a foreign leader that was addressing Congress.

WEST:

It was. It was a Joint Meeting for a foreign leader. And it wasn't newsworthy. And the Doorkeeper was unhappy about the press attendance. I think it's known, perhaps not publicly, but in situations like that, many Members of Congress don't appear. But they always send a warm body in lieu thereof in the press gallery. {laughter} And the Doorkeeper, apparently, had this vision of some warm bodies in lieu thereof. Well, Mr. West did not take kindly to that idea, and nor did the Standing Committee of Correspondents. Because, well, one, we were fearful—at least I was. I didn't want the precedent, because now and again I would get a request from—sometimes from a Member himself or herself—“Well, I'm going to make a very important speech today.” And, of course, subliminally suggesting it's going to be vastly newsworthy—you want to fill the galleries here. And could my staffer take notes or something? Well, that's obviously a bit of a ploy because probably the staffer's the one who typed up the speech. So I always had to decline that because I didn't want to set that precedent. Because I wouldn't [want to] find myself in—if Winston Churchill walked down the center aisle, you know, I don't even have room for standees, and I've got a half a dozen clerks sitting down in my front row. So the committee shared my view on that, and the Doorkeeper never got over it. Also, he was very unhappy about a pay increase that one of Michaelson's staff, in the radio-TV gallery, was inheriting. And he didn't try to block the appointment, but he reduced the pay \$5,000 in a move he described as his “administrative authority.” And the TV committee, the equivalent of my Standing Committee—I think they call it their executive committee—or did, I don't know about now. And so they went to Mr. O'Neill, and Mr. O'Neill had a private meeting with this now-beleaguered Doorkeeper. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Even though you fell under the jurisdiction of the office of the Doorkeeper, the Standing. . .

WEST: See, that was the bone of contention. We were not under his jurisdiction.

JOHNSON: Well, listed in the. . .

WEST: We were listed on his payroll only.

JOHNSON: Right. And the staff telephone directories also listed the press gallery. . .

WEST: That was a change that we went to war over. And that also got changed.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: Unbeknownst to me, Ben Guthrie was then Clerk of the House, and the Doorkeeper went to Guthrie and wanted these big telephone-index cards that you post for public display and use, to change that configuration and take the press gallery out of its separate listing and put it under the Doorkeeper's Office because we were on his payroll. And no Doorkeeper in history ever disputed the press gallery autonomy. It was just a payroll add-on, period.

[A 1-minute, 13-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

And one of his pet peeves, I learned later on after our disputes were already ongoing, was that somehow someone told him that I was a very close friend of "Fishbait" Miller, Mr. William Miller. And I'm one of the few people that called him "Bill," and only because, as a very impressionable young fellow, I

was in the chamber one day and the then-Majority Leader McCormack was paying tribute to “Fishbait” Miller, who started out as a doorman in 1941, I believe. And he carried Members’ laundry and their dry cleaning. That’s how he kind of ingratiated himself, and it worked; he went right up through the ranks. So one day, Mr. McCormack, for some reason, is paying tribute to Mr. Miller, who I think now is Doorkeeper, yeah. Yes. He made a point. He said, “Mr. Speaker, in paying tribute to Bill Miller”—and kind of a hush fell over everyone. “Who’s Bill Miller?” {laughter} He continued, “Mrs. McCormack said he is an Officer of the House, and ‘Fishbait’ is inappropriate.” {laughter} Well, that stuck in my thoughts for years, and I always called him “Bill.” Well, somehow the Doorkeeper came of the notion that I possessed some dirty linen about Bill Miller. And it’s absolutely false. The most dastardly deed I ever heard about Bill Miller was—and it was told to me in person by—in fact, sadly, his obit was in the paper the other day—William Jennings Bryan Dorn of South Carolina, former chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee. We were close friends because he married a reporter and close friend of mine in the press galleries. One of his constituents had sent him a huge country ham, and somehow or another it was directed to the Doorkeeper’s Office. Mr. Dorn is sitting in the press gallery, in the presence of several reporters and myself, and he said, “Do you know”—and he’s got his hands apart about two and a half feet—“when that ham finally made its way to my office, three big slices were missing out of the middle.” And he says, “I know who got them.” {laughter} “Fishbait Miller.” And that is the only dastardly deed I ever heard about “Fishbait” Miller. He was famous for kind of rifling some of the goodies.

See, that’s another thing that’s long gone: Members took great pride in the product within their district, whether it was peaches, Vidalia onion, sockeye

salmon, or something. And, to be sure, the press gallery was always a recipient of this largesse. There'd be a couple of bushel baskets of freshly picked peaches the day before. You know, not the stuff in the supermarket that was picked last year. And reporters—they would come into the gallery and they would have a big, brown paper box of something—sockeye salmon from Alaska, perhaps. That came to the press gallery quite a bit, and to individual Members. And Bill Dorn was one. He got a bushel of peaches and a big country ham from some company in his district. And it was very commonplace. And “Fishbait” was notorious for “skimming” it, was the kindly designation we all used. So it was just kind of his trademark and everyone thought it was humorous. But Bill was a bit disenchanted about these three missing pieces right in the middle. I mean, the middle is prime country. A couple off the end, we'll forgive. But, anyway, the Doorkeeper had this fixation that I had dirty linen on Mr. Miller, and I did not. And we got along famously. Mr. Miller always respected the tradition that he inherited and the adjunct to his payroll that he inherited.

JOHNSON: Well, I think this is a good place to wrap up because we don't have much time remaining.

WEST: Okay.

JOHNSON: I was hoping you could talk briefly about your tie clip.

WEST: Oh, tie clasp. Well, actually, it was given to me by Lyndon [Baines] Johnson, and he had them prepared to give to \$10,000-plus donors. And I knew Mr. Johnson, slightly, as the Majority Leader on the other side. But I did see him with some frequency because Speaker Rayburn was sort of

sponsoring him for the presidency, as time progressed. So, frequently I'd go to a press conference with Mr. Rayburn and Johnson would be there, so we knew one another. But exactly how—I mean, the card said: "Thank you, Lyndon Johnson." And it was addressed to me. And beyond that, it's all a mystery. It's been a treasured possession, much like my convention medals—some of them personalized—that I acquired over the years. At one time, I was offered a bit of money for them, but I'm keeping those for my two children. They can divide it in half. My son is a conservative Democrat, so he'll get the Democrat ones, and my daughter is a Republican, so she'll get the Republican ones.

JOHNSON: That works out well.

WEST: And so it worked out just right.

JOHNSON: Well, thank you very, very much. I enjoyed this.

WEST: Well, if you decide you want to expand beyond, there's much more I can provide for you.

JOHNSON: That would be great. Thank you.

— BENJAMIN C. WEST —
INTERVIEW TWO

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Mr. West, former superintendent of the House Press Gallery. The interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center, Cannon House Office Building. The date is August 31st, 2005. This is the second interview with Mr. West.

In the interview last week, you alluded to changes in the House Press Gallery—the remodeling of the House Press Gallery. Would you be able to describe that?

WEST: The remodeling of the press gallery took place in 1967, and it took about a year out of my life. I think in an earlier question about what was the press gallery like in 1942, I used the word “squalid,” and indeed that was quite descriptive. And so in 1967, I frankly tired of the working conditions that I found myself in each day. I went to Mr. Embly, and having previously many, many nights at home made some illustrations, made some scale drawings—I’m a self-taught draftsman and a fairly decent illustrator—I sort of laid out a game plan for him. And Dick [Embly] was a kindly man, but he was sort of a laidback administrator. He didn’t like new entries, and he said, “I agree with everything you say, but I don’t want to be involved. It will be your undertaking solely.” I said, “That’s fair enough. You’re the boss. I just want some blessing.” And I said, “Maybe a little sweat once in a while.” He says, “Very little.”

So on that premise, I undertook the total remodeling of the House Press Gallery in 1967, and as I’m fond of saying, I even bought new paper clips, just to make everything shiny-new. And I must also give credit to the

chairman of the Standing Committee at the time, Frank Eleazer, who was the chief of the United Press International House staff here on the Hill. Frank worked tirelessly to help me with some of the authorization problems, the funding problems. He and I appeared before the Legislative Appropriations Committee for the funding. And it was a massive undertaking, and I had a time pressure problem as well. The Congress adjourned, I believe, about October 15th of that year, through the first week of January, for a *sine die* adjournment, and so I had to fit everything into that timeframe. When I say everything, I had to, one, initially move the press gallery operations from its physical site to the Rayburn Press Room—2101 was ours; I assume we still have it—and set up a staff operation there. And that was quite a laborious task, moving file cabinets and some furniture and the like. And having established that, I had many, many meetings with the Architect's Office. I spent many, many hours at night, and at home on the weekends, preparing drawings and illustrations. I had to undertake of my own initiative buying furniture, subjecting it to competitive bidding, and then once the construction actually got underway, I was on site from 7:00 in the morning until 5:00 at night.

When the first workman arrived, and when the last workman departed, I was on-site. And I never took a single day off in that entire period, and I was really fiercely dedicated to this project. We gutted everything. We opened walls; we sealed off what were tunnels for rodents and roaches and that. I buried a lot of conduit in the wall before they were re-plastered for future use. And I devised and designed, with the aid of two very dedicated telephone company engineers, a universal telephone system. And also, it had the capability, about three years later, in addition to its in-house paging system, it also included the Rayburn Press Room, so reporters could work

there but not be so isolated from the press gallery and would miss incoming telephone calls and the like. And it all went together, including buying carpeting, which the Clerk, who I'd known for years, authorized. The furniture was authorized. Everything I needed was approved, and there was a bit of animosity from the—well, animosity might be a little strong, but the then-building superintendent from the Architect's Office was not that warm towards the press or the press gallery, at that. But it was a minor obstacle, and by and large he kind of threw his weight in behind it towards the end. And we virtually met the deadline.

And this new press gallery featured, among other things, a universal telephone system at two different staff desks, whereas previously it'd been a solo staff desk, and you could answer all 12 phone booths at the desks. No longer did you get up and page people and walk around. The handout press release system. Before the remodeling, press releases came in. They were pinned on the board and then stacked, one upon another. If you saw something on the board that attracted your eye, you had this pilgrimage through a mountain of paper and press releases to find that spare copy for yourself. Well, I designed cabinetry that had 60 individual slots, and it was rare that we would exceed 60 slots a day on handouts received from Members. And so, you looked, and I had a custom-made rubber that stamp said "House Press Gallery, Board Copy, Do Not Remove, Slot Number." And you looked down at Slot 14, and you took one out. And you lived much longer, because you didn't have all this labor invested in rummaging through the stack. Now that seems like a small thing, but it manifestly improved the efficiency of our operation. It was much swifter. But again, just a small item. And it's just that very fact that this multitude of small

items melded into a modern-day, efficient, proud-to-have facility in the House of Representatives.

And the public response, among the in-resident reporters and those transient types who would hit each gallery once or twice a day as part of their routine, was immense. I was a hero. I also put in acoustical treatments on the walls. I introduced carpeting in the main rooms, at least those generating the most noise factor. And it was like, as calm as this room. And everyone just rejoiced at their new facility. And about a month later, I was summoned out of the chamber. And here all—some 40 or so chairs lined up in our main room and the chairman of the Standing Committee is officiating. It seems that the public clamor to reward my leadership and energies had produced the Standing Committee gift of a \$500 color television set, which was a remarkable instrument in 1967. But this was the public response from the reporters and the Standing Committee. And my family and I enjoyed that for, I guess, a good 10 years. And also, a part of it which I found very rewarding: a couple of years later—in fact, I think I was superintendent by now—two longtime reporters, John Averill and Tom Foley, lamentably both now deceased—they wrote an article, I think for *Washingtonian* magazine, but I could be mistaken, about the power figures on Capitol Hill. And the lowly superintendent of the press gallery—he’s listed as one of the power figures. And among my credentials stated was the fact that I had actually saved the taxpayers many thousands of dollars by my personal role—I mean the drawings and the oversight. And so I had two rewards for my year of work. And it was indeed a year of work—hard work.

JOHNSON: Was this a cooperative project, in that reporters had been saying for years, “We’re not happy with the conditions?”

WEST:

Well, no, with the exception of Frank Eleazer and myself. We were the motivating force for all of this. Now, I did have the silent wishes of Mr. Embly, who privately complimented me on, not only the success of it, but my ability and shrewdness to confine it to that timeframe of opportunity—the *sine die* adjournment, because we could ill afford to have the press gallery shut down during a session of the Congress. And so he was quite pleased with the finished product, as every occupant was. But it didn't motivate any other galleries to emulate this initiative. The Senate Press Gallery Superintendent was quoted to me as saying—well, one of the reporters quoted him as saying, "I think West built a cocktail lounge." Because it was tastefully furnished in the décor and matched. It was not an oddball surplus from the building superintendent's office. And it obviously had a depth of planning and attention to detail. And to this day I'm proud of it. Now I discovered, in going over there the other day, that it's now been remodeled again. But much of my, sort of, outline of the time—modernization, if you will—is still present there today. So in a lingering form, that initiative of mine in 1967 hovers today.⁴

JOHNSON:

In Donald Ritchie's recent book, *Reporting From Washington*, there is an image of the House Press Gallery before the remodeling.⁵ Could you describe that image?

WEST:

Well, this picture, I have a similar print in my private collection at home. The view of the press gallery's main room that you see here results from the re-roofing and remodeling of the Senate and House chambers. I seem to remember that as 1948 and 1949. And so this format and décor, if you will, represents that refurbishing. And you'll notice there is fluorescent lighting in

the ceiling. Prior to that, there were two cone-shaped reflectors that threw the light back up against a very dingy ceiling and then reflected back down. The room was very dimly lighted as a result—poorly lighted, to be honest. And the phone booths were replaced—the old ones. And we did have a PA system that spared us walking from the west room (I'll say, parenthetically, it wasn't named after me. That's just the geography, but) the west room, the general room, the wire service room, and the east room. And so we did have a PA system for the telephone traffic. But we didn't have transfer capability that I introduced. You didn't have response capability that I introduced with my system. And again, I give credit to the couple of C&P engineers who worked with me. I was the idea man. It's a story they tell about—I read it somewhere in history—similar to a story they tell about Theodore Roosevelt. And Mr. Roosevelt was interested in building a canal. And so one of the planners said, "Well, Mr. President, the Pacific Ocean is higher than the Atlantic Ocean." And Roosevelt is reputed to have said, "Now, it's my idea. You work out the details." {laughter}

Well, that was, basically, kind of my motivation. You know, I had the idea, and this telephone fellow, they worked hard and they finally came up with the engineering to accomplish my objective. Now, going back to this room in the 1950 photograph, you'll notice that the tile—the old rubber tile—in its kind of checkerboard pattern, is still on the floor. It was very dirty and dingy, had been put in in the early '30s, and it covered up what is known as the Minton tile. It's part of the original floor surface. I believe it was manufactured in England, transported in the construction of the south wing of the Capitol. The reporters you see seated here are Tex and Al, Harry, Frank—yeah, they were all regular, in- resident reporters. And Mr.

Embly is at the end of the table. And perhaps in the future we will identify all of them, as you suggested earlier. So this is the so-called refurbished press gallery, in a 1950 photograph. And it does not reflect the later modernization of mine in 1967. You'll notice here, for example, it's difficult to discern, but there's about a six-foot high scroll mirror, above a fireplace. And there, at this end of the room, nearest me, in the forefront here, there is another fireplace. All of them were inoperative. And another matching mirror at that point. And in the east room, over that fireplace, was another matching six-foot mirror. And, in fact, that was one of my crises, in my remodeling. We desperately needed bulletin board space. And the one center one shown here, was woefully inadequate for the task. And so my crisis—remodeling crisis—nobody wanted these bloody mirrors when I took them off the wall. Now, the antique aficionados, I'll say, they wanted them preserved and put back. And I spurned that idea. And finally, I made a call to the Smithsonian. And I guess "lukewarm" would describe the reception when I outlined the proposition and gift I was offering. I said, "I'm a man bearing gifts." It didn't sell, really.

So they finally accepted them. And the final disposition, I know not to this day. But that was one of my very difficult tasks, was to unload these huge mirrors. And two of them were in a state of repair. I think they call that silver gilding in the back, that makes a mirror reflect, or something—two of them desperately needed refurbishing in that respect. But, so this caption—and that's the old Western Union clock. If you look into the west room here, on the left behind this pair of phone booths, would be an open window area, looking out on the south lawn, and a bench with three typewriters. And then the rest of the room was consumed by Western Union Telegraph on the left. And by 1950, Postal Telegraph had merged with Western

Union, and that old postal office was assigned to these AP regional people. And that's why you see one, two, three, you see three of them in this photograph. Because they were based on my side of the building, as a result of their AP regional office being on the premises.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: And you're standing over by the bulletin board?

WEST: Yes, that's me standing there.

JOHNSON: Is that where the press releases were posted?

WEST: That's where what?

JOHNSON: Is that where press releases were posted?

WEST: Oh, yes, in those days. And if you'll look down here, you'll see we're still piling press releases, one on top of another. And to my right, and you can see the window frame, was a pair of file cases with a Formica top on it. And when this cabinet became full, then you started dumping them one on top of the other. And it was quite inefficient, quite inefficient. And I had no voice in this renovation. And it really was something of a misnomer to describe it as renovation. Yes, there was new lighting, and far more efficient. And secondly, the dingy, cigarette smoke-stained walls were behind us now. So it was mostly lighting and painting. Mr. Donaldson, I'm confident, had

some invitation to participate but he was at a point of his career that it was a more of a leisurely pace.⁶ The staff inspiration for what I introduced in '67 just was not present. Now, I don't say that selfishly. It was just an attitude in those days, that you sort of accepted what was provided you. But it did make it a little brighter and a little cleaner. And much of the old furniture was returned. And you start with a basic premise in the press gallery, and I should have mentioned it at the time I described it as squalid. But even in 1942, the membership hovered just a little under 600 reporters, but it was about, spacewise, 65 percent adequate for the need, even then. And in the postwar era, it was virtually inadequate for the need. Now, when I retired, the membership had grown from 600 in 1942. It was hovering around 1,500 in 1986, when I left. The last count I had, which is now three or four years old, it was hovering around 1,800. And I find that an interesting fact because the number of daily newspapers in the country is rapidly declining. But yet, the membership grows. And I think, in large part, the explanation for that is the growth of government. And now, instead of reporters covering Capitol Hill, many of them cover a topic area or a specialty. Now, if a labor bill is on the floor of the House, they're in the press gallery's portion of the chamber. If there's a press conference by the Secretary of Labor, they're downtown on Pennsylvania Avenue, covering that. So a lot of bureaus sort of divested themselves of numbers and went to specialty beats. And as a consequence, as the number of specialties grew—environmental is a specialty, taxes, a specialty—and the broad spectrum of government, by its continuing growth, enlarged the press gallery membership.

JOHNSON: Was this a change that you saw during your tenure as superintendent?

WEST: That was one of the many changes, yes, that there was a growth factor. At one point, we should discuss the evolving of the various media galleries, and their growth. And I'll await your lead to introduce that. But it would contribute to that very question.

JOHNSON: Well, I did want to ask you about that topic. But before, I wanted to ask about the mission of the House Press Gallery. Did you have a specific mission?

WEST: I'm not certain that it was ever spelled out or defined. I think it sort of evolved with time, and events. In 1857, occupying its new chamber, the House set aside the third floor level behind the central motive for the press galleries. And it was relatively uneventful in the beginning, as best as my modest research can ascertain. But in about a 15- or 18-year timeframe, the press gallery, originally intended for reporters and letter writers, was overwhelmed with claim agents and government agents posing as reporters, pick women, sometimes street urchins, so the occupants, informally, to be sure, appealed to the Speaker for some discipline and some exclusive area for the press. And thus, we believe, was born the Standing Committee of Correspondents, possibly not precisely by that name. And they put in certain guidelines and requirements for admission to that press section or area. It's unclear—I've never run across any document or drawing indicating just how the press section was walled off, east and west. Indeed, initially, it was planned as the south corridor for the House Chamber—visitors' corridor. And so, I presume it was open from east to west, initially. But I never was able to find a drawing that depicted it one way or the other. But, ultimately, it became enclosed in rooms. Under the Standing Committee's informal situation by now, in the very early 1880s, the membership of legitimate

reporters was less than 100, in the early, very early 1880s. In his recent book *Reporting From Washington*, Donald Ritchie writes that “the press gallery accredited membership in 1881 was 91.” And so you have something of a springboard of less than 100 members, probably 80 or 90, reaching 1,500 by 1986, that I know of. So that was kind of a signal of the growth. And as the staff evolved, and as the mission of the press gallery evolved, the facts are rather pale along the way, and are not all that definitive. But as the growth of staff occurred, the first superintendent, Mr. Mann, in the very latter part of his career, had a Page assigned to him. And, bear in mind that these were political appointees, presumably at the pleasure of the Speaker. And that fact becomes very important later in the press gallery history that we should touch upon. And so we see something of a staff growth, and it logically follows that the depth of the mission has now increased—the workload, if you will, has now increased. And more than likely reflected now, a growth in the population of legitimate reporters in the press gallery.

When I joined the press gallery staff in 1942, the staff had grown to four. And certainly not overstaffing by any means. But that, too, reflected, by and large, the advent of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Because Franklin Roosevelt was an innovative President, and from my point of view, and from some historians that I’ve read, he sort of introduced socialism into our form of democratic government. In fact, there’s a very amusing story a White House reporter told me once about Mr. Roosevelt, who was gearing for his second term. He was very disturbed about a speech in his bid for his first term, that he had given in Pittsburgh, assuring the American public that the budget would always be balanced and there would be no deficit financing. And so this reporter is telling me that in this informal gathering and mix, that Mr. Roosevelt turned to one of his chief aides and said, “You know,” he

said, "I'm very worried about that Pittsburgh speech and the now unbalanced budget." And the advice given him was, "Mr. President, it's no problem. Just deny you were ever in Pittsburgh."

So that was one of the stories he gave. But it serves to illustrate how government was expanding with Mr. Roosevelt's programs. And with it, the press corps was expanding. Now, I don't have—my *Congressional Directories* go from 1940 to 1986—so I don't have any *Congressional Directories* available to me to count the press gallery membership in 1932. I'm going to guess it was probably less than 400. That would be my guess because the Depression is well underway, and newspapers were cutting back on hiring, as was the nation. And so I'm going to guess it was probably around 400 or a little less. And so the mission now becomes more defined. You have committees now, conducting hearings on the merit of Mr. Roosevelt's W.P.A program, which really was a make-work program, but it did put people to work. And so you need a staff man from the press gallery to handle the logistics of that hearing, that morning. And so, as the growth of the government grew, so did the growth of the Congress, and the role of the Congress, and the mission of the Congress. And coincident with that would be the mission of the press gallery. So "the mission" evolved with the passage of time and the increase of government, sort of hand in hand. I know that's not a very definitive response to your question, but I think it gives some insight or clue to the growth factor which would necessarily increase the mission of the press gallery. And indeed, in latter years, it became a very focal facility. The committee chairmen would stop me in the hall, or I would meet with them in their office if they knew they had a blockbuster hearing coming. And so an appreciation grew within the Capitol complex, of sort, of the press needing you, and yet the Congress needing me, as a, not as an interpreter or a

go-between, *per se*, but I was that middle-ground diplomat—that fixer, if you will—and it lent itself to efficiency and people could do their jobs—both the reporter side of the press gallery and the Members who are providing the press gallery for their individual needs.

JOHNSON: Well, that was something I was hoping you could elaborate on because you were in the unique position of serving Congress and also serving the reporters. Did you see yourself as a liaison between reporters and Members of Congress?

WEST: I mentioned earlier the breaking in two, if you will, of the career. The climate of Members of Congress and reporters changed drastically during my career. And the early reporters in, say, 1942 through early to mid-1960, as I described earlier, were born of experience in reporting in their local areas: initially city hall, state house, and then the Washington assignment. And many times, a now-Washington reporter, 25 years ago, knew the chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee. I understand that name's changed now, but the chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee was a member of city hall when that reporter was covering that beat. So a friendship and a camaraderie developed between individuals. That doesn't suggest that the reporter abandoned his adversarial role, it does not. But there was a common bond, most of the time, between those old alliances. And after about mid-1960, but really accelerated during the Watergate Baby era, and I think that's your phrase there, I found that. But it really accelerated the momentum of that. We now saw the introduction of "gotcha" journalism.

JOHNSON: And investigative reporting.

WEST:

And pack journalism. That was essentially nonexistent in my early, roughly 20-plus years' career. So the relationship, coincidentally, between Member and reporter changed as well. It was demonstrably more adversarial and less and less common bond, so to speak. And as a result, each side became a bit more distanced from one another.

In my early career, Members had a great pride in their local product. And when it came a bushel of peaches or three bushels of peaches, there was always a bushel of peaches sent to the press gallery. A California Member, immensely proud of the dates grown in his district, come the Christmas month—with or without Congress in session—there would be a case of California-packed dates sent to the press gallery. So the Member always made it a point, while he's feeding his colleagues, there was always an extra basket for the press gallery. And as the estrangement grew, and also other factors, that practice stopped. There were no more cheese wheels from Wisconsin, and I miss that to this day. Bless Dave [David Ross] Obey. I hoped he would sort of rekindle the practice. But that all kind of disappeared in the late '50s as well. Of course, transportation costs were becoming a factor. The producers back home were sort of now fading away to a younger generation. They didn't see the public relations worth. So there was many, many factors went into the kind of—the abolition of that practice. But it also, in large measure, from my view reflected a now-developing chasm between the press and Members of Congress and government at large.

I don't want to just isolate the Congress in this new modern-day journalistic view. And I suspect that someone in the press gallery of today listening to

this tape would want to charge me with blasphemy just thinking these thoughts, but there is a difference: The camaraderie is not there. The longtime friendship, stemming from earlier years, is not there. And as a consequence, you have a different type of journalism today, covering the Hill and covering government.

JOHNSON: How did that change in the relationship between Members and reporters affect your job?

WEST: That's hard for me to define. Most of my knowledge about the relationship with Members is basically hearsay. A reporter would say, "Well I was talking to my Member today about this," and he might share a sentence or two, you know, within earshot or in your presence. And that habit, over the years, actually was a fringe benefit, in my belief, because I heard many stories by that route. And many of them quite humorous and never to be published. But today Members are far more guarded in what they say. And, frankly, they are more polished and machined. They now have kind of glib, pre-rehearsed responses at the ready. Well, that's a new, modern fashion. And it must work, because I think I'm correct in recalling, in the 2004 elections, only 27 House seats were in actual contest, and 20 of those incumbents won. So, apparently, the glib, polished image works. But, occasionally—I remember one story a reporter was telling us: a Member of his delegation that he covered—a Member of his House delegation—the senior Senator from that state was retiring. And this Member, apparently not well thought of by his colleagues in the delegation, decided he was senatorial material and embarked on a campaign, and miraculously he wins the primary, and in his state that is tantamount to election in the state. So the reporter is recounting the story to me, that he was polling the delegation that night after this fellow

wins the primary and said, “What are your reactions to this rather surprise win?” And so he quoted one Member as saying, “By his adjourning to the Senate, he has enhanced the intellect of both chambers.” {laughter}

So it was that kind of, you know, lark and a bit of an uplift as a dreary day goes on. And that process, though, of just reporters quoting odds and ends, and tidbits like that, kept you abreast, somewhat, of the relationship he’s enjoying with the Member of his. If he represents the *Omaha World Herald*, then he’s polling the Nebraska delegation. And so that gave you some clue as to the rapport and the relationship. Now today and, indeed, the last number of years I was there, I would be hard-pressed to answer the question, because even that hearsay was disappearing, because reporters and Members are not that open to one another as—or you were not a sort of silent confidant—not by pledge, but just by action and happenstance. So the modern-day reporter, beginning in, I would apply that measure to roughly the middle ’60s, but particularly as it accelerated in about 1973, ’74. Everybody wanted to be a Woodward and Bernstein. And I’m an old-timer, and I know I’d be subject to journalistic rebuke, but I’m not sure Woodward and Bernstein made a contribution to journalism. I have some questions about it. But everybody wanted to emulate that. And, indeed, that found its way even to the fuzzy-haired professors in the journalism schools. And they were turning out this new breed of reporter. And the local newspaper and/or the papers back home were hiring these young college turnouts with a new attitude and a new perspective and a new idea of pursuit.

JOHNSON: And so did that really change the press gallery? Did you notice that in the reporters?

WEST: It changed it, perhaps “subliminally” is the word. It was very, kind of undercurrent, or something. In my early years, I never heard the hostile references to a Member or the description of his talents derided. Didn’t hear that. Oh, yeah, of course, we had our buffoons. But they were lovable, you know.

JOHNSON: So it wasn’t mean-spirited.

WEST: {laughter} Well, no. But I remember, at the press table, which is a 12-seat table in the corner of the main dining room—and I’ve had thousands of meals there, breakfast, lunch, dinners—and one day, it was four or five years before I retired, there was this reporter with a major newspaper, and she was covering politics in Washington and was on the Hill much of the time. And she lived over in Northern Virginia. Well, a very conservative fellow, and Republican, broke through that Democrat dynasty in Northern Virginia and was elected to Congress for about 12 consecutive terms. But he was unseated by a very liberal Democratic fellow who survived one term. But in his bid for the second term, this reporter is telling us at the table how she spent her weekend knocking on doors, distributing literature for this fellow. And one of the other reporters sitting there, noticeably uncomfortable about this, he said, “You write national politics. How do you divorce your private, personal sympathies from your. . . ?” “Oh,” she said, “it’s no trouble. No trouble.” Well, perhaps it is no trouble. But for him, and for me, sitting there listening, it had a disturbing factor to it, because it may not actually reflect itself in her reporting, *per se*. But somewhere underlying it, you know, deep down, me, as an insider, [I thought] that her bias somehow may have swayed who she sought out to interview, for example. So there are little nuances and silent ways to allow your basic thinking or premise into your news account.

It's not going to be overt, of course. But I remember that reporter. He was very uncomfortable with her, as she was recounting her weekend adventures.

But conversely, in the earlier days of my career, newspapers, overwhelmingly, were very conservative. And I'm sure much of the reporting reflected that conservatism in print. And, more than likely, in the payroll people reporting from Washington. So it's not a new, novel attitude of a journalistic bias. I think most honest reporters will acknowledge that there is a silent bias in much of the reporting. But much of the reporting survives that bias, joyfully. And at least that's how I examine the proposition when you say "mission of the press gallery." These are journalistic factors that you have to work from but also make it a part of your formula. Now the increasing responsibilities of the press gallery staff occurred by and large of growth of journalism, and growth of government, and growth of the House of Representatives. When I joined the press gallery staff in 1942, there were approximately 1,700 of us on the House payroll. I believe I'm correct in recalling when I left, there was something like 17,000. And that's hard to picture for an old-timer. But as I walk through and see these catacombs and hives, virtually they were beehives when I worked here. Now they're an office, with a label out front. But, again, I go back to the mission. So the mission is enlarging with each passing year and each passing Congress. Each Congress has its own innovations. And far more reporting from the Capitol building. Now, reflecting this growth, when I joined the press gallery in 1942 there was approximately 1,700 of us. Members of Congress, in their legislative office, had three clerks. Each committee, prior to the Reorganization Act of 1946 . . . There was 57 standing committees, and each committee had a clerk and a clerk-typist, with the exception of Appropriations and Ways and Means. I think, respectively, Appropriations had eight employees, and Ways and Means had

six. And those who actually worked and resided in the Capitol wing, Speaker Rayburn made it a point to know each and every one.

I remember I had just come back from the Marine Corps, and the boss had assigned me to a hearing in the Cannon Building. I'm walking through the Cannon subway, and I'm about midway, and I see approaching Speaker Rayburn. And you sort of had to work here in those years to know the immense stature that Mr. Rayburn enjoyed. Deservedly so. And so I see Speaker Rayburn approaching. And {laughter}, frankly the palms were a little sweaty. {laughter} And I get almost abreast of him, and I said, "Good morning, Mr. Speaker." And I know I couldn't have been two steps beyond, and he said, "Good morning, Ben." It just staggered me. I froze in my step. He kept on going. {laughter} And I thought, "I probably could be unemployed by day's end." I mean, he's going to the trouble to find out my name, see? I've had it. {laughter} Well, I thought of that many times, and I finally figured out how he knew my name. He was a very close friend of Mr. Donaldson's over the years. And, in fact, there's an aspect of that friendship that I would like to get into later, when we discuss conventions, particularly. But over the years, I realized how he'd come by that. One, it was his habit to know everyone who worked in that House wing. And a number of reasons I'd learned subsequently. A part of my job—and I didn't have a lot of training the first day on the job—but a part of my job was, when the House, in those days, with the manual roll call . . . the [reading] clerk actually called every Member by name, twice.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST:

The tally clerk would record this on a huge hardback roll call tally sheet. And the hardback went to the Government Printing Office for the *Congressional Record* the next morning. And there would be three or four onionsheets. And my job was to go down, about midway in the roll call, walking, well stooped over, not to impede the view of the Speaker, and sit on the step in the second tier of the rostrum until the roll call was complete, and the tally clerk would hand me the onionskin. So I finally figured out, one day, possibly the first day on the job or—he turned to the Parliamentarian, Lew Deschler, and, I sort of hypothesized, “Lew, who is that kid?” {laughter} So I know that’s how he learned my name. And, in fact, that’s . . . I know I’m digressing just a bit, but Speaker McCormack, succeeding Mr. Rayburn, was a very good friend of mine over the years. And again, in my same task as the low man on the staff totem pole, about 2:00 or so, the superintendent would dispatch me down to the House Floor to inquire of the Majority Leader of the program for the rest of the day. “Will we finish this bill today?” We didn’t have the sophisticated Whip systems of latter years. So every afternoon, with seldom interruption, Mr. Donaldson would dispatch me down to the floor, and I would go around behind the rail, come down the aisle behind the Majority Leader’s table, and sort of stoop down behind, and I’d say, “Mr. Leader, I am Ben West from the press gallery. Mr. Donaldson would like to know the program for the rest of the day.” And he would look over his shoulder. He says, “Well, I think we’ll finish this bill.” And he knew Mr. Donaldson quite well. And he says, “Tell Bill we may take up a couple of minor bills.” “Yes, sir.”

Well, this went on for about two weeks. So on this day, I dutifully go behind the rail, come down the aisle. And apparently he either heard me, or I may have touched the back of his jacket, and he looks over his shoulder, replying,

“I know. It’s Ben West, and you want to know the program.” {laughter}
Well, from that point on, Mr. McCormack and I were very good friends, particularly when he was Speaker. We kind of did a couple favors for him. And he was immensely helpful when I was remodeling the gallery and ran into a little bit of a problem with the Legislative Appropriations Committee.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example of a favor?

WEST: Well, first of all, the renovation required the Speaker’s approval, since at least my last, leather-bound copy of the House Rules—Rule 34, Section 930 at the end of my tenure—stated that, “The administration of the press gallery is vested in a Standing Committee of Correspondents by and with the approval of the Speaker,” comma. So remodeling the press gallery, while it had a unanimous approval of the Standing Committee, I had to go down and see “Big John,” as I used to affectionately call him. Because Speaker McCormack was a tall man. He was as tall as I, and perhaps even an inch more. And but he was a good friend for many years. And he took a liking to me. And we did a favor or two for each other over the years. The afternoon that I was elected the superintendent of the press gallery, which I think was about the first week of January of ’69, John Monahan, his man at the front door guarding the Speaker’s inner office, come walking into the gallery and said, “The Speaker understands you’ve been elected superintendent of the press gallery.” And I said, “Yes.” He said, “He wants to see you immediately.” Uh-oh. There goes the career again. {laughter} Well, I go downstairs, Miss Johnson, and here is the Speaker in his office. And he’s got Dev O’Neill, the House Photographer.

JOHNSON: The House Photographer.

WEST: Right. And he says, “Come over here, Ben. Dev wants to take our picture.” I said, “Dev wants to take our picture?” {laughter} And he laughed. And so Dev took a couple or three shots. The next morning—I mean, this is with dispatch—here comes this framed picture with a very dear inscription on the bottom. In fact, it hung in my office from that day forward until I left. And it’s part of the photographic portfolio I put together for my children. And that was just a mark of the friendship that we knew for one another.

JOHNSON: Since you just mentioned Dev O’Neill, the House Photographer, what do you recall about him?

WEST: Well {laughter}, Dev O’Neill was a flamboyant fellow. I remember him initially as one of the news photographers. He would never win a best-dressed man award. Again, to digress for a moment, in the early years of my career, the photographers had no facility whatsoever. And indeed, the . . . well, I won’t go into that. We’ll get into that with the evolving media gallery. But, so as an accommodation and a courtesy, the still photographers, who used the old primitive four-by-five speed graphics, and they carried these huge leather bags of flashbulbs and plates. I didn’t buy a flashbulb for years. They’d say, “Reach in there and grab a handful!” {laughter} So the superintendent—I think it began with Mr. Donaldson—would allow the photographers for AP, UP—and in those days the old International News Service was a wire service, and they had what was called INP as their photographic arm. And they would place their heavy bags and camera up in the windowsill, which was basically out of the way. And we didn’t take telephone calls or messages for them. But it gave them a brief respite from no man’s land. Over the years, in response and in appreciation if, for example, I

was working a hearing, and Dev O'Neill, Ed Alley, UPI, or Bill Allen or Herbie White of AP, George Dorsey of Harrison and Ewing, if they made a picture in the room, and you were in it—in those days the photographers did their own lab work at night—the next morning they'd hand you an envelope. And I had a stack of 8 x 10 glossies two feet high. Which I culled through, my first year of retirement and put together in photographic albums for my children. And the bulk of them I sent to the history office of the Architect of the Capitol. George White and I were close friends. And I didn't want to just dispose of them recklessly. And some of them were just empty rooms. I'd asked several of the photographers to take before and after pictures of the press gallery when I was remodeling, with an eye towards George White's historic office.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: So all this was documented in images.

WEST: Well, I assume they kept them. Most of them I sent down to—I've forgotten the lady's name who used to run that. But I was very familiar with one of the draftsmen. In fact, I worked with her, in rather large measure, doing the remodeling. And her first name was Georgia. And so, rather than destroy all that, I had some appreciation for its worth. And so I mailed it all to George, and I assume it's down there now.

The photographers just would show their appreciation by just running the extra print. And they'd bring it up and hand it to you. And now sometimes

it had a downside, but it many times would be a plus. One of my many, many jobs . . . if I was to write out a job description of an energetic, on-his-toes, kind of diplomatic superintendent, which I aspired to be—I'm not sure I accomplished it—it probably would run three or four pages. Because one of the most surprising things in my career was the untold duties of the superintendent of the press gallery. In fact, I schooled two new Senate superintendents as they took office that same day. And the Clerk of the House, seated next to the Vice President during a Joint Session of Congress, Ted Henshaw, Ralph Roberts, Ben Guthrie, their picture's in the *Post* or the *Times Herald* or some paper the next day, and they want a glossy. So I would just say to one of the photographers, I'd say, "Well, the Clerk, or somebody on the floor, would like a glossy. Can you help me on that?" And the response was always immediate. And in a couple of days I had it. And it was a bit more of a task with the advent of color photography. It was a bit more of a chore. But that turned out to be one of the superintendent's busiest days, is the following morning, is the phone traffic, particularly those on the rostrum, "Could I get a glossy of that, Ben?" It might even just be the tally clerk. But it would be something for his grandchildren.

JOHNSON: This would be after a Joint Session such as a State of the Union address?

WEST: Well, indeed, for myself, during Joint Sessions and meetings it was my habit to stand in the right aisle of our portion of the press gallery, in the chamber, about two steps back from the first row. And I allowed, with the Speaker's approval, the AP and UP to make back-shot stills from the first row of my gallery. Under our rules you don't record and/or make photographs. And that's in compliance with the rules of the House. But I interceded with the Speaker to let the AP and UP make these back-shots. We would not let the

courier in. So I would stand there and await the first roll of film, take it back out to the waiting couriers, who would get on motorcycles and race it down to Pennsylvania Avenue to the lab. And so, many times, I'm in the picture. Well, I never had to ask. {laughter} If they saw it, you know, it'd come the next day. And the only time that I ever had to strong-arm any photographer, we had a Joint Session . . . and starting with Lyndon Johnson, Joint Sessions for the President went to evening events. With absolutely no disrespect to Mr. Johnson . . . I'm wearing his very fancy tie clasp {laughter}, his gift, this moment. But there probably was never a higher or stronger ego to walk these corridors. And he decided, or some very sharp aide of his said, "Well, you could be on television in the evenings, but a noonday television, nobody watches that. They've got a big hamburger in front of them!" {laughter} So we went to evening Joint Meetings. On this particular evening—actually the following morning, I had a call for a picture of the rostrum. And this one photographer—it appeared in the *Post* that morning—he wasn't too fond of the Clerk. I don't know if they'd had a run-in or something or other. I don't know. And he said, "Well, can I ask who it's for?" I said, "Yeah. It's for . . ." I believe it was the Clerk. Now, I may be mistaken. But whoever it was for, in whose behalf I was asking, apparently they'd had a run-in or an encounter or something. And he said, "No." He says, "No way." And I looked over to the windowsill and said, "Is that your camera and bag there?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "Pick it up and leave my office." He said, "How many do you want?" "One will do nicely," I replied. {laughter}

JOHNSON: This was an unusual circumstance?

WEST: Yeah, right. But that was part of my superintendent mission, since you used the word "mission." I learned many facets of it, and what can only be

described as on-the-job training. And I thought I was—having been the acting superintendent so much of the time, four, perhaps five years prior to my official appointment—I thought I knew the job inside and out. But I learned there were diplomatic roles, quiet roles. And I will always feel that I made a contribution that history will never know, and the average fellow in the corridor will never know. But the recipient of the request, he will know, and still does, presumably.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example of what you're talking about?

WEST: Well, not without violating confidences. Well, let me see. I've mentioned the pictures. And it didn't have to be a House Officer. It was just employees. I remember one time I arranged for a glossy print of a Page boy who was seated down on the rostrum. And I know that was 30-plus years ago. And it's probably hanging in his office or something, to this day. Also, for example, a role I never knew—and I had worked political, presidential nominating conventions from 1944 to 1980—that the first year I was superintendent and totally in charge, one of the reporters come rushing up to me, and he said, "I have a big problem." He said, "My publisher has just decided he wants to come and sit on the platform." Because his paper had two seats assigned. And they would dump one reporter, of course, for the publisher. But he said, "I'm desperate! He insists on driving his car to this complex. I need a parking ticket, if there is one." Well, I went to the head of security. But I had some parking permits. But I had allocated them to the wire services and the local paper in that city. So I was clean. I didn't have anything in my pocket. So I went to the, I think the Sergeant at Arms—or maybe it was the convention manager—told him of my predicament. He reached in his pocket and said, "That'll get the car through the line." I said,

“I assure you, it’s the publisher of the paper.” So I took it back. I gave the reporter the parking permit to come into the stadium complex, and I gave him a utility—what was called “press area credential”—that the publisher could get in. And he says, “I need two. His wife is with him.” {laughter} That was just one of the duties I never anticipated. It was an emergency, on-site, private role to help a reporter who was under a command performance to get that car inside that stadium complex.

So they’re nitty-gritty things, but they contributed mightily to a certain circumstance at the time. And so that was very much like some of the private conversations behind the scenes. Like once in a while, I can recall, a committee chairman would call me and say, “Could you drop by the office for a few minutes?” And I’d go by to learn, “I have a request from—” and he would name the reporter, “—for an interview, a private interview.” He asked, “I don’t know the man, I was wondering if you know him and could tell me a little bit about him.” “Yes, Mr. chairman,” I said, “I know him for a number of years. He’s a first-class gentleman, and you’ll get a fair shake.” And I learned later that he gave the interview to that reporter based on my sort of confidential, behind-the-scenes advisory.

JOHNSON: Was that a common occurrence?

WEST: It was not a common occurrence, no. But it was a little shy of being rare. I remember we had a very colorful chairman around here by the name of [Lucius] Mendel Rivers, of South Carolina. And Mendel prided himself on being a Southern gentleman. One day we were having a hearing in the Armed Services Committee room. I knew his aide-de-camp, Anita Stocksdale. She motioned me to come up to the rostrum. It’s a half-hour

preceding the hearing, and Chairman Rivers was there. He knew me by name, actually. He said, "What do you know about this reporter?" And he gave me the name. Well, the reporter had a story on the front page of the *Post* that morning, not all that complimentary of Mr. Rivers. And I've forgotten the project that was involved or the matter involved. And he says, "Well, what do you think of him?" I was always very careful about questions like that. Of course, I'm a fellow quite cognizant of the fact I'm serving two masters. And I'm definitely endeavoring to do it loyally, both directions. "Mr. Chairman," I said, "the only thing I can tell you about him is he's one of my constituents." And I had a big grin on. He says, "Well," he's pointing his finger, "I want you to know I don't like him!" {laughter} Well, I don't know if I was expected to evict him from the press table or not. {laughter} So it was just little duties like that I never anticipated. I'm sort of an ambassador from one to the other, perhaps.

JOHNSON: This is a good stopping point.

WEST: Okay, that's fine.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: At this point in the interview, I was hoping that you could talk a little bit about the behind the scenes of the press gallery that most people wouldn't be aware of.

WEST: Well, I'm unsure of the behind-the-scenes role. Obviously, there were numerous ones in different capacities. In the latter-day years of my career, it was always advantageous for both the House of Representatives and the

superintendent and the press to have logistical meetings in advance of what you knew were to be blockbuster events. And as a consequence, you got to know firsthand a number of committee chairmen and their chiefs of staff, most of whom I knew; they sort of worked their way up in the ranks as I was working my way up the ranks, so I knew many committee clerks over the years, and when they became the top honcho of the committee, it was a plus for me. And those are always useful.

One of your behind-the-scenes moves was to influence the chairman and convince him that his committee room was woefully inadequate for the need and the coverage that this hearing would trigger. For example, as the impeachment hearings were looming, I was at a meeting with my counterparts in the regular TV gallery, and in the House Periodical Gallery with Mr. [Peter Wallace] Rodino, [Jr.], and his chief of committee staff. And he turned to me, because I was sort of the senior superintendent there, and he asked, “Well, what is your thinking on it?” “Mr. Chairman,” I said, “I have had the experience of many, many blockbuster newsworthy hearings. Obviously, impeachment would be at the top of the heap, and a presidential impeachment would be at the top of the heap.” And I urged, “I would strongly recommend that you relocate these hearings—when they come to pass—to the Cannon Caucus Room. I’ve worked many hearings there.” I said, “It lends itself to 100-plus press seats and a reasonable accommodation for public spectators, and a reasonable mobility for the committee rostrum.” He kind of looked at me and said, “You know, that’s a sound recommendation.” But he said, “This is going to be an historic event, I want that history to occur in this Judiciary Committee Room.” So he spurned the bid to relocate. Well, that was a behind-the-scenes mission of mine: to counsel the chairman. And I regret to this day that he spurned the

suggestion. But that was part of our role. And I was doing it not only on behalf of he and his Judiciary Committee; I was doing it for the benefit of the reporters who would be working that hearing. And I saw it as a dual representation, my role.

JOHNSON: So that would be an example of you serving two masters?

WEST: That would be serving two masters. I think that was to be my next thought. And so, that two-master role occurred many times. And again, that's sort of a self-imposed status, but it's one that I embraced many years ago, long before I was in the policymaking echelon of the press gallery. I was a spear carrier for quite a number of years. But I felt that way. From less than 180 million people in the United States when I joined the press gallery in 1942, and I thought, I among a handful that gets to serve in the House of Representatives. And that was the motivation for me, my whole career. And along the way, I reasoned that I had two masters. I saw it in evidence before me every day. Sometimes it was tranquil; sometimes it was combative. But I realized that if I was to be a success in this undertaking that had to be my mantra: that I am a slave of two masters. And that was my thinking.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have reporters come to you and ask you to intervene? Maybe a Member that they wanted to interview refused, and then they would come to you and ask you to intervene?

WEST: Not as a peacemaker, *per se*, but yes, I've had that role. It generally—not exclusively, but generally—involved a Member's suspicion more than an actual indictment, or reluctance, or fearful of the consequences of a behind-the-scenes interview. Most of the time, I succeeded in salvaging the

appointment or, in effect, igniting it sometimes. And a Member would ask, “How am I going to fare with this fellow?” And I always had to respond to that conditionally: One, I don’t like to make personality assessments, and secondly, I wanted to appear responsive to the Member’s question, but I also wanted to defend the reporter’s entitlement and right to access to him. So it gets a little fragile, that line. But since I’m still mobile and walking about, I succeeded much of the time, obviously.

So yes, I’ve had Members call, and I remember one Member called me who I was quite fond of. We were good friends over the years. And he called me one day, and—a new Washington reporter had—representing his area; I am not sure it was his district *per se*, but his area—and had written this story that the Member was involved in some clandestine move to unseat the committee chairman, or something like that. So he called me, and he said—again, we were very good friends over the years—he said, “Ben, what advice have you for me in responding to this?” He says, “I’m a chairman of two subcommittees! I adore the chairman! This is totally untrue!” And I said, “Well,” I said, “old friend, you have one difficulty here. If you respond to it, it may ignite a follow-up piece.” “But,” I said, “if you don’t respond to it, it generally gives credence to the story.”

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And he said, “I was fearful you were going to tell me that!” Or words to that effect. And I told him, “What I would do is just simply issue a statement—a one-sentence line that the story is totally without fact.” I said, “I wouldn’t try to amplify it; I wouldn’t include any righteous indignation. Just a one-sentence thing, or a two-sentence, one paragraph just to say it is without basis

or foundation, period.” And that’s what he did, and the wire services picked up his statement from Washington, and nothing ever happened to that myth. Whether it was a generated story, I have no way of knowing. Maybe it had substance. Maybe the reporter was right, and my old friend was deceiving me a bit. I don’t think so. I don’t think so. So again, that was part of my kind of diplomatic mission or at least, the diplomatic aspect of my overall mission, was to try to dutifully respond to both sides of the built-in confrontation of press and elected official.

JOHNSON: At this time, I was hoping you could focus on your recollections of reporters. You were an employee of the gallery for 44 years, so you obviously came across many, many reporters.

WEST: I would estimate, in the 44 years of tenure, the press gallery membership probably included 10,000 reporters. Many of them were dignified, well respected—a name in the journalistic community: the Arthur Krock, the George Rothwell Browns. I make a mistake in naming any of them. But there was this—a roll call of very prestigious reporters in that period of time, particularly during the early Roosevelt administration. In fact, [Don] Ritchie in his book, *Reporting From Washington* devotes a couple of chapters to the relationship between Arthur Krock and Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt. And that was not all that uncommon. It wasn’t widespread, but even a President had his favorite reporters.

It comes to mind that one of the reporters who covered the White House during Roosevelt’s time had the habit of referring to the lady that Mr. Roosevelt was reputed to be enamored of, but in his reference or as a preface to his question, the reporter would say, “Mr. President, about this little white

cottage,” which referred to Warm Springs and the rendezvous with, Lucy, I believe her name was. And so Roosevelt, essentially ignoring the question, but he took up the habit of referring to this reporter as “Butch.” Well, now the reporter is a very dignified fellow: He wears tailored suits; he’s a White House correspondent, which is the pinnacle of journalistic prestige. And so, he told me the story, in later years after Roosevelt died. He said, “Mr. Roosevelt and I made an agreement. I would no longer be ‘Butch,’ and I wouldn’t bring up the little white cottage.” {laughter}

So again, that’s another quiet report. But reporters as a whole and, again, breaking my career essentially in two parts, were men of distinction, but also many in the press were awash in alcohol. This cannot be construed as a general indictment of the press gallery membership at large. The vast majority were sober and skillful reporters plying their profession each day. It was just a tool of the trade.

You had to have ink in your veins to be a reporter because the salary system and structure was abominable. And unfortunately for me as a staffer and my staff colleagues, this spilled over into our operation because the old-timers who found their way to the Standing Committee of Correspondents—not every single one, but a majority—possessed the view that gallery staffers shouldn’t make more than the reporters they’re working with.

And later on, as we get into the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 and how it applied to the press galleries, I’ll be able to expand on that particular aspect. But the reporters were very underprivileged as far as pay goes. At that time, we had four local papers: the *Washington Star*, which enjoyed a national prominence and reputation; the *Washington Times-Herald*, which I

served as a schoolboy at 4:30 in the morning and 3:30 in the afternoon; and the *Washington Post*; and the *Washington News*. And it was not uncommon for some of the local reporters covering District of Columbia government—and there was an official House Committee on the District of Columbia in those days—they possibly worked for three or four of those papers in their career. They'd get mad at the city editor because he deleted a paragraph he was fond of. He'd say, "Well, I quit!" And go across the street and get a job with the *Washington Times-Herald*. Well, it was something of a revolving door among the local papers. But that came to a screeching halt in about the mid-50s because a new phenomenon came on the scene. It was called the "fringe benefit package," and papers were reluctant to hire late-40ish reporters and early-50ish reporters because of the impact it would have on their bottom line and the fringe benefit package.

So that swapping jobs sort of ended. But a couple of papers—the *Washington Star*, as I say, enjoyed a national respect—it was very paternal with its employees. In fact, if you bought a home, they would finance it at a half-a-percent rate lower than what you could get at your local bank. And it was a very paternalistic organization. When they knew they had an alcohol problem, they would generally bring that fellow off the Hill or off the street and find a place for him in the office, where he's under surveillance. And, you know, if he goes to lunch and has a couple, fine—we've still got him in view, and he's producing, and he's working. And I would say that in large measure, most of them were adequate for the task, even after a long lunch or the pint bottle in the pocket during the day. They were just . . . many of them were just hardened, seasoned drinkers. And indeed, we had a handful of Members of Congress that I remember. One of them—it's a word long forgotten—but in my early career, we actually had a handful of orators.

Apparently, they're all gone, because I watch C-SPAN, and apparently they boycott C-SPAN. But we actually had an orator or two, and one of whom, until he had a couple of good belts of bourbon, was not an orator! But given that brief stimuli, he was one of the finest speakers in the House. And, in fact, if you would say, "Mr. X is speaking," half of the reporters in the main room would go into the chamber portion of the press gallery and listen. So the fact that it was—well, "awash" was a quite strong term; I probably would delete that later on, but it was very prevalent.

And how it reflected itself in the end product? I'm not convinced that it did, because I read too many papers the next morning. And I'm satisfied, as that habit obviously waned and pretty well disappeared from the landscape by the mid-'50s—late '50s almost completely—that I didn't see any particular improvement in the copy emanating from the press gallery! All read rather nicely to me! So the fact that it was not a crutch, but the fact that it was just present and available. The messenger in the Capitol Hill Liquor Club Store, where Madison Library sits now, had two full-time messengers servicing the office buildings of both House and Senate, and the press galleries. And so, it was not an uncommon event, or condition, or atmosphere.

JOHNSON: And this was during the '40s and '50s?

WEST: Well, I assume it was during the '30s, the '40s, and '50s, because I found myself within a staff that were heavy drinkers. And had a history of heavy drinkers. I know many times, one of the staffers—I'll not mention names—would ask me to go downstairs and get a cup of coffee and bring it back up, and he would prepare what he called "coffee royale to awaken one." And he'd pour a big slosh of whiskey in it, and drink this hot coffee. And that

would happen a couple of times a week. And another assistant, he kept two bottles of wine in the file drawer that he kind of gave attention to as the day progressed. And so that was just the atmosphere.

And it was true of one—at least one—of the radio reporters I knew at that time, because the radio gallery—we'll get into the evolving of the others—but the radio gallery, on my first day, was two phone booths that had been lined with some type of acoustical cele-tex and a desk sitting out in the elevator lobby of the east part of the east part of the House Chamber on the third floor. That was the radio gallery. But I do know one of the radio guys was given to this lifestyle. But it pretty well cleansed itself. And also, in the House itself, it began to disappear in the early '60s. I suspect it was a result of increased press coverage of Congress. There was a developing chasm between press and the Congress. Not conspicuous, but it was starting to show somewhat. So the days of alcohol by and large disappeared by the late '50s. Now in the office, in the corridors, I'm guessing it was probably well on the wane as well. I could remember many, many times the hours we spent, Tony and I—Tony Demma and I, in the House Un-American Activities Committee—the chairman would invite us occasionally in the back office, and we'd have a little splash over some ice. But that was just a one drink, “Great job today, fellas,” sort of atmosphere. But there was heavy drinking. And there was a lot of social life on the Hill in those days. Nowadays, I—perhaps I mentioned earlier, each Member had three employees—three clerks. Now I think they have 16. They're running over each other's foot; no time to party! So it was a little more relaxed atmosphere then. And there was a bottle now and again. But by the mid or late '50s, it was disappearing, and no longer a part of Capitol Hill life.

JOHNSON: Well, to this point, you've mainly discussed the male reporters. What about the women reporters?

WEST: We have women reporters. I remember Ruth Cowan of AP; Ruby Black, UPI; Elizabeth May Craig of the Portland, Maine papers. I would say in the early part of my career, the early part being in '42, in particular, there was probably at least a dozen women accredited to the press galleries. But as the war progressed, by early 1943 we had many, many women in the gallery—in the press galleries.

The AP's regional staff was practically all female by the end of '44, and many bureaus had been hiring women as reporters. Now, fairly or unfairly, at the end of the war, and these old-time reporters returned, many, many of the women reporters were either deposed and/or transferred to the office to write obits or society or something. And so by and large, they pretty well disappeared from the press galleries for several years. Now that doesn't mean there were none. I mean, Elsie Carper—my dear friend Elsie—with the *Washington Post* . . . and of course, Mrs. Craig was still there, Doris Fleeon was there, Ruth Finney of Scripps Howard was there. So there were numerous women who continued their profession in the press galleries despite the return of many male reporters.

JOHNSON: How did the increasing number of women reporters change the gallery?

WEST: How did they increase?

JOHNSON: How did they change the gallery?

WEST: Oh! I'm not sure that it did, materially. I know in my own operation—and I say this with some humor, but also with genuine attention to the matter when it was brought to me—as the population of women increased, the bathroom facilities were really overwhelmed. To give a graphic description, the ladies had a one-seater, and the men had a two-seater. And as the ladies' population increased, they felt this was manifestly unfair, given biology and other considerations! And our faction was sympathetic to that. And so I caused the Architect of the Capitol to conduct an engineering survey to see how that could be reversed. We couldn't just change the labels on the door; that wouldn't work. And so in a week or two, he got back to me and said it was not structurally feasible because it was a supporting wall and arch. Well, I'm a somewhat skillful draftsman; I know a little bit about such things. So I accepted that report. And it sort of languished. And when I became superintendent in 1969, the woman population is now increasing even more so.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And the problem, of course, is manifesting itself worse and worse. So up in the far northeast corner of the corridor is a ladies' room that belonged to the House Rules Committee. So a couple of years later, I went over to the Clerk, who I knew quite well, and confided in him that I had this problem that it was apparently structurally impossible to change. I said, "How about if I have a key to your ladies room, with the strict understanding that it will be kept in the center drawer of the staff desk, and only as a necessity—perhaps bordering on urgency—will it be used." He said, "Well, let me run it by the chairman." It sold. Well, I became a hero. Nobody asked me for a date, but I became a hero! {laughter} And it worked fine for a couple years. I had to—

in fact, the only time, I believe, in my career I ever did—I had to publicly admonish a member of my staff for keeping a young lady lingering while she tried to justify the need for this emergency back-up key. I was very angry. And so that worked well for a year or two. For a reason that remains unknown to me today, I gather one of the ladies in the Rules Committee staff objected to sharing it with reporters; I never knew the confidentiality of that room was ever violated. Now, I myself was not privileged to inspect, but never once. Anyway, he said, “I have no other choice, but I have to ask you for the key back.” Well, it continued to be a mounting problem. And as the increase in women Members continued, the situation really become quite difficult. There was a public ladies room on the first floor, but it was quite well removed from the day of operations.

And so finally, in the latter years I was here, we commissioned—the Standing Committee directed me to commission another engineering study, which I did. And they reported that it was engineeringly feasible, but it would be somewhat expensive and somewhat structurally involved. “Well,” I said, “I’m not in a position to authorize it.” I said, “I’m only directed to commission this new study.” But, I said, “that sounds workable to me, if it was confined to a *sine die* adjournment.” And that’s what was done. The center wall was moved, certain fixtures were transplanted from the ladies room. Certain fixtures were transplanted to the new men’s room. And in effect, they reversed facilities. And even then, it was proving somewhat inadequate for the men, and continued to be inadequate for the female population that was still growing. And as I walked by the other day, I see it’s structured that way, although it has a new façade on it now. But so, apparently there, it’s still two to one in the press gallery’s infrastructure.

{laughter}

JOHNSON: What do you remember about the first African-American reporters?

WEST: The first what?

JOHNSON: The first African-American reporters.

WEST: Oh! Louis Lautier. Louis Lautier was a grand fellow. He spent much of his time in my gallery, and he was a very affable fellow. Like me, he had a pride of dress—he was always impeccably attired. And he sort of blended in with the environment. No one particularly paid attention to him. He might ask a question. He asked me numerous questions, because I worked the chamber much in that era that he was there. He just sort of blended in. I don't recall anything particularly significant about him. I do think that Ritchie, in his *Reporting From Washington* book, could have elaborated a bit more meaningfully on the opposition votes in the Standing Committee about Mr. Lautier's qualifications for membership.

JOHNSON: Because the Standing Committee denied him credentials.

WEST: They did, based on the rule. The vote was four to one on Mr. Lautier's application to reject it, on two counts. The chairman who he lists as voting for it, Griff Bancroft, represented the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which was a very liberal paper. In Chicago, it was started during the Roosevelt administration because the publisher was quite a fan of Mr. Roosevelt and the New Deal. And it was meant to be a counter to the very conservative *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Herald-American*. And also, there was the *Chicago Daily News*, but I am unfamiliar, at least now, with what, if any, their political

orientation may have been. But [Charles Wayland] Curley Brooks, who—a Senator from Illinois who represented Chicago—overruled the Standing Committee. The four dissenting votes were Bill Theis of INS [International News Service], Don Warren of the *Washington Star*, Bill Sisson of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and Herman Lowe of the *Penn Federal News Bureau*. They were the—not bad for an old fellow! {laughter}

JOHNSON: I was going to say that you have a fantastic memory! {laughter}

WEST: Yeah! {laughter}

JOHNSON: I'm impressed.

WEST: Thank you for that comment. And I knew each one of those gentlemen over the years, and they were men of quality. And there never was a racial tone—and I don't suggest Ritchie creates that—but the absence of maybe another paragraph or two on the flawed application might have removed that hint. At least I read it as a hint. By the same token, another reader may have interpreted citing the Bancroft affirmative vote alone was a veiled criticism of an advocacy vote ignoring the facts. It is all in the eye of the reader, I believe. A paragraph I would have included would note that two—perhaps three—years earlier, another Standing Committee of Correspondents unanimously rejected the application of the Associated Negro Press—a group of weekly and semi-weekly newspapers—for the same disqualifying reasons.

But absolutely, Mr. Lautier did not qualify on two counts: One, he was not an employee of the *Atlanta World*, as alleged, and secondly, he was not engaged five days a week in the pursuit of news and the reporting of news for

a daily newspaper. And to the credit of the *Atlanta World*, when presented with this fact, they acknowledged that they were only a repository for a collection among black weekly papers to fund a salary—sort of in the guise of a daily newsman—for Mr. Lautier.

JOHNSON: And just to provide a little background on this, the qualifications for accreditation were that you had to . . .

WEST: The qualifications were you had to, one, be a salaried reporter working for a daily newspaper published five days a week. And that your principal income was derived from daily newspaper reporting and writing of dispatches.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: He was an employee of the Justice Department at the time. So those four gentlemen, I believe, simply voted the rule, which was quite explicit. But Mr. Curley Brooks, now chairman of the Rules Committee, he being from Chicago and up for election I think the next year—I think in '48. I think this occurred in '46-'46 or '47—

JOHNSON: Forty-seven, I think it was.

WEST: Forty-seven, right. And he was up for election the next year, as I recall. And he simply vetoed it, in my view, on political expediency, not on the facts. But it had some spillover, in that subsequently, we had applications for membership from two more black reporters. One, Ethel Payne—

JOHNSON: And Alice Dunnigan.

WEST: And another one from Alice Dunnigan.

JOHNSON: Alice Dunnigan, right.

WEST: Right. And I may need help now and again. {laughter} It's not infallible; it's just good, but . . .

JOHNSON: We can work together.

WEST: Oh, indeed! So Alice and Ethel—there was a sort of a routine cursory committee approval because they knew a veto was awaiting, more than likely, from Brooks again. And they had very frail qualifications. To their credit, I remember Alice saying one time that she was not always a full-time reporter, that she had to supplement a rather meager reporter's salary and she was up-front about it.

And I think I am correct in recalling that Ethel Payne acknowledged one day—I was nearby—that she also was an advocate as well as a journalist. Well that, too, would be a rules violation. We've had cases where we have called in accredited members of the press galleries who lend their name and sometimes photo likeness to commercial endorsements. And in fact, we were poised to expel one member who declined to relinquish her role in the advertising for Ipana Toothpaste. Yeah. It was back in the late '40s—a woman, one of the women, with the *New York Herald-Tribune*. Marguerite Higgins.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay.

WEST: *New York Herald-Tribune*. And she was—well to her credit, in face of the expulsion, she resigned, but she refused to relinquish this rather lucrative commercial endorsement. And a very famous syndicated columnist, we had to summon him for violating the promotional rule. And he was endorsing Sir Walter Raleigh Cigarettes. And under questioning confessed that he didn't even smoke! {laughter} That's a little dirty linen from the press gallery, there.

JOHNSON: Were these rare occurrences, for someone's credentials to be revoked?

WEST: Well, the committee had the power to revoke them.

JOHNSON: But it didn't happen very often, did it?

WEST: It was a rather infrequent thing. Part of it had to do with sort of a club atmosphere—one reporter sitting in judgment, trying not to be too harsh on another reporter under indictment.

But the committee was, over the history, and I'm quite familiar with the Standing Committee history—and it was unstinting in its mandate to adhere to the rules, no matter your stature or popularity. And so we had quite a number of those discipline rules. We had a series of hearings on one reporter who was charged with lobbying on behalf of a foreign government. And that simmered off and on for two or three years. And I can't honestly say that it reached any decision level; it sort of expired on its own.

But that was not a unique role for the committee, to hold disciplinary rules. And I can remember a time or two it sat in personnel judgment. We had a very talented fellow on the Senate Press Gallery staff. But he was given to going to the committee—this is in the late '50s—you would assign him to a Senate committee, and normally you would expect that staffer—unless he has a pickup, just routinely goes in and looks for some handouts, a couple or three pickups in addition to his main assignment—you expect him back around 11, 11:30. One o'clock, he wouldn't be back. Well, at that time, there was the old Congressional Hotel over there on the corner. And they operated a bar—I think it was called “The Quorum Room,” I believe. And also was reputed to be the rendezvous of a certain President when the First Lady was out of town. And perhaps we can get into that later. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Lots of dirty linen here. {laughter}

WEST: Yeah! {laughter} So he would make his way over there to that bar, and the press releases are standing this high, and he's having a few, and he'd come back to the gallery stoned. Half the time, the handouts would still be laying on the bar or were now discarded. But given his credential level, a very bright fellow! And so, we tried all sorts of directives; that didn't work. One of my longtime reporter friends and frequent golf companion and guest out at the Bethesda Country Club was a reformed alcoholic, and was quite active in the AA movement. And so, I mentioned this case to a friend one day on the golf course. And I said, “I hate to lose him.” And I said, “I really think he's worth salvaging. But,” I said, “the superintendent is right to fire him.” And so finally, my friend says, “Well, there's a facility up near Frederick somewhere.” He said, “Would the committee”—and he said it's fairly reasonable in price—“would the committee entertain an idea of dispatching

him up there?” And they did, because, like me and a couple of the other members of the committee, they were genuinely interested in salvaging this fellow. And so they sent him up there for three weeks, and it lasted about three weeks. And so the committee was resigned to their fate and discharged him.

So the Standing Committee overall had both personnel overview—and I had some conflicts with the committee in the latter days of my career—and the accreditation process, and kind of the general policy health of the gallery overall. So it is a meaningful responsibility when you're a member of the Standing Committee.

JOHNSON: I read a few articles about Dorothy Williams. She was the first—

WEST: Dorothy Williams?

JOHNSON: Right. The first chairwoman of the Standing Committee.

WEST: She was indeed.

JOHNSON: And that was 1957, I believe.

WEST: Well, there were three in my time: Dorothy Williams was the first, followed by Joan McKinney, and Jacqueline Frank. In fact, Joan McKinney is now a staff member of the Senate Press Gallery.

JOHNSON: Oh, okay.

WEST:

And I didn't know that until about a year ago. But Dorothy Williams—dear Dorothy. I knew her as a youngster. She worked for the United Press—it was United Press then. In 1958, United Press and International News Service merged to become United Press International. In 1942, Dorothy was on the general staff of United Press, and I knew her from day one. And we grew to be great friends over the years, not surprisingly. And after she left United Press, she went to work for and became the press voice for a woman about town: gadfly, party-giving Pearl Mesta, who was a Washington figure. And famous for her parties—mostly diplomats. And Dorothy went to work for her as an aide-de-camp, press voice, and the like. Well then, years later, after that star sort of went into the sunset—or “nightfall,” I guess, would be more grammatically correct—she went to work for several small papers and formed her own news bureau. And she ran for the Standing Committee in—let me think—somewhere in the '60s, as I recall her. And that, I can look up; I have a [*Congressional*] *Directory* at home. For Standing Committee, and as is the custom of the committee, if you lead the ticket the year you're elected as a member, you are, with rare exception, elected chairman the following year of the committee.

JOHNSON:

I see.

WEST:

So she led the ticket because she was immensely popular in the galleries and kind of the press corps locally, and she was a member of the Standing Committee.

About 1978 or '79, Joan McKinney, who represented the *Baton-Louise Ledger* and several other small Louisiana papers, was elected to the Standing Committee, and she led the ticket. And next year, as a result of her election

lead, she was made the chairman of the Standing Committee of Correspondents. And I remember the opening morning that she convened a committee, and of course, the two superintendents always attend Standing Committee meetings, and are participatory. And since 1955, the first assistant superintendent always attended the meetings as an observer, not as a participant. And so, the opening morning, we had a very fun-loving fellow over on the Senate side with United Press International. In fact, he was the chief of UPI on the other side. He had, in anticipation of the opening meeting, a nameplate made. And so, he ushered her in, sits her at the head of the table—as you now sit—and puts down a nameplate. It says “chairbroad.” {laughter}

JOHNSON: Did she find that humorous?

WEST: Oh, she was overwhelmed! {laughter} And she said, “Steve, I know you had a hand in this!” Oh, she was delighted! {laughter} And that was her welcome- aboard symbol. And when she left the committee, she made sure that that nameplate went with her. Yeah, she was quite fond of it.

And so, those are the two ladies, the chairmen that I remember. And I would say in both occasions, they did quite well. Both Joan and Dorothy relied quite heavily on the superintendents, their backgrounds; that’s understandable. As indeed, do most chairmen.

We only had a couple of chairmen over the years that kind of wanted to be lone eagles and have their name enshrined in history—that sort of thing, you know? And that was a bit pesky, but the wise old superintendents managed to

keep things in the firm. {laughter} But the wise old superintendent—I'll say that of the Senate fellow, anyway. {laughter}

JOHNSON: So that was one of the tasks that you were talking about having to learn on the job—about how to deal with different personalities?

WEST: Yes, that's part of the training. Reporters are personalities unique to themselves, as can be said of many professions. And so, a superintendent—a wise old superintendent knows that they need a bit of nurturing. Not backslapping, although we had one Senate superintendent of that fashion, and I always disapproved of it. I thought it was not in keeping with the dignity of the superintendent's office. But I don't say that as a criticism because he was a good fellow to work with. But it was not in keeping with my image of a press gallery superintendent.

JOHNSON: I have a related question since we're talking about reporters again: Was there any sort of friction between you and the reporters because you didn't have a journalistic background?

WEST: That would come up occasionally, but it would be basically on the periphery. Now, I do know that in 1968, the chairman of the Standing Committee invited my boss, Superintendent Embly, and me to a private luncheon. And we had an upcoming staff vacancy, and so he wanted our insight and input. We told him approximately what we would look for in a staffer, and he kind of held it to dessert at the luncheon, he said, "Well, what would you think if we hired a reporter for the job?" Well, I was immediately aghast because, initially, it was a break with tradition. But secondly, my fear—and it was shared by Superintendent Embly—was that the transition from an active,

opinionated reporter to the sort of apprenticeship staff role might be a giant hurdle for most people. And the loss of independent movement and decision-making in the course of a day, and that bothered me extensively. And the chairman said, "Well, that's an astute point." And he said, "I'm bothered by that, too. In the private conversations I've had with the candidate," he said, "I've brought that matter up. And the candidate concedes that there would be a transition period for him, and a challenge." But the committee—since neither Mr. Embly nor myself offered any objection—I think if either of us had objected, that would have been the end of the matter. But if I was convinced that he could make that transition, I had no objection to the fact that you were introducing reporter blood into our staff structure. I didn't have any hang-up like that. And so he was hired, and it turned out, as the years progressed, he was one of the best, most loyal staff aides I ever had. And once in a while, he would blurt out a reporter opinion, and he would get a glare from the nearby superintendent, and that was that. And it would be months before there'd be another slip. But he made the transition quite comfortably.

JOHNSON: Did he have a different relationship with the reporters because the reporters knew his background—a different relationship than maybe you would have because you didn't have that?

WEST: Well, you might say in a form, he was fluent in their jargon, so to speak. And he was comfortable with them, and they with him. But if it created a difficulty for him, it never evidenced itself in his work and/or in my presence. And unfortunately, there came a time with this staffer that he would come to work dragging, downtrodden, and the work product was failing, and I had three or four very stern lectures with him. And it was not working, and I

found myself having to in part do his work, in part assign it to someone else. And I got fed up with it, and I gave him an ultimatum. I said, "You have two weeks to turn it around, or consider it your two-week notice." And while he was very friendly with the then-chairman of the Standing Committee, who was a part of his sort of "social life" after hours, and so I went to the chairman, and I said, "I just had the unpleasant task of firing—the gentleman." And I said, "He's the sharpest fellow that I've got on the staff, and he's been intensely loyal." And I said, "It's really a grievous situation for me. But," I said, "I'm out of leniency, and I'm out of forgiveness, and I've given him a two-week ultimatum." And I said, "I want to know if you're going to back me up in this." I said, "I know there's a personal relationship involved, and," I said, "I hope we're talking informally. But," I said, "if you deny my request and do not ratify it," I said, "I may have to take other actions myself." And I let her sort of evaluate what that meant—whether that meant resignation, or I would take it to the Speaker. So I kind of left it as a bit of a mystery. And so we met in my—I had two offices: one in the press gallery proper, and one in the Rayburn Office Building. The one in the Rayburn Office Building was big enough—I could see five people. In the press gallery office, always one. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Which is more typical of the Capitol.

WEST: {laughter} Oh, exactly! It was a cubicle, I think, would be a more descriptive term. And so, we met over in the privacy of my office, initially. And the committee attempted to dissuade me, and I was adamant. I'm a fellow of measured tolerance; I have a wealth of tolerance, but it exhausts rather quickly. And that was my state with this gentleman. And so we discussed it, and we decided we would meet the next evening with this gentleman present.

And so we went into the Rayburn Building about 7:00 that night, and I locked the door. Everyone had left anyway, and the committee met in closed session behind locked doors. And I presented my case and my experience, and the committee heard little or no response. He did not contest any of my presentation. And so, the balance of the meeting by and large consisted of his conversation with individual members, particularly the chairman, who, as I say, was a social friend and cohort. And so, the committee said, after some length—I guess perhaps an hour, each member taking a bit of time—and the committee, one member of the committee; I think it was Jim Adams—he said, “Would you be willing to give this staffer another chance?” And I said, “I’m unwilling at this time.” And so the committee asked the staffer, “Would you care to make a presentation at this time to Mr. West?” And he did, and I found it a compelling one. There wasn’t any groveling or nothing like that. But I extracted from him the fact that his rebellion was over, his discourtesy and dishonor to my office was over, and that I would continue to dismiss from my memory the recent months—almost a year, actually. And with that understanding, I would urge the committee to grant a three-month extension and that I would withhold my recommendation. Well, it worked out swimmingly. He reported the next morning, all bright—he was even early for a change! I was kind of early most mornings; that was my habit. And it worked swimmingly. And in later years, he became quite valuable to me, because like me, he later gained an institution pride. He felt that he was a part of the institution, and he would strive to contribute to it. That was said of me once, in my presence, and I don’t have a fonder memory than that. I remember an inscription that the Parliamentarian put in my leather-bound rulebook the year I left. And he mentions that facet about me. I asked him just for his autograph, and Bill fills out this whole page in his little tiny writing!

JOHNSON: Was this Bill Brown?

WEST: Yeah. I told him, “This is the first time the House manual ever included exaggerations.” But he made that point in his note to me.

JOHNSON: And this is Mr. Brown you’re talking about?

WEST: Bill Brown.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: Oh, we were quite warm friends over the years, starting in 1952, when he joined the Parliamentarian’s Office. One of the problems that the superintendent had, particularly after—and I believe I gave some background on this before—that Western Union folded, Postal Telegraph long gone.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And getting copy out of the gallery was very difficult. It meant the reporter had to get a cab or a streetcar, go down to the office, either write the final part of the story or even start anew from there, transmit it, make sure the office has received it back at the city. And I had tried some way, and thought long, on some mechanism to permit those people to transmit their copy from the press gallery to the home office. Well, I did find one interim method, and I know sometimes I sound self-serving, but I became a hero with this gadget. I was working the ’72 Republican Convention in Miami Beach, and prior to that I had a visit from the vice president of Xerox, that was

marketing a machine called the telecopier, of which one would take a written page—double-spaced was preferable. You'd put it in this roller; it would then self-feed. You would dial your number, put the receiver into the pair of sockets, and in a space of one minute, it would transmit what was called "300 baud," or roughly about a half a page.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: Well, so I said, "I'm interested." So based on that experience, Xerox introduced it at the convention as a friend of the Republican Committee and also the Democratic Committee, and a number of the independent reporters—small papers, medium papers—they utilized this free transmission service—this revolutionary device, if you will. And so after the conventions, I was in my office late one evening, having a splash, which I did once in a great while. I kept thinking about that telecopier. So the next day, to the chagrin of staff, I took two of them, and I said, "We're going to have a mass mailing. I'm going to write about 50 bureau chiefs in this city a personal letter, and you will have so much time to get these ready for my signature." And what it unveiled was my thought that I would lease from Xerox eight of these telecopiers, four each for the east room and four for the west room. And to distribute my cost, these bureaus would participate in this device, and their reporter could send his copy to the phone number back home.

Well, I got a tremendous response—affirmative response. And so I called Chuck in New York and told him, and he put in motion the deliveries, the installations. In the meantime, I approached my warm friend, Wayne Hays. And I say that sincerely, except for one exception.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: I said, "I'm going to need some new phones—just the phone lines." He said—essentially, "uh-huh." And about a week later, I got a letter from him—approved. And the telecopier system was put on board. And now, reporters, instead of getting home at 8:00, maybe 9:00 at night, could send their copy from the gallery—particularly if the House is adjourned, the bill has passed, the story is written—the fellow's on the bus to Arlington at 6:15, and the wife is glad to see him! The children even recognize him now!

And it was a smashing success. Now, it was very primitive. And one of the problems that we had to surmount—and we did, we succeeded—was when a reporter transmitted his copy, he of course had the original to take with him. Okay, well and good. So if he got a call at home late at night about some question, he's got that in his pocket. Well, that comes to be important in the next phase of that introduction. And so for several years, it was an immense success. So, one of the bureau chiefs participating in my telecopier program sent the first message to me by telecopier. And I'll never forget it. It was only one line. "What has West wrought?" {laughter}

JOHNSON: Oh, very clever!

WEST: And to this day, I wish I had saved that! I may have, and it got discarded later on. But "What hath West wrought?"

JOHNSON: Right, and the connection being Morse sending the first telegraph from the Capitol.

WEST: Yes. My community use/pay concept remains valuable, but the telecopier is becoming obsolete. There is a new word on the horizon: “computer.” And this is where that staffer became quite valuable to me. He had a like interest, and the balance of my staff did not. In fact, one of my senior key aides retired because of it. He didn’t want the burden of this new horizon—this new dimension.

JOHNSON: This new technology?

WEST: And so, he retired with 31 years’ service. Somehow I was invited to an exhibition at the Wardman-Park Hotel up on Connecticut Avenue. There was an exhibition showing computers. They were quite primitive. The room was quite warm, because a lot of them were still using vacuum tubes, like the old radio days. You probably never saw a vacuum tube, right?

JOHNSON: No.

WEST: It was a vacuum tube that produced the energy and/or transmission capability of whatever socket it was placed into, or whatever circuit it was assigned. And they had these computers. Well, the telecopier is—although a smashing success—is beginning to show its age. It’s slow. And so, something was needed to replace it. Well, the initial, early computers were not suitable for my need. For one thing, they displaced too much space, and I didn’t have it. I’m overseeing a gallery that is barely 50 percent suited to the need spacewise, and in part staffwise. So several years elapsed, and I would say about 1978 or so, ’79, you’re seeing a little more abridgement in size, and the equipment is less complicated, displacing less space and the like. So one computer vendor who was at this exhibition, he and I entered into agreement

that he would loan me two of them for demonstration purposes. It wasn't all that successful. One, they were a bit unwieldy, a bit cumbersome. And, frankly, there was more training program involved than I was willing to commit staff resources to. And so, but about 1979, 1980, the program is aboard, and I wrote to all the bureau chiefs, and many participated. I vacated the telecopier program but patterned the new program on it. And one of the complexities was, once the reporter transmitted his copy to the office, he had no copy to put in his pocket and take with him. So we finally worked that out, although it took several months to work that out mechanically. Frankly, it was an unwieldy system, but it sufficed for the need, temporarily. And so, we put a printer in the west room with four terminals, and a printer in the east room with four terminals. It was a great success—people getting home early. A little amusing anecdote: my wife and I . . .

JOHNSON: I'm going to have to stop here, because we're running out of tape.

WEST: Oh, okay. Oh, okay, all right, fine.

JOHNSON: But we'll definitely pick up with changing technology in the next interview.

WEST: Oh, okay. All right.

— BENJAMIN C. WEST —
INTERVIEW THREE

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Ben West, former superintendent of the House Press Gallery. The date is September 7th, 2005. The interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center conference room. This is the third interview with Mr. West.

You ended the last interview with a brief history of the technological changes that took place in the House Press Gallery. In particular, you were speaking of the telecopier and some of the early computers in the 1970s and 1980s.

WEST: The telecopier program was my initial effort to move press copy out of the press gallery after the demise of—well, and/or withdrawal of—Western Union from our facilities. And the telecopier by today's standards was quite primitive, but effective. It did the job at the hour of need. And then I replaced that subsequently with a community computer system in which the bureaus paid an equal share to participate, and reporters could write from the press gallery, transmit almost instantly from the press gallery and, indeed, get home a couple hours earlier. So the program was immensely popular for approximately five, five-and-a-half years. And like all innovative moves and grand ideas, it fell prey to a modern technique called the laptop computer. And one by one, the bureaus opted out of my program, and I could not sustain it financially. But it had a run until about early 1985, mid-'85. And I called the vendor and told him to come pick up the equipment. And there was that transition period to personal laptop-computer use. And being portable, obviously, it was quite handy, quite convenient. And that sort of brought to a close my initiative for moving and transmitting copy from the press gallery. It was now an individual initiative, no longer a collective one.

JOHNSON: How did the reporters adjust to these changes?

WEST: I think in the main, they were partial to my system because one: there was no luggage to carry around, and two: they didn't have to worry about policing it or accounting for it. My system spared you that responsibility. So, I think given their druthers, they would have been more likely to vote to maintain the old community system. But my system lacked the reference and storage ability of the laptop; my system was essentially a mechanical one to transmit copy. And I should mention that initially, we had a great challenge in codes. Some newspapers wanted to participate but didn't wish to share their code with me. But we reached a compromise that I would keep the codes in a locked drawer, and when one of their reporters was in need of it, it would be there on the premises for him to use and to get into his home system. There never was a breach that I ever heard of.

But it was very complex and I give particular credit to my—I called him my technology aide—Jim Talbert. He was my kind of co-worker on these projects. And he—at great length and at great energy—he worked out with each company to make their system compatible with my community system. And it was a technical challenge for us. But we resolved that, resolved the code problem. And it was just a smashing success for about five years, and an immensely popular one to be sure.

JOHNSON: During your time as superintendent you also witnessed some changes in the House proceedings on the floor: mainly electronic voting in '73 and then televised proceedings in '79.

WEST: Right.

JOHNSON: How did those changes affect the press gallery?

WEST: Well, at one time—well, let me begin by responding to the 1973 introduction of electronic voting. Actually, that was an advantage for us in the press gallery. In the old, manual system, one, we had to dispatch a staffer down to the rostrum to get our onionskin copy. And secondly, there was no political breakdown: Democrats for, Democrats against, Republicans for, Republicans against. And also, there was no regional or state-by-state breakdown. And it was very cumbersome for regional reporters to use. You can picture a table, this large onionskin handwritten laying on the table, and 25, 30 reporters shouldering about, trying to find the names of their delegation. So the electronic voting system was a meaningful tool for us in the press gallery.

Now, initially I ran into opposition of obtaining the state-by-state printout. I was told some of the “old bulls,” which I assume meant committee chairmen, objected to it. I never had an explanation why, but there was objection. So, my memory is for about a year, I did not have the state by state, although the capability in the system was there. But I succeeded in conquering that barrier, finally. And while we did also get an alphabetical printout, the one of value was the state printout. Also, it delivered us from the kind of the delay in the political breakdown. The wire services made that computation for their own wires. And they insisted—and understandably—on moving that first before sharing it with me. So sometimes there might be a 10,- 15,- 20-minute delay. But under the electronic voting system it’s just

printed right on the front page. So, by and large, it was a real asset to the press gallery.

Well, I'll save that for when we get around to discussing the Speakers because there is a voting link involving Speaker Rayburn that would be more relevant to that discussion. But it was definitely an asset and a gain for us. With regard to the televising of the House procedures, in all honesty I guess I'm still a bit lukewarm about the wisdom of that. I think from my observation that it has prolonged the sessions of the House. And one of the worries of the founding advocates of that system worried about a term they called "grandstanding." I do believe I see some of that in these times. But the great peril it presented was when the networks were participating in the initial examination of the purpose and problems that would be confronted. They made an effort for back cameras located behind the Speaker's Rostrum, which would have necessitated an incursion into both my east room and my west room, in effect virtually liquidating their worth. And this was of great concern to us because we were operating in facilities barely 60 percent suited to the need. And to lose even a small corner for this back photography and camera use reached such a crisis as the consideration for televising the House proceeded, that it prompted a hearing by the House Rules Committee. Both the chairman of the Standing Committee and myself attended and participated. And we had two very sympathetic voices on that committee, particularly Bernie [Bernice Frederic] Sisk of California, who was a friend quite a number of years, and Andrew [Jackson] Young, [Jr.], of Georgia, who I believe later went on to become mayor of Atlanta after he left the House. They were solid voices in our behalf to have televised proceedings.

And, frankly, I used the word “lukewarm” earlier regarding myself, but that was essentially the feeling of the Membership at the time. They had very mixed feelings and misgivings about it. And, also, there was not great excitement to turn the task over to the networks. I’m not sure what the seed of distrust was. But there was little enthusiasm for that idea. And we successfully thwarted the bid to intrude in our east and west rooms; it never got off the ground. And ultimately the decision was made to have a House operation for televising the events. And that drew criticism as well that an in-house program might not always reflect unfavorably in a circumstance. But those advocates prevailed, and it was a House-operated system. Quite primitive, initially, but it was worked out with baling wire and adhesive tape. George White, in his latest book, *Under the Capitol Dome*, addresses that question of how it was a patchwork system just for demonstration purposes.

But the effect overall, we kept a monitor going in the general room and later on introduced monitors in the wire services offices. I would label it a useful tool. It gave a reporter an opportunity to sort of stay out in the general room, read the press releases on the bulletin board, and look over his shoulder at the monitor and the proceedings of the House of Representatives. So I would label that a useful tool to the press gallery as well. But I do believe that, at least in my tenure, it was adding to the length of the session because Members eventually accumulated a belief that, well, he’s there saying that to his constituents, maybe I better say the same thing to mine. We saw it as a partisan tool when the Democrats were trying to depose Speaker [Newton Leroy] Gingrich. You had queuing up for one-minute speeches deploring Mr. Gingrich and/or his leadership or his alleged deeds, whatever. And so, in the old days of the House, I don’t believe, for several reasons, you

would have seen that scenario take place. But in the overall, I believe it is an asset to the House.

JOHNSON: How do you think the televised proceedings changed the reporting of Congress?

WEST: Well, I think, one: It made each Member of Congress more cognizant of the fact that there is now a constituent actually watching him in action. The constituent is not just getting a fancy letterhead written response back to a question; he can actually see his Member in action. And again, I think the feeling of a Member of Congress to respond to that expectation lengthens the House proceedings. And then, as the years evolved, it became an obvious re-election tool. As far as I know, there's no prohibition against a Member using a clip from prior proceedings in an advertisement or in a joint effort with others. So it's become an election tool. I think when you consider that in the last election of 2004—my recollection is that out of 435 seats only 27 were actually contested, of which about I think 20 of the incumbents triumphed in those. So, it is both a legislative tool and an election tool—and an information tool. You can't put 200 million people in one committee room as a hearing is being debated. So, in addition to the floor proceedings and the effect on the press gallery's operation, it also brought a new dimension in committee hearings. And, true, I've watched many hours of C-SPAN committee hearings. And there's posturing there, it's apparent. But in the overall, it's a great information service to the American people.

JOHNSON: Did you notice a change in the behavior of the reporters? Were they spending more time watching the proceedings on TV rather than being in the House Gallery?

WEST: No. I did not witness that. Now, to some extent, that circumstance would prevail, we'll say in an evening session. And the Associated Press would drop from five general staffers to perhaps two, or even sometimes one. And the reporter left that evening can do several things simultaneously. He can be rewriting a story he's moved an hour or two earlier, with one eye on the monitor in the AP office. He doesn't have to deploy to the chamber proper because he has not one, but two aces in the hole. He, one: has his monitor, and two: he has a competent staffer from the House Press Gallery sitting in the back row monitoring as well. The need to have that staffer never changed in my view, and as far as I know today—that staffer's there every minute that the House is in session. And so the reporter's TV monitor is bolstered by the fact there's a staffer backstopping him in the chamber. So, it did allow some better management of manpower, particularly as the day progressed or the evening sessions arrived. It was a helpful asset, yes.

JOHNSON: Earlier, you mentioned committee hearings.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: What do you recall of the House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC]?

WEST: Well, Ms. Johnson, we could devote 30 sessions to that topic alone. Tony Demma, who was the first assistant [superintendent], and I spent a good part of our press gallery life in the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the 80th Congress—let me retreat a step or two. Under Martin Dies, Jr., of Texas, the committee drew some fame in the late '30s and sort of disappeared

a bit in the World War II era. But with the 80th Congress and Republicans taking charge for the first time in approximately 25 years, the years 1947 and 1948 the House Un-American [Activities] Committee was on the front page of every newspaper in the country. And, in that particular time period, there was radio, but it was very limited in its application to committee hearings. And obviously still photography and newsreels. And they, like Tony Demma and I, we lived in those committee rooms for two years—an ancillary career, possibly.

And particularly when they got into the Hollywood phase of their investigation. That series of hearings, which spanned off and on a good year and a half, and it produced those moments of history. J. [John] Parnell Thomas of New Jersey was the chairman in the 80th Congress. And he was something of a stern chairman. I can remember one time him pointing down . . . he said, “Witness, you will answer that question.” He was the taskmaster. You would have people come in denying any affiliation with communist activity or persuasion, many cases knowing full well it was false. You had screen actors coming in to testify. I remember in particular Ronald Reagan, who I believe at the time was president of the Screen Actors Guild. And I may have to check on that, but I believe I’m correct. And he testified on behalf of that organization. He was quite forceful in his willingness to cooperate with the committee and introduced any means by which this communist influence or alleged communist influence could be ferreted out and eradicated. I remember there was an episode in which a Hollywood star and his entourage were here basically to denounce the committee and its hearing format. And the word was—in fact, I think it made print the next day—is that wiser heads prevailed from particularly the studios, that this would be a bad image not only for the studios and the industry, but also for

the individual stars themselves. That delegation just sort of phased itself out overnight. But they did have some hostile stars in there. They had a witness who was quite forceful in his denials, although the committee indicated they had information to the contrary. There was a parade of uncooperative Hollywood witnesses in days, weeks, and months during our press assistance role.

JOHNSON: What exactly were you doing to assist the press?

WEST: For example, it was kind of a multifaceted role. The committee would issue documents to us in the morning and we would have to correlate all of those, make packets, and we had over 100 reporters covering that hearing. Now, 100 reporters in one committee room is a gigantic event. And many of the hearings were held in the Cannon Caucus Room for obvious space needs. The wall on the left, opposite you as you came into the caucus room, was lined with platforms for newsreel cameras, still photographers. The still photographers were allowed to come down in front of the witness table to make pictures. And those old Number 5 flashbulbs with about 20 photographers—I know the witness didn't see the committee Members for about 20 minutes before their vision sort of returned and cleared. So we would put together all this material that they would issue most mornings. We would ensure that the assigned seats program was maintained. And we tried to accommodate unannounced reporters showing up.

So your basic responsibility was handling the physical needs, the physical arrangements, the physical materials being presented to you by the committee for distribution. And just a general overview. Much of the time reporters would move in and out as a sequence developed, or perhaps just a

sudden bulletin matter. They needed a staffer there to sort of fill him in during his absence as to what took place while he was filing that particular piece of information or a story. So you had several roles, and it was necessary—because of the sheer size of it and the press coverage of it—to have two of us there virtually all the time. Now as a general operation technique, along about 10 minutes to 12:00, if the House was convening, Tony would turn to me and say, “Well, you better go back for a couple hours to get the lunch schedule completed and come back and let me up at 2:00,” or something like that. So, for part of the day, he and I alternated. But it was a two-man operation all the time. And this went on for several years. We were virtually wed to one another. After the hearings, sometimes in the evenings we would go in the back room or just circulate around the rostrum.

In that time I became very good friends with a young Congressman and a longtime friend, one Richard [Milhous] Nixon. I know Mr. Nixon has some infamy that surrounds him today, but he was a good friend then, and he was a good friend even when he was President of the United States. And we knew numerous other Members. We were sort of family. All the witnesses were gone, all the press was gone. But it would be his staff or their staff, and our staff. And usually one of the radio gallery staff would be there. It just made for a family atmosphere each day as the months progressed, the years progressed.

I guess one of the more famous HUAC hearings was the Whittaker Chambers appearance. That made headlines for days. And, in fact, it increased the press outpouring for this hearing. And we really didn't need a great deal more. But it did indeed. The HUAC hearings, I remember quite well. And the chairmanships changed as the years progressed. The topic area

changed. The pursuit of the communist conspiracy continued over quite a number of years. But the press following declined as the years progressed. Now, it had to be a very special hearing to bring out this avalanche of press coverage. And it did, indeed, on occasion do just that. But not the Monday to Friday format of the early days of HUAC—particularly the Hollywood hearings. That really taxed our operation because it lost two staffers for the better part of the day.

JOHNSON: Early in the '50s, some of these hearings were televised. Did that make your job more complicated because of the television coverage?

WEST: Well, in the early '50s, you now have the advent of television so the logistics are becoming more complicated. With the introduction of television sort of co-joining the radio operation, the logistics became extremely complex, and it created something of a media war. It was necessary for those of us in the writing press, the daily newspaper industry, to have visual opportunity as well as on-site opportunity. Television was very cumbersome, largely packaged. And it took up a lot of space. Also, it was starting to displace—and that's not a good word but, in effect, the prominence of the writing press.

When I joined the press gallery, the writing press was king. I can remember on the press elevator one day, the Ways and Means Committee chairman and a longtime political columnist and I, all assembled in this elevator. I remember the columnist saying to the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, "How are you, Dan?" And the chairman said, "I am fine, Mr. Brown." And so the writing press enjoyed this prominence. And that press enjoyed this prominence. And that was starting to pale now with the incursion of television. So we had quite a number of battles about space

locations and they ultimately were resolved, but sometimes it was rather tenuous, rather fragile, the solution. Generally on-site solutions. No particular overall policy. I recall a *New York Times* reporter telling me of a very eventful extended hearing in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The TV lights were so intense from behind the committee rostrum—as well as that light focusing on it—that you could barely make out the members of the committee or who was speaking at the time. He sent a note up to the chairman, and he tells the story himself, that if the lights were not subdued the *New York Times* was leaving. The note came back, and on the bottom it said “Farewell.” That sort of gives you a measure of how television was becoming a coequal. And I would think that today, although I understand the press conference rate in my old press gallery is now virtually zero, most of it is now conducted in the radio-television gallery across the hall. But in our heyday, the writing press was the dominant media. It was *the* media, actually. You had magazines and a fledgling radio system; the news arm of radio was virtually nonexistent.

When I joined the press gallery staff in 1942, the radio gallery, created in 1939, consisted of two telephone booths that had been lined with Celotex to help soundproof it and a desk sitting out in the elevator lobby on the third floor of the House wing. That was the radio gallery. And there was no periodical gallery until 1946. There was no photographers’ gallery. So the writing press from 1857, when the House of Representatives moved to its current chamber, was the dominant information and news system for the nation.

But the House Un-American Activities Committee, they made front page every day for months and months. And with the possible exception of two

other hearings, I would estimate HUAC was probably the most covered committee on a constant basis in my long career. Yeah, it was just automatic big press turnout.

JOHNSON: What other hearings do you remember?

WEST: Well, I would say that I still haven't regained the eight pounds I lost in the [President Richard Nixon] impeachment hearings. We spent hours and hours and days and days. Literally, 12- and 14-hour days for me was not uncommon because I handled those hearings personally. I figured that they were of a magnitude, of a history, that only the superintendent should oversee those requirements. I did have one staff aide with me full-time also. It was just necessary.

And another hearing series which also was quite demanding physically and timewise—in about 1973–74, the House appointed a special committee to reexamine the assassination of John F. [Fitzgerald] Kennedy and Martin [Luther] King, [Jr.]. That spanned many, many weeks, and again that demand on press gallery staff is almost debilitating because I don't have that kind of staff numbers to spread around and make that kind of full-time commitment. Now, I assume eventually we'll get into some discussion about the impeachment hearings. But those two hearings, I would cite as something of a parallel to the House Un-American Activities Committee in time demand, labor demand, and—but neither impeachment nor the Select Committee on Assassinations spanned that much time as did HUAC. HUAC went on for years. You almost figured you had a staffer, a special assistant for HUAC {laughter} in the staff listing. But they made news. We did our work. And I developed some long-lasting friendships there. And it

probably will never be equaled again in the span of time or the focus on one particular subject or topic. I doubt that any legislative committee will ever commit to that type again.

Now somewhat paralleling HUAC, for about a year and a half, as I recall, was the old Kefauver Crime Committee. That had a good run. And in fact Mr. [Carey Estes] Kefauver was astute enough now in the era of television that he might be presidential material. And in fact he made some movement in that direction later on. But those hearings lasted about a year and a half. And I can remember a couple of times the Senate asking to borrow a staffer or two from my side given their workload on a given day or perhaps the House was not in session that day. I myself went over a couple times to lend a hand. And frankly, I rather enjoyed them. I recall one episode, while not relevant to our discussion, but they had a fellow on the witness stand that day from Cleveland. And he was the bookkeeper for organized crime. And I remember his name, “Greasy Thumb” Guzik. Now who could forget a name like that? My memory not to the contrary.

JOHNSON: Very original.

WEST: Well, well, Mr. Guzik misunderstood a question Kefauver put to him. He said, “Now you’re under oath, Mr. Guzik. And you realize if you violate that oath it’s a \$10,000 fine.” Well, Kefauver was just being methodical and protecting the fellow’s rights. And Guzik opens his coat pocket, pulls out this huge amount of money, and is looking about, he says, “Who do I pay?” Well, I’ve never forgotten that. And so, it was sort of compensation for volunteering that day. But those Senate crime hearings would somewhat parallel the old HUAC schedule over the years. But HUAC would be the all-

time champion in time consumed and staff commitments from several directions, press gallery and otherwise.

JOHNSON: You mentioned the radio-TV gallery and the periodical gallery.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: Can you elaborate and provide some background on those galleries?

WEST: Well, I think it would be helpful simply to sort of describe the genesis of each one. And how they evolved. The press gallery, as I've mentioned, began in 1857. And the radio-TV gallery, as it existed in 1942 of two phone booths and a desk. Following World War II, 1946, they relocated to the west end of the building next to what was a three-room suite of the Foreign Affairs Committee: the chairman's office, the hearing room and the staff room. Well, next to it was more of a storage room than anything. In fact, I remember it had a basement, and you went down a flight of stairs to get to this subterranean level. And that was the radio-TV gallery for some years—Robert Menaugh was the superintendent. The periodical gallery began in 1946. The first superintendent was William Perry.

And of some interest, when that was being negotiated, there was not a single full-time magazine writer stationed on the Hill. Now, *Newsweek* and *Time*, they did a rather frequent look-in to be sure. So the word reaching the press galleries was that Speaker Rayburn was not very enthusiastic about creating this periodical gallery, which existed on paper. They operated out of one of their own offices downtown. So it existed on paper for purposes of accreditation. And they had a formal committee. I'm unsure how it was

elected—likely by mailed ballots. There was a structure, but no facility on the Capitol site. Word coming to the press gallery was that Speaker Rayburn was not enthusiastic, one: of creating this facility and two: relinquishing a Capitol room. But it was agreed upon. The first periodical gallery was the area vacated by the radio gallery. But they did put a partition across, linking the two elevators together and creating this little subcorridor behind it. And that was the House Periodical Press Gallery. And the next year, 1947, Perry went over and convinced the Senate that they should have a periodical gallery also. So in 1947 the Senate created the Senate Periodical Gallery.

The photographers' gallery—that was created on the Senate side in 1957. And to this day, there is not a House counterpart. The first superintendent was William Forsythe. About three years later, an additional staffer and an assistant superintendent was put into the photographers' gallery.

[A 42-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

Well, the original photographers' gallery had two in-resident photographers. The AP kept a full-time photographer, and the United Press kept a full-time photographer on each side. (I should have said three.) The International News Service kept a full-time photographer on both sides of the Capitol. Superintendent Embly confided in me one day—now his deputy—that he had a conversation with Mr. Forsythe about allowing him to put a desk and a small cabinet, storage cabinet, in the east room of the press gallery as a House photographers' facility—and he had agreed to the request. Well, one Mr. West was instantly enraged, and I told Mr. Embly of my total dissatisfaction with that accommodation, that I saw it only as a nose under the tent. They would eventually justify their existence and engulf the entire east room. We

could ill afford such real-estate loss. So, a day or two later, Mr. Embly came back and said, "I should have talked to you originally." He said, "You were right, and I have informed Mr. Forsythe that I would not provide that accommodation."

[A 58-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

On our way to the '64 Republican Convention in San Francisco by train, three superintendents—Menaugh, Forsythe, and West—found themselves in a vestibule between cars, waiting to be seated in the dining car. Bob Menaugh, knowing of our disdain for one another, looked at both of us and held out his hand, and simultaneously, I will say, I think Bill Forsythe and I did the same. And we became friends after that. There were no more rumors about my opposition anymore. So, it had a joyous ending. And we became rather good friends as the years progressed.

So, that is basically how the media galleries evolved on the House side. I'm not that knowledgeable about the Senate side, beyond the periodical and the photographers' gallery. Those, I'm confident of my facts. I did read once that the Senate Chamber was not completed as early as the new House Chamber.

JOHNSON: Right, it was two years afterwards.

WEST: About two—that was my recollection. It was about a two-year gap. And so, when the Senate Press Gallery was born, I've never encountered that in anything I've read. But I assume it was probably very close to the same time factor. And the Senate Radio Gallery, I remember—as a so-called assistant

electrician in my first job around here—that radio gallery had a room, before their new facility was built in the old Senate Document Room. But that room was right across from the public elevator in the corner. And that was the radio gallery for a number of years. But as far as the House facilities, I know well the dates that I recall, those are accurate.

JOHNSON: Was there a sense of competition that emerged between the House press galleries?

WEST: I don't think so. There was a logistic war between the writing press and the television industry. But as far as a deep inner sense to compete or to give some extra now with the advent of this new electronic age, I never encountered any evidence of that. Now, I suspect it had a silent residue with a lot of old-time reporters, yeah, probably. But when somebody is televising something instantly, it's difficult to compete and/or top that. There is no bulletin, there's no extra paper hitting the streets because it's transmitted instantaneously. So you're disadvantaged just by the time factor in covering a given hearing or an event. But competition *per se*, not that ever reached the surface, that was not discernible to me, no.

JOHNSON: Okay. You talked a little bit about your staff when you were superintendent.

WEST: The staff, what?

JOHNSON: About your staff. Could you talk more about your staff while you were superintendent? What kind of qualities did you envision in a person that was going to be on your staff?

WEST:

At the time I became superintendent in January of 1969, I inherited three of the four assistants—obviously I knew them well. And I hired Jerry Gallegos as a low, entry-level staffer in 1969. I never had more loyal aides than Charles F. Marston and James N. Talbert. In their way, like me, they were institutional people. And I will say in all honesty—and I think Mr. Talbert would want me to say so—that we very nearly parted ways once in the early part of his career. The old reporter tendency was surfacing too often. At the behest of the Standing Committee, I agreed under my terms for a second chance—one of the wisest decisions I ever made. And we also had in addition to Jerry Gallegos, who I had hired, we had Thayer Illsley. He was placed in the gallery staff by his father-in-law, who was the head of the Associated Press office here in the press gallery. And, again, I conveyed to Mr. Embly my opposition. I thought it was very hypocritical at that time, 1960, for the press who were crusading against nepotism in Congress. Indeed, nepotism was rampant, let's be square about that. I don't pass on whether it was good or evil. I knew some wives and brothers who did praiseworthy work around here, but I did know some loafers as well. I just thought it was uncommonly poor grace for the press gallery now to delve into nepotism—and particularly this Associated Press chief, who had three other children on the payroll at the same time. It just didn't register well with me. But Mr. Embly was a man from the old Wild Bill Hickok movies: "I'm a peaceable man." And he would not join me in the opposition to this selection.

[A 2-minute, 13-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

When I retired, we had an extraordinary replacement in Mr. Talbert, in my view. He knew the press gallery. He had a warmth for it. He had an institutional feeling like myself for the House itself.

[A 1-minute, 9-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

The staff, overall, I deployed somewhat differently than Mr. Embly. It was far more sophisticated than during the tenure of Mr. Donaldson. Because in Bill Donaldson's era, the staff was not involved much beyond seeing to the logistics of news-making committee hearings. There was no staffer in the chamber. There was no running résumé of events of the day. There was a prepared committee list each day, yes. It was one of the lowest-paying staffs on the Hill. But as times changed, bureaus expanded, government expanded, the obligations of the press gallery staff became far more meaningful and necessary. In my tenure, and to some degree at my suggestion during Mr. Embly's . . . I strongly believed in specialization. I don't like the all-purpose, one-size-fits-all staffer. So, I deployed the staff as specialists, and I then would train one backup staffer.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example?

WEST: Well, yes. For example, with myself, I was the backup force. The man sitting in the chamber each day during a session of the House has a staffer trained to be just as competent as he. And myself, I still have that previous experience if I should lose those two staffers in one day. Or if one or both are late coming back from morning hearings, I'm there to man the helm. I found from my own experience as an in-rank staffer that you are far more valuable and make a larger contribution as a specialist than be an all-purpose

utility hand. I'm convinced of that to this day. Well, unfortunately, under a format like that, there's always some staff impatience. Obviously, one job is a bit more glamorous than the other and I understand that. I think I'm repeating myself here, but I'm the only staffer in history that served in every rank of the press gallery staff.

So I know the hurts, the disappointments, and the triumphs of every level. So, you spend your day at a desk answering telephones and answering inquiries. That's not very glamorous, granted; not very exciting. But that's a role that someone has to perform, and I don't wish to relieve that boredom at the sacrifice of partially diluting a specialist by employing him at that desk on just a given day. So, my format and my deployment were specialists. And I had each rank trained with a backup, and then myself as the second backup. We developed a superb product.

Now, I know I'm delving in a little self-idolatry here, but we were the talk of the town, the press gallery. And I am pleased to report that again today: We were the talk of the town. We were "Mr. Efficiency."

[A 2-minute, 39-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

And I confess to being a man of craft, and I was extremely proud of my product, and the erosion of it was quite discomforting and disappointing for me. It was a key factor in my decision to retire because I had virtually lost control. I would not permit my name linked to a lesser form. The committee had taken over the assignment process. I used to have the office open from nine to one on Saturday, and that really was the time to clean up, clean out,

and be prepared for Monday morning. And you only drew that assignment once a month.

JOHNSON: Did other people on your staff share your feelings?

WEST: Marston and Talbert did, yes. They believed in the specialty idea and factors. And we all had grunt work. My goodness, I remember during the impeachment hearings—in fact I have a photograph of it at home that made every major newspaper in the country—we received several boxes of the first printed volumes of the initial impeachment hearings. And in this picture, there is a long line of reporters queuing up back into the general room from my west room, and Charlie Marston is handing these books out to the reporters waiting for their copies. And I'm standing there sort of grandstanding, I suppose. But "overseeing" is a better word. And Charlie Gorey of the AP was taking some pictures of us, and that was grunt work. We had gone down and transported these boxes, brought them up on carts and stacked them—that's grunt work! And there was grunt work with the glamour work.

That's just the life of a press gallery staffer. That was one of the reasons that in the earlier days—particularly in the earlier part of my own administration—I was not enthusiastic about a woman being in the entry level of a press gallery—because of the physical work involved. I mean, a hearing might demand picking up manual typewriters and moving them from the Cannon press room over to the Longworth press room. I've had situations where two, three—sometimes four times a week—the Appropriations Committee would call and say, "Defense Appropriations

Hearings, Volume I, are available.” I would send a staffer down with a two-wheel truck, and we would bring up a minimum of 100—bulky, heavy work.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And as the . . .

JOHNSON: Well, we’ll need to pick up this topic in a minute.

WEST: Oh, okay.

JOHNSON: I just need to switch CDs.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: You were talking about women on your staff—if you could continue with this topic.

WEST: On the staff, right, and my reservation was the physical requirements of that job description. In 1979, when Mr. Marston retired, they [the Standing Committee of Correspondents] hired the first woman in that rank. On her first assignment, some several days later, I received a call from the committee involved [informing me] that printed hearings were available, send someone down for them. I dispatched her and the two-wheel cart. Five minutes later, I get this kind of frantic call that “I can’t handle the cart.” So, I assigned another staffer to go down and help her. At the time I made the assignment, I was not aware of the volume and quantity of it, I should add. I would probably have assigned her anyway. This became the pattern. If it was that

physical, I had to assign around her, and it was creating some unrest with some other members of the staff.

JOHNSON: And she was the only woman on your staff?

WEST: Yes, she was the only woman on the staff. Some of the other staff was a bit disgruntled about it. Because they felt, “We’re doing part of her work”—that kind of attitude. Well, I pretty much stamped that out very quickly, and then I learned to reassign—to assign around her physical abilities. This was not a great hardship, in all honesty. It did depart from the kind of nice, uniform, assigned-task system that always worked so well, but it was no great difficulty. She stayed with us only about a year. She applied for a job successfully across the hall in the radio-TV gallery. We hired another young lady to take her place, and she worked out rather well. And in a couple of years or so after this introduction of the first woman on the staff, some of the physical requirements were starting to decline. For example, it was now rare that we moved typewriters from one press room to another to meet the needs of a nearby hearing or something. Yes, the copy paper still was coming in, but we were using less and less of that because people were going downtown to write, and the problem with getting copy out of the press gallery to the home office was almost insurmountable. So, the physical burden of the entry-level job was declining, and it worked out well. It worked out well.

JOHNSON: It’s well documented that during the 1970s, women were breaking many barriers. It also was true in the House, with the first female photographer and many other women breaking barriers.

WEST: Yes, right. Yes, right.

JOHNSON: Do you feel that you were . . .

WEST: Dolly Seelmeyer.

JOHNSON: Dolly Seelmeyer, exactly—the first woman photographer of the House.

WEST: Right. I worked with her husband, that's why I know her so well.

JOHNSON: Did you feel that you were playing a role in this movement by having women on your staff?

WEST: Well, no. That would sort of paint me as a conformist. No, not really. I never looked at it that way. My initial reservation—and it was a valid one, with me at least—and I think on the scene, generally, that I had to assign physical work around her, but it wasn't any great task. It wasn't any great disruption. Once or twice it was inconvenient, but nothing meaningful—but no, I didn't feel that I was contributing to a movement. No, I never looked at it that way. I look at the quality of the staffer and the worth of the product that she or he is producing. That's the way that I saw things, period. I didn't feel that I was helping a movement along or was a participant in a movement. No, I honestly can say I didn't feel that emotion or have that opinion at all. Never occurred to me.

JOHNSON: To this point, we really haven't talked much about the National Press Club or the Gridiron Club. What relationship was there between the House Press Gallery and these two organizations?

WEST:

Well, actually, a rather close one. The National Press Club—and I don't know a date of origin, but the superintendent and the first assistant—now I think they're called deputy superintendents—were made members of the press club, ostensibly to serve as officials for the annual press club election. I myself was elected secretary of the Elections Committee year after year after year. It also later expanded to include the superintendents of the other media galleries and, in most cases, their deputy. I continue to be—one of my retirement gifts from the club was to be made a lifetime member. So I've been a member of the club since 1960. They have an organization of those 40-year and more and 50-year and more called the Silver Owls and the Golden Owls. Well, I'm Silver Owl age now and rapidly approaching the Golden Owl status. But we also—in addition to the Election Day procedure—we used the club for the Raymond Clapper Award. We would rent a room from the club for the Raymond Clapper judging. In recent times, I have been asked by the club to come down somewhat in this historian capacity to help identify hundreds of individuals in pictures in their archives that are undated, and there are scant clues as to the individuals pictured. I haven't consented to do that yet, but it's weighing on me. I don't want to get too much on my plate here at once. So that basically was the link between the press gallery superintendents and the [National] Press Club.

Now the Gridiron Dinner was a little more sophisticated and required more involvement. The Gridiron Dinner, usually in March or early April, is a Washington institution and has been since the 1880s, and for 20 years, as superintendent of the press gallery, and with my counterpart, the superintendent of the Senate Press Gallery, we were the greeter and host of the head table reception, which was private from the general reception. The Gridiron invites—I'm a little rusty. It's either 565 guests on Saturday night

or 585. I believe it's the former, and the head table would be approximately 30 individuals—very elevated, looking down on the dinner scene. The dining room is refitted and restructured to simulate a Gridiron. That's the way the tables are set up, and senior members of the club are seated at the head of those arms coming out from the head table. Together with my Senate counterpart, we greet the President of the United States, the Chief Justice, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, more than one Justice, Secretary of the Air Force—the luminaries of Washington. We invite them in for a refreshment before dinner and evening events. I have a picture of me welcoming President Ronald Reagan and the First Lady on Gridiron night.

The pre-dinner receptions are separated. You have this mass general reception at one end of the hotel, and you have this private reception for the President and others seated at the head table. Security became more elevated each passing year. It made more work for my counterpart and myself in addition to just being the official host. Traditionally, we went down about 4:30 p.m. to the hotel for a Secret Service briefing. The Secret Service confided that as a symbol of identification, all individuals seated at the head table would wear a red rose. They had these boxes of roses for the head-table guests. Before the meeting adjourned, we went over several other details. For example, one of the Secret Service chieftains—who I knew over the many years and worked with many years—was a bit of a funster. He always had two Secret Service agents seated at the front below the head table. For the printed program, he would list them as Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson.

{laughter}

On this particular evening, they said each guest must wear a red rose and that will be your job tonight. They had the roses and the straight pins ready at

the reception entrance. Well, I'm getting more uncomfortable with the task with each passing minute. I'm trying to picture myself putting a rose on the lapel of the President of the United States or the Secretary of Labor or some other mogul. The Commandant of the Marine Corps is a member of the head table and approaching us. He's wearing his military version of a tuxedo, with all these medals. I said, "Commandant, could I share a chuckle with you? As an old Marine in World War II, I never thought I'd be pinning flowers on the Commandant." Well, he thought that was hilarious. So, we pinned the Commandant. We did the "rose thing" about five years. One of the ladies—and I believe it was Elizabeth [Hanford] Dole, when she was Secretary of Labor—she came in and wearing this magnificent gown and frankly, I couldn't get the pin to penetrate it. It had so much quality, and so finally in desperation, I said, "Madame Secretary, I'm going to leave the task to you," but she got it on somehow, but I was very uncomfortable.

That was one of the superintendent's tasks; that was part of your participation in the Saturday night institutional Gridiron Dinner. There were all kinds of parties and hospitality suites that followed. It was a festive night, a splendid night. On Sundays, the club would repeat the show, and in latter years in full costumes for about 1,200 guests: Members' wives, Supreme Court Justice wives, all the notables that possibly weren't even invited on Saturday night. They are now guests. So, it was my assignment, with my counterpart helping, to seat all these people, in rows befitting their ranks. The first three and four rows of seats are the most coveted, to be sure. One or two Gridiron members every now and again would fudge their numbers and say, "Well, I've got six guests, but two of them lost their ticket." Well, all right. So that was our job too, to seat these people. The club had a nice Sunday reception: several bars going, and finger sandwiches, and that sort of

thing. I always took my bride to the Sunday reception, and she looked forward to it. She enjoyed Washington society and the superintendent's popularity.

But on this particular Sunday afternoon, Jerry [Gerald Rudolph] Ford, [Jr.], is scheduled to come back, although he was present the night before, and he was bringing Mrs. Ford with him. I seated my wife in the second row immediately, behind the President and the First Lady. As the afternoon progressed—about 5:00 is the start of the program—in comes the President and First Lady. Well, Jerry Ford—President Ford—and I were friends spanning many years. He held many, many press conferences in the House Press Gallery, and we knew one another quite well. So he comes in and calls my name as he gets several paces away, shakes my hand, and puts an arm on my shoulder as we chat. My wife is drinking this in, you see. I can just see by the glint in the eye that when she gets back to her office on Monday morning what the opening conversation is going to be {laughter}.

That was just our task as an aide—impromptu aide, so to speak—to the Gridiron Club. I enjoyed those events immensely. The theatrical creativity of reporters, the ingenious lyrics they could compose and put to music was phenomenal. I remember one particular night. In fact, I would say a historic night for me and, possibly the club. Mr. Reagan was President, and one of the skits involved the subject of the First Lady. She was getting a rough time in the press. In fact, the skit centered on her allegedly borrowing \$10,000 gowns from designers in New York or Rome or someplace or another. She was getting some rough press on that. So, someone in the club, or perhaps a consortium of them, took the song “Second Hand Rose” and wrote new lyrics called “Second Hand Clothes.” The ballroom darkened and the stage

curtains parted. To the astonishment of all there stood the First Lady center stage, resplendent in a magnificent gown, preparing to sing this parody, "Second Hand Clothes." The lyrics were hilarious, and her performance was flawless. It was a smash, as they say in the trade. It was literally a smash. I never saw the room with 565 guests erupt in such applause and appreciation. She did a superb job. My Gridiron nights and Sundays are very exciting yet, and, cherished memories for me. So, these are sketches of the superintendent link with the National Press Club and the Gridiron Club.

JOHNSON: A few minutes ago, you mentioned press conferences that took place in the House Press Gallery. Was this a frequent event, to hold press conferences there?

WEST: Yes, it was, and I had to keep my eye on it very closely to prevent one conference overlapping another. But, yes, it had a rather high volume. Jerry Ford, as the Republican Leader, was virtually a weekly visitor. Generally, a Democrat, not necessarily the Democratic Leader, occasionally would come up almost on a weekly basis as well. This was a popular format for Members over the years. Commensurate with the advent of television, the demand began to decline somewhat. Members were dividing their time between the press gallery and radio-TV. I suspected a number of times they were using my office as a rehearsal for the camera. But it started to diminish in my late years on the staff, but there was still a rather high volume. Now, I'm told it's virtually nonexistent, that everything goes across the hall to the House Radio-TV Gallery. With our cramped quarters, by necessity, we prohibited any type of filming in the gallery. We did relent on hand-held tape recorders, as long as it was not reused for broadcast purposes. The only exception that I'm aware of, I made personally. I was in the press gallery on a Saturday morning

for some leftover chores. Who should stroll in with a cameraman and a light man behind him, was my old friend, now Vice President, Jerry Ford. Well, I wasn't about to call his attention to the press gallery rule on filming. It was uneventful. He was "just visiting old friends," he said. The one exception of filming in the gallery was my on-site decision that day.

I remember a press conference that Mr. Ford was having as the Minority Leader. He had issued the day before a big package regarding the economy and balanced budget. His press conference and the focus of it essentially is on this statement that is a rather complex one. Initially, he went to quote a couple of times from it and couldn't recall the exact numbers suited to a reporter's question. It was a complex subject. I signaled my staffer at the desk to bring me yesterday's "handouts." I kept every "handout" for 30 days. That was a new feature in my '67 remodeling program. I quickly leafed through them and found his handout and laid it in front of him.

JOHNSON: He must have been appreciative.

WEST: When he left, he put his arms around me and gave me his big football hug. "Thank you, Ben." So he got his point and his numbers across for that day, and he got pretty good press on it. My quick thinking at that moment aided the Minority Leader, the reporters present—and perhaps most importantly—the readers of daily newspapers.

So those are little miscellaneous activities and, indeed, perhaps obligations of a superintendent that don't show in a job description. The Press Club assist, the Gridiron role, your invitation to the White House Correspondents' Dinner is sort of a *quid pro quo*. You are exchanging your management

expertise for their social largess. The first woman superintendent, who had been on the Senate staff a little over 20 years—her title was office manager—was sort of an unofficial secretary for both superintendents, although I rarely utilized her services. I preferred to write most of my own letters and correspondence as an old speed typist, served me well. I remember her calling me one day, perhaps a month after being on the job, saying, “I didn’t realize there was all this riff-raff that goes with the job.” And there’s a lot of miscellany, and some stealth which I cannot share with you. Let the newcomer find out for himself, but there is a lot of miscellany that goes with that job to be an effective superintendent, and some of it is obligatory and other is optional. Well, I never had many people lending me a hand in my younger life, but I always enjoyed lending a hand, sometimes even if it was a nuisance perhaps. I just enjoyed doing someone a good turn, and that’s part of the miscellany. You’re just kind of doing someone a good turn. I gave you an example, I think, about the Member who called me about what he thought was a disastrous news story in his district. That was untrue. He asked my advice how to respond. Well, that’s part of the miscellany; it’s not in your job title. I don’t know what the job title looks like today. I haven’t read it once since I wrote my own, to give away a state secret; but the superintendent was commanded to write job descriptions for each office, which I did one day. It was a program put in by the House Administration Committee shortly after I became superintendent.

In 1965 the House adopted what was called the Legislative Classification Act. It had for its purpose, among other things, to introduce a policy format for time on the job, time off the job. There was no plan for overtime compensation. The Standing Committee, somewhat with my sympathy, refused to be a part of that program. They felt that it would be intrusive on

their personnel authority. Included in this act was an assimilation of the downtown executive pay structure called “Ramspeck.”⁷ You’re in a job position three years and you receive a tenure raise. That component was quite beneficial to those participating House staffs. My committee felt that it lent itself to a mischief potential.

Well, little did they or we know that years later a mischief maker by the name of [name redacted] would come on the scene, and it was that very instrument that he started intruding into the radio-TV gallery and the periodical gallery. He was always angry with me when I would point out to him that I’m not a part of the Classification Act, but his rejoinder was “Well, you’re on my payroll, it’s the same thing.” He created a very unfriendly atmosphere for quite a long time, as we discussed somewhat before. So, the then-decision of the Standing Committee to abstain was vindicated years later, but at considerable salary costs for us. I hope eventually in our travels we get to the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946—because that had a material effect on the Congress at large, and the press gallery particularly.

Another duty of the superintendent was to provide for press traveling with a visiting potentate or head of state addressing Congress. There was a fine lady at the State Department who was the sort of the press liaison with my office. Her name was Mary Marizini; she was most helpful. Given my space limitations, I could never commit my entire portion of the chamber to a visiting foreign press delegation. So, we kept it to a maximum of 25, and sometimes I would say 30 if she was really pressed. She would always ensure that those people would be limited to 25 or 30 and that they were writing people. They weren’t sneaking in radio people or magazine people or embassy attachés. Part of the superintendent’s job was to ensure that you had

that dependable State Department link, a list is sanitized and these people are all accredited by State and presumably have passed their security test and the like. So that's another chore. When Mrs. [Sandra] Hays took over, she was astonished by the hidden miscellany. She was there three feet away from the superintendent's desk for over 20 years and didn't know because a lot of it was discreet by necessity.

JOHNSON: You provided some great details about your job function as a superintendent and the daily tasks you performed, but were there any unusual events? Something atypical that happened in the gallery that you remember?

WEST: Yes. There would be unexpected events. Well, for example, I mentioned earlier this sudden incursion of the networks to take over east and west rooms as a part of the televised proceedings of the House. You know that made for a lot of work and a lot of worrying days for me. That is an unexpected bolt out of the blue. You don't come to the office that morning and say, "Well, I'll start with some bacon and eggs," and then suddenly here comes this entourage in to announce virtually that you've just lost your east and west properties.

Also, working on the conventions one day . . . I was the draftsman and illustrator for all of that work and I hope we do that as a separate topic area. To accommodate the AP, I gave them a Xerox of their portion of my layout, overall about the size of this table, six feet, seven feet long, so that he could go early to Detroit to plan. He telephones me the next day and says, "Thanks a lot for putting an escalator in the middle of the AP photographers' facility." Well, that's a bolt from the blue. Yes, I had been in Detroit, but that never showed up in the facilities we inspected. It was explained to me

later that weeks of work went into the trash can because they sent me an old drawing that did not reflect this addition. So I carved out the AP photos' lab right there smack in the middle of this escalator shaft. {laughter}

So it's things like that that would occur. Or suddenly, the President of the United States dies. Right away you're thrust into meetings with the Architect [of the Capitol]. "Will you use the historical Lincoln catafalque?" "Will the press be in its usual location in the Rotunda?"—that sort of thing. You may have been schooled and experienced in the deed, but when it {snaps fingers} comes upon you once again, it's just a shot out of the blue. You've got to drop whatever you are doing and give emphasis and priority to this unfolding event.

JOHNSON: With Presidents [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy and [Lyndon Baines] Johnson, when they laid in state in the Capitol, what kind of preparation did you have to do in the gallery?

WEST: You begin with the Architect [of the Capitol]. Generally, he would hold a mass meeting of the superintendents, and the building superintendent would be in his company. You would try to give estimates of the press turnout, press coverage. I would want to know, for example, would the East Capitol Street press parking area still be operational or would it be closed for standees waiting to come into the Rotunda, as was the case with the Kennedy lying in state. You would work out those types of arrangements. You would provide the Architect estimates. Maurice Johnson of the photographers' gallery would estimate he will have 17 organizations and will need stands rigid, so you don't get blurred prints—those kind of technical needs and discussions. Then you had the visual, that you had to staff to oversee the dignity of

everyone in the press section and to ensure equity of access. A decorum was maintained, a respect for the solemnity of the moment. It was just an overview. Staffing becomes a little trying, particularly if it's open all night.

Now, the Kennedy one was the only one in my career that I didn't participate in. Mr. Embly had said to me that Thursday afternoon—the House had quit until Monday. “You've done your share this week. Take tomorrow off and have yourself a long weekend and hit golf balls.” He always got a chuckle, “go hit golf balls.” By coincidence, my wife had joined me at the club that morning, and we're driving home, and I hear the bulletin on the car radio. I came home and telephoned Mr. Embly and said, “I'll be there shortly.” He replied, “Stay where you are.” Because I had had a very bad week, and that's true. He says, “No, I want you to be fresh Monday because I don't know how long this is going to be prolonged or what it will lend itself to further on.” So he said, “You come in fresh Monday, relieve me.” So that was the only one in my career that I did not attend or participate in. But there were many of them. Presidents, of course. General MacArthur. MacArthur's casket was open. That was the wife's request, apparently his. General MacArthur was reputed to have a massive ego, so I guess the final moment there would be public opportunity to adore. And I don't say this with any disrespect. I'm an admirer of General MacArthur's. In fact, I was present on that historic day in the House Chamber when he concluded his address to a Joint Meeting: “Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.” I was looking right down 15 feet above him. So, I have great respect for General MacArthur.

But the lying in state was essentially a uniform operation from one to the next, with rare exception. The MacArthur casket being open—I can

remember some others that the casket was open, perhaps just briefly. Then you had Senators. I remember Senator [Everett McKinley] Dirksen lying in state. It was rather a frequent occurrence, a very ceremonial, solemn one, but with some frequency. I came to know George White [Architect of the Capitol] quite well over the years, by and large from the lying in state ceremonies.

You asked earlier about unexpected events or sequences. One of the biggest was I awoke on Inauguration Day 1985, and the high temperature for the day was predicted to be seven degrees. It had snowed during the night, not a heavy downfall but a meaningful one. I got little sleep that night. From about noon Sunday throughout the night, I was in constant telephone contact with the Architect's Office and the building superintendent, and he was waiting for higher ups to determine if the West Front inaugural ceremonies would be canceled and moved within the Rotunda. At about 5:00 in the morning I called Tom, and he advised, "It's moved inside. How soon can you get here?" It's 5:00 in the morning, man. Well, I jumped in the car and drove to the office. We had to abandon everything that we had worked weeks on in planning and application. And it was a test of your improvisation, not only for the Architect. I mean he's plowing new ground here. I'm plowing new ground, and each and every one of us is plowing new ground. History shows we got the President inaugurated and sworn in. But that was just one of those unexpected career challenges. It was somewhat anticipated by a declining and deteriorating weather circumstance, but just to hear him on the phone, "It's coming inside. How soon can you get here?" It gets a fellow's attention. {laughter}

JOHNSON: {laughter} Did you panic for a moment?

WEST:

Well, you know, I suspect maybe I did. Either that or I was so sleepy I just didn't realize I panicked, but I suspect I did. {laughter} But those things are just . . . It's like that massive snowstorm we had the night before Jack Kennedy's inauguration. It took me four hours to get home that night before. The next morning there was only one lane each way on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway—actually about a lane and a half—and at about every 100 feet, you would see the nose or the roof of a car that the bulldozers had just pushed over to clear this one lane. They had towed every car to get Pennsylvania Avenue clear for the parade. It was a brutal, cold day. The Army overnight had shoveled the snow—heavy snow—from the Capitol steps and the bench tops of the press section on the East Front and the built-in wooden seats that went all the way across, coincident with those counters. Most of it they just dumped on the floor, out of necessity, really. It would be quite unwieldy to get it out of there. Several times during the ceremony, people were banging on this wooden deck to try to get circulation back in their feet, and it sounded like an onslaught of buffalo heading in the direction of the ceremony. It was frightfully cold, and I didn't wear a hat in those days. The *Evening Star* sent a copyboy down to their 11th and Pennsylvania Avenue office and brought back a box of earmuffs. One of my longtime friends, an editor, was generous and/or sympathetic enough to give me a pair of them. So I still have my ears today, thanks to him. But it's just that type of circumstance that suddenly hits you in your role of superintendent or gallery staffer on a given day or that unanticipated event.

JOHNSON:

Since we're speaking about unexpected events and, in this case, a tragic one, what do you remember about the 1954 shooting in the gallery by the Puerto Rican Nationalists?

WEST:

Well that—now, I remember that vividly and I hope I'll be able to answer questions that you ask. Having said that, it was about 2:00, 2:15 in the afternoon, as I recall, and you have to first picture the physical layout of the press gallery's main room. We have two doors that lead into the chamber and those are double-doored. There is a wooden panel door inward to the chamber, and then a glass panel door inward to the press gallery. During the sessions of the House, the wooden doors are put into panels specially built to receive them, and that way you have a push door in either direction. Well, I had reached for the press gallery door and had taken one step in on roughly a two-foot-deep separation of the doors, when I heard this, *pop, pop, pop, pop!* And I took another step and looked to my left and I saw a woman in the front row of the visitor's gallery with a Luger. I saw another fellow with a pistol, and I saw a third fellow with a pistol almost instantly. The fourth individual, I did not see. At least he was not firing at the time, or maybe he hadn't pulled out his revolver.

Inside at the time was Mr. Embly, who was working the pad. We call it a pad—the running notes of the proceedings—and Charlie Marston, who had gone in to look at the pad to answer a question by some telephone inquiry from a reporter. I can't tell you how much time elapsed. It seemed like an eternity, but I'm sure it wasn't more than five seconds. And this woman, I hear her saying, "Viva, Mexico!" And she's having difficulty controlling the Luger and, in fact, she was responsible for shooting up much of the ceiling. I don't know if you've ever fired a Luger, but as an old Marine, I have fired a 45 automatic, and it takes a good, firm hand and arm to maintain that kick.

JOHNSON:

She later claimed that she only shot at the ceiling.

WEST: Well, I couldn't tell if she was deliberately firing at the ceiling or it was a result of the revolver kick she couldn't handle, but she's also doing it one handed. Apparently, her assignment was to unfurl this flag. . .

JOHNSON: The Puerto Rican flag.

WEST: . . . and drape it over the edge of the front row and again, I hear her saying, "Viva, Mexico!" Well, now that shows you how your ears can play tricks. Now, it's true there was firing, live firing, going on. It turns out she was saying, "Viva, Puerto Rico!" So that's how an on-site witness can be mistaken. I would have signed document after document attesting she said "Mexico." The fourth guy, I never did see. Well, Charlie Marston and Dick Embly almost ran over me, vacating the chamber. {laughter} Their plea was, "We're not paid to be heroes." Charlie, very alertly, ran over to the staff desk and grabbed the direct tie line to the Senate Press Gallery and shouted into it, "There's shooting over here in the House side!" And he hears Howard Dawes, who was a member of the Senate staff in those days, shouting to the membership at large, "They're shooting up the House! They're shooting up the House!" Within minutes, the press gallery was so overwhelmed that Superintendent Donaldson ordered the east and west doors locked. There just was not room for any more humanity. In the meantime, Tony Demma, who was a member of our staff and first assistant, for some reason fled into the corridor. I have a picture at home of him standing there as the police officers have captured the woman and one of the shooters, and Tony is standing right next to them. I kidded him for the rest of his life that I thought he was one of the shooters {laughter} which he took in good cheer.

Well, after they brushed by me, I stepped back in, and I was not really fully aware until that second step into the chamber that there was live ammunition involved. I thought it was noise making. What drew my attention was that despite the absolute panic before you on the House Floor, the gentleman from Michigan, Mr. [Alvin Morell] Bentley, toppled into the well, and I could see this circle of blood going into the carpeting beside him. He was severely wounded and, in fact, I believe I'm correctly recalling, that some 10 days elapsed before it was determined he was going to survive his wounds. Once I realized that it was live ammunition, I too am about to make a turn and flee. Then I see that the culprits have fled out into the corridor on the west side of the chamber. I can see some damage to the ceiling, and I believe that the Puerto Rican flag was still there, but it may have been picked up by the police officers by then. I'm not sure it was still there the second time that I looked in. For at least an hour, you couldn't get a phone line into the press gallery, nor could we get out. I guess pandemonium rang, but it wasn't so much physical because no one could move. It was just this onslaught of humanity. There was just no physical room to move, and that's why Mr. Donaldson ordered the doors locked.

Well, finally, it became obvious that the story was not there in the press gallery but it was out in the corridors, and downstairs Mr. [Kenneth Allison] Roberts of Alabama was in the third row, and he got shot in the knee and walked with a slight limp for the rest of his life. Mr. [George Hyde] Fallon of Maryland, fleeing the chamber by the east door, had a round embedded in his buttocks, which was not good public relations—doesn't seem much of a hero. Mr. [Benton Franklin] Jensen of Iowa was wounded. I think there was a total of six, and the gentleman from Michigan. By now, practically every fire apparatus and ambulance in Washington has reached the Capitol. I

remember telling you and your colleague in our initial conversation about a brief, mostly smoke fire in the Capitol building one day. Every fire engine and fire chief in Washington turned out to save the Capitol. It was good public relations and looked good at the next D.C. appropriation bill as well. So the press dispersed and this army of downtown press corps is now arriving, and Mr. Donaldson put a staffer at each end, after unlocking the doors. Until somebody left, no one else came in, and that was by necessity. It wasn't arbitrary, it was just sheer physical necessity as the day unfolded. The film people were dispersed everywhere. The photographers dispersed everywhere.

They finally captured—I made my way to the west door, where Tony had already gone out to the scene, and this little Puerto Rican fellow, he's spread-eagled on the floor, and they've got four men on him. And to the credit of some of the tourists that were part of that tourist group they hid in, they helped in assisting to arrest these people—quite heroic, actually. These four people had this fellow down, they still can't wrestle this gun out of his hand. So I went back into the press gallery rooms, and it was just pandemonium all day. It must've been 6:00 or 6:30 before the story was kind of going together, and the news was beginning to break, and reports were now coming back on the health status of the wounded. There was evidence all over the chamber. One bullet ricocheted off of the Minority Leader's desk. And a gentleman, I believe from Alabama—not Mr. Roberts, but another gentleman from Alabama—was seated next to Mr. Roberts got up and had left about a minute before the shooting started where Mr. Roberts was wounded. Dead center in the back cushion of that seat was a bullet hole. So by sheer destiny, someone left one minute early to do other errands or to move to other parts of the chamber.

The conclusion wasn't until late that evening. And the Speaker of the House, Mr. Martin, of Massachusetts, under the inherent powers and authority of the Speaker, declared a recess instantly, subject to the call of the chair. And the House is unofficially out of session at the moment. As the crowd now is starting to dissolve, the Capitol process itself is now coming together. Obviously, this episode produced a glaring failing and omission of security. The next day, there were plainclothes officers borrowed from the Metropolitan Police Department put into the chamber. They had never been there before because of a longtime standing rule of the House about bringing weaponry into the chamber. So generally, a plainclothes officer stood outside the gallery door. And all that changed and new mechanisms were put in place. Certainly not of the kind of "fortress America" that you're obliged to have today. I'm one of those visitors to the Capitol that my identification card in 1942 at the Office of the Architect was simply my picture, about the size of a postage stamp, and my name under it, and I signed it. That was my security clearance! And we're at war! {laughter} So to come up here today and see the United States Capitol—my Capitol—a fortress is mind-boggling. But I understand the necessity of it. If it needed any extenuation, it was when those two officers were killed here just a few years ago.

And it's our era. I don't know, perhaps somebody might argue we earned it, but it's our era. But the contrast for me as now, an acknowledged old-timer, white hair and all, to remember my little card—and I think I still have it—identification card—and the fortress and the precautions of today is just staggering. Staggering. But it did launch—the Puerto Rican shooting—did launch the security era in this complex: the Capitol and all its environs.

JOHNSON: Was there any long-term effect that you saw in the press gallery because of what happened?

WEST: Yes. Not necessarily in a tangible, right-in-your-view situation, but after that shooting, the wire services put in a rule that there would always be a wire service man in the front row of the chamber at all times. The *Washington Post* and the *Washington Star* put a full-time correspondent in each house. The *Post* had an iron-clad rule—because my dear, elegant friend, Elsie Carper, we spent many a night there listening to a single guy in a special order drone on. We're missing all those great parties. . . . {laughter} And I don't know why—if I hadn't been married, I think Elsie and I would've married. {laughter} We enjoyed one another's company so much, and we spent so much time together. But that *Post* rule was, the *Post* reporter stayed until the House adjourned, much like the superintendent's rule: you stayed until the House adjourned, or, in my early days, until the last reporter left the press gallery rooms. And so, I know something about overtime. {laughter} That was one change that came about. There also was a little more of an organized cadre of security people, like the D.C.—they borrowed—my recollection is that we borrowed this personnel, and then we reimbursed the District for their loss of time there. And that was another change. You had this full-time, plainclothes force. But beyond that, as the kind of the fervor of the moment subsided, there were not particularly meaningful changes. I think more attention was given, rather than just as a peripheral matter heretofore. I think more active attention was given, but I'm not confident that it produced anything in particular or that tangible immediately. But it did make for some reforms and some changes, and particularly in the press

gallery's approach about having someone in the chamber at all times. So that was kind of the main change of the wire services.

And speaking of the press gallery, there is an item that I should have mentioned earlier, when we were discussing the origins of the press gallery, and we can transpose this to that segment later, but while I'm thinking of it, as a result of the—oh! In 1857, when the House adjourned to its new chamber, there were 387 Members of Congress. As a result of the 1910 Census, the House enlarged to 435, its present number today. One exception in the '50s: the admission of Hawaii and Alaska, it was increased to 437, briefly. In that 387-Member format, and in the original assignment of the space behind the central motif, now the Speaker's Rostrum, there were four desks on the House Floor for the press. And Members, until the number was increased to 435, had individual desks. In fact, when I retired, one of the original desks was in the Speaker's Lobby on exhibition. I assume it's still there.

JOHNSON: It is.

WEST: It is still there?

JOHNSON: Yes.

WEST: I assumed it would be. Now, I can't say that in my kind of reading and rummaging about old documents and things, that I ever found where those four were located. My guess is that it was four seats on the front row of the rostrum. I don't think there were individual desks, although the one reference I ran across referred to four desks for the press. And that change

not only eliminated the individual desk format for the House, but also eliminated the four reserve desks for press on the floor. I'm going to estimate they probably ultimately became wire service seats. There were four prominent wire services in the early days: United Press; Associated Press; Universal News; and ultimately, the International National Service. But in lieu of that—and I never verified this with Mr. Donaldson—but in lieu of that, I know each new Congress, I wrote a letter on my letterhead to the Doorkeeper, advising him of one member of the Associated Press, one member of the United Press, and one member of the International News Service had the privilege of the floor behind the rail. And also, I submitted the name of an alternate in the event of the absence of the prime choice. So, from 1912, I assume the loss of press desks on the floor gave way to the floor access behind the rail for the wire services. And, again, the day I retired, that was still in effect, and there were designees who would have that privilege. Yeah. So, I wanted to get that in as part of the earlier origin of the press gallery we had examined at that time.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: And I just plain forgot it! I shouldn't use that word, but. . . {laughter} You can scrub that, but. . .

JOHNSON: That's okay. We know you have a good memory. {laughter}

WEST: Scrub that word! But for some reason, when we were discussing that, I thought that was highly contributing—to the overall picture at least—so I thought I'd better toss that in there right now, while it's in my thoughts.

JOHNSON: This seems like a good opportunity to stop and switch CDs.

WEST: Okay.

END OF PART TWO ~ BEGINNING OF PART THREE

JOHNSON: Switching to a much lighter topic than some of the things we were talking about previously, what can you share about the baseball games that took place between the press gallery and the Members of Congress?

WEST: Well, it was an annual event, but a brief one. Indeed, there was a game that the reporters in the gallery—in fact, Tony Demma and I were on the press team, and I'll say with some pride that he and I were instrumental in winning the first contest! And it was sort of an adjunct of the National Press Club's annual picnic day for the family. And the baseball game was something of a focal event; I mean, people looked forward to it. And it wasn't a softball contest; it was hardball. And it lasted about three years, and so, briefly, it was an annual tradition, an annual game.

And the first time—the first game—I remember Mike [Michael Joseph] Mansfield of Montana, who was a Member of the House, played on the Members' team. [Cecil William] "Runt" Bishop, a Member from Illinois with some baseball background, he played and managed the Members' team. And they also had a pitcher from the Senate with some semi-pro ball background: Senator Harry [Pulliam] Cain of Washington. He was their pitcher. Well, we won the first game, and I'm unsure now if it ended after the second or the third—I believe it was the third game. And I'm unclear, but it may have given way to the annual Republican/Democrat game

tradition. I'm not positive on that, but I believe there is a link between the ending of the press contest and the Members' contest among themselves.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: But it was a splendid day. And I don't recall who won the other couple of games, but I do remember the opener. Why, we managed to win in the last of the several innings! And it had something of a tie to a point I made earlier about more of a camaraderie between Members and press in those days. My thinking is that the baseball games were '48, '49, and '50. Now it could've been '47, '48, and '49, but it's in that span of time. And we had various events. There would be a mingling of press and Members, and you enjoyed one another's company. The Metropolitan Police Department used to throw a big event out at what was called the I.C.E. club, which was right next door to Andrews Air Force Base. And they would invite Members and members of the press gallery. And it was a great day—horseshoe pitching and badminton, and cold beer and barbeque, and we would just enjoy one another's company.

Well, somewhat similar to this ball game and the contest, there was this festive *sine die* tradition in the early days, and to say “festive” is exquisitely accurate because virtually every office had an open door and a feast on the table and refreshments. “Everybody, y'all come!” as the Southerners say.

And included in that *sine die* ritual—may be confined to one night; it might span several days until everything's tidied up and we actually physically adjourn. There was a roving quartet of House Members, and actually they were quite good. They would walk the corridors, serenading on *sine die*

night, usually when there was a long recess, waiting for conferees to bring a finished product back. The press gallery was no exception; they always visited once or twice. Well, that sparked a ritual that there would be sing-alongs on the House Floor during recesses. And the Members would serenade the reporters in the press gallery. So Tony and I and several others, we organized an informal chorus of our own, and we would serenade the Members. And this was kind of the warmth, the excitement of the evening, but the warmth and the friendships prevailed, and you looked forward to *sine die*. Now, I don't mean that you were unloading a lot of work for a change, but you looked forward to that night.

JOHNSON: And this was during the 1940s, from what you recall?

WEST: Well, this was—I would say this—I remember it particularly in the 80th Congress, because the 80th Congress, under the leadership of Speaker [Joseph] Martin—I think I shared it earlier—they had a byword: “*Sine die* by Fourth of July.” That was the byword. It wafted through these hallowed corridors. And we made that. But it was '47, '48, '49, '50. And then about '52 or so, it wasn't as festive. Maybe the newer Member was a little more composed, perhaps, or not to let his hair down, or her hair down. That sort of thing.

JOHNSON: Was it a gradual change that you noticed?

WEST: Very gradual, but perceptible. And the singing on the floor, after the mid-50s, I don't remember much of that, if at all. And there's still some singing in the corridors, or the Speaker's Lobby or something.

But this roving quartet, they were rather talented, and I was somewhat in position to judge because I was a decent baritone and a member of a barbershop quartet myself at the time—very active in it. And so they made it a point to visit the press gallery. We exchanged greetings, if you will, or a warmth, actually. And if there were any animosities, they were put aside. It was just a very festive evening. But it died out starting in the '50s. It was still a big night—everyone looked forward to it—but it didn't have the trappings of yesteryear.

And goodness knows what it was like back in the '30s, but then again, it might have been muted because of the Great Depression, when employees and Members had taken pay losses. So my guess: It was very muted, if at all, in that period of time. But that was sort of a part of the atmosphere—I mean, the ball games and the exchanging sing-alongs and that sort of thing.

JOHNSON: I've learned through our conversations together that you were and continue to be an avid golfer. Even in your tribute upon your retirement by Congressman [Robert Henry] Michel, he mentions your golfing.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: Was this something that you did with members of the press and Members of Congress?

WEST: Yes, yes. And not frequently with Members of Congress. One of my great disappointments: My warm, good friend Tip O'Neill. Tip O'Neill was not exactly pleased about my retirement letter; he made that rather clear at one time. But we were trying to get a golf date together, and it never worked.

Either my schedule interfered, or his schedule interfered. So I never got to play golf with the Speaker.

But I had several reporter friends in the semi-annual Press Club Golf Tournament. The four of us played year after year after year. On an occasional Monday, if there's nothing doing, the four of us would adjourn to Bethesda Country Club. My friend Freeman Bishop was a longtime member. And on occasion, there would be a Member of Congress. I never played golf with Bob Michel either. But I knew Bob Michel as a staffer. A member of the old House Un-American Activities Committee was his boss, Mr. [Harold Himmel] Velde of Illinois. And Bob was his—I don't know if he was his chief staffer; I think he was because every once in a while, we would find ourselves in Mr. Velde's office for a splash.

So, I knew Bob for years. In fact, Bob had a great singing voice! He had a big, booming bass voice. But yes, golf was my release, my therapy, if you will. While working on the 1980 Republican Convention—we had a terrible time with the city officials—and they were late in decisions, we were running out of time. There's a massive amount of preparation that goes into covering a presidential nominating convention. And on this Sunday morning, about mid-morning, a vice president of Michigan Bell, that I had worked very closely with in trying to coordinate this, has crews working around the clock putting cable in the press stands. He calls my home about 10:30 and pleads with my wife to call the club and say it was urgent that I immediately call back. My wife quotes herself as saying, "Not even I disturb Mr. West on the golf course." {laughter}

So that was something of a mark of my intensity. That was my therapy. I forgot about reporters; I forgot about politicians; I forgot about—well, I don't suppose I ever had a moment I totally forgot about the press gallery. But by and large, that went to the back row, and my Sunday golf game—that's the only time I got to play. And that was just an untouchable. And that's documented by the fact, rain or snow, I'm still out there. Which is not very bright, I suppose. So yes, I was an avid golfer, and still am.

JOHNSON: I found a statement that you made in 1985. It was in a *Los Angeles Times* article, and I wanted to read it to you and see if you could comment on it. You said, "It holds the same awe and majesty"—referring to the Capitol—"that I felt my very first day on the job. I get the same feeling of excitement every time I look up at the lighted dome when I leave work at night." So almost two decades after you said that statement, how do you feel about the Capitol now?

WEST: It still has the same majesty for me. As I left that building, it was my habit to look up every night at the majesty of that dome because I had this personal belief that I was a privileged individual out of 200 million people to not only work under that dome, but possibly even contribute to it. And that's a feeling I have to this day. If I was to walk out that House door today, I would look back at that dome. And that will never change. If I had to document my earlier reference to myself as an "institution man," I would cite that particular quote. Yes. It just has a symbolism for me that is ongoing.

When you said the *Los Angeles Times*, I was once quoted in there improperly. We had a Standing Committee fellow who was elected and led the ticket. By tradition, he became the chairman the next year. Some Standing Committee

chairmen are somewhat like Presidents of the United States: They want to leave a mark. {laughter} Albeit the Supreme Court or the military, they want to leave a mark. Well, this fellow was particularly overzealous about it. In fact, he proved to be a very intrusive fellow to work with. He just wanted to be participatory and micromanage. Granted, authority for presidential convention management is vested in the Standing Committee, and their input is contributing. Day-to-day involvement is not particularly helpful—nor my deputy cavorting with him behind the scene.

The Democratic Convention is in New York in 1980—even with the experience of 1976—New York is a bad convention town for us.⁸ The Madison Square Garden is a misnomer: It's round, and you lose a hell of a lot of space. It's not functional. There were many problems. It was very difficult. And then, awaiting us in the shadows were the providers of rental furniture {laughter} and typewriters, who saw a multimillion-dollar profit opportunity. And the price gouging was terrible—terrible, unconscionable! So, in a conversation in which the chairman overheard, I made a comment about it. I said, "In all my years of working in the press gallery and on presidential conventions, I have never seen such price gouging."

Well, he quotes me in the *Los Angeles Times* the next morning. Front page. There is a long tradition—broken in recent times: You never quote the superintendent. It was your assurance of confidentiality, and his, that when you asked a question—it might be an awkward or a ticklish one—you enjoyed the confidentiality of response. Well, he violated that, and I was quite angry about it. I was angry not only about being quoted, but also that a Standing Committee member would violate that gallery tradition. And it isn't any longer.

I'm sorry we're not going to get to the counterpart of this, at least immediately because it has historical bearing in several respects that changed policies and made for a different community, in my thinking.

Unfortunately, it's not any longer strictly apolitical, as I knew it. I worked 44 years in the press gallery and never stepped into a voting booth. I would not permit myself a political favorite, or an expression. And that was in keeping with my Opening Day instruction on the staff.

One of the things I was going to mention in the Speakership category—Mr. Donaldson came back one day from a very early press conference of the new Speaker Martin in the 80th Congress. Toward the end of the conference, Mr. Donaldson told me—in fact, he told Tony as well—that Speaker Martin had looked up and said, “Bill”—and they knew one another over the years—“Bill, how many Republicans and how many Democrats up there on your staff?” Because the Republicans were bent on some housecleaning. And rightfully so: They stood outside looking in 25 years. That's a rule of the game. And Mr. Donaldson quotes himself as saying, “None of each, Mr. Speaker.” And Martin says, “And keep it that way.” {laughter} Well, to me that reinforced—even though it was just a handful of years later—that reinforced the ultimatum given to me by Mr. Donaldson on Opening Day. It was sort of a variation on the military cliché, “Keep your nose clean and make colonel.” Well, “keep your nose politically clean and become a permanent staffer”—that's essentially how it translated.

[A 27-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

But maintaining that apolitical complexion is, to me, a vital organ of a press gallery operation and, indeed, a Parliamentary operation, a history office operation, and joint taxation committee. There's only a handful beyond the media galleries that can be viewed as nonpolitical offices, non-patronage appointees, despite the fact that in the early press gallery, the original staffers were appointees of the Speaker. And I have to assume—Mr. Donaldson never answered the question—but I have to assume that he was an appointee of the Speaker in 1913. Mr. Donaldson did speak a number of times about his battle with political appointees. He cited one example. He had a Democrat-appointed staffer as his assistant. And this Democratic appointee was a very parochial fellow! And if a Republican statement came in that he didn't approve of, it went in the trash can! It didn't go on the bulletin board for the benefit of reporters—wouldn't expose them to such drivel! Mr. Donaldson found the situation very uncontrolled because he had no voice over this fellow as a supervisor, and he didn't want to risk appealing to the Speaker on the matter. So in 1921, he had become very friendly with a member of the Rules Committee. And at one time, he referred to him as "Vest-Pocket Campbell," but I cannot associate Mr. [Philip Pitt] Campbell with this particular episode, but I'm only guessing that he was Mr. Donaldson's agent on the Rules Committee. But in 1921, when the new rules of the Congress came in for approval, a section was added to Rule 34, actually a stanza: "By and with the approval of the Speaker, including the selection of its employees . . ." Section 9.30 of Rule 34, I still remember it . . . {laughter}

From that point on, the Standing Committee, at the behest of the superintendent—the superintendent did the hiring and firing—the Standing Committee largely had a perfunctory role in approving the candidate. And

that is how the House Press Gallery was delivered from the patronage appointment system. It was through the energies of Mr. Donaldson and, perhaps, Mr. Campbell. With another reference to Professor Marbut, he describes this departure from political appointments as occurring in 1916. I am not a history arbiter; I only report the conflicting versions. And I must add, it's of historical consequence that, according to Mr. Donaldson, the two gentlemen had a high appreciation for good bourbon after hours. {laughter}

JOHNSON: {laughter} This seems like a good stopping point for us today.

WEST: {laughter} All right!

JOHNSON: Thank you very much. I've enjoyed speaking with you.

WEST: Well, I've enjoyed it, and I look forward to the next session because there are a couple of areas I particularly would like to get in the mix.

JOHNSON: Okay, that sounds good.

— BENJAMIN C. WEST —
INTERVIEW FOUR

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Benjamin C. West, former superintendent of the House Press Gallery. The interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center, Cannon House Office Building. The date is January 19th, 2006. This is the fourth interview with Mr. West.

How did the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946—the act which decreased the number of House standing committees from 48 to 19—how did it affect the House Press Gallery?

WEST: Much like Capitol Hill, it had a sweeping effect on the operations of the press gallery. It ignited a major reform in the House of Representatives and a press gallery adjusting to new needs surfacing from it.

Possibly a meaningful clue to that would be, shortly after its enactment we increased the size of the staff by one to accommodate the new demands on the press gallery at large. Somewhat in tandem was the increase in the number of reporters being accredited to the press gallery because much of the World War II government did not disappear; it was ongoing. And therefore there were more events and more government to cover, and the press gallery membership grew. So did the activity, the basic activity of the press gallery at large.

You mentioned that we had this drastic reduction in the number of committees, to 19. I would add parenthetically, that somewhat sadly that gave birth to an avalanche of subcommittees henceforth and new little fiefdoms and a few new tyrannical chairmen. But the volume noticeably

increased. Unlike the earlier times, you would look in your *Congressional Directory* and see these many standing committees listed and there would be a footnote: meets every other Tuesday. That pattern changed. These new committees, very much enlarged in membership and subject matter by combining them, found they had a very full plate every morning and started meeting on a daily, or more frequent, basis. They started having far more hearings that were time-consuming simply by the fact there were more Members to accommodate during the questioning and answering period. The press gallery staff found itself obliged to assign staffers to these hearings far more frequently than in the past.

Essentially, the press gallery up until World War II was mostly a message center and newsroom. True, on very headline types of hearings, we would have a staffer there operating. Now, with the new reorganized committee structure, the superintendent was rather hard pressed to use his staff equal to the need to cover all of these various hearings, and also the vastly increased press coverage that accompanied them. That basically was the major effect on the press gallery, together with adding a full-time staffer in the chamber during House sessions.

But at the same time there was a drastic sort of a reformation of staff structure within the Capitol itself. One of the long problems prior to the Reorganization Act was the downtown executive branch was far better salaried than its Capitol Hill counterpart. Now and again you would lose a key staffer to a downtown agency where his expertise was as applicable there as it was here on the Hill. And so the Reorganization Act brought in a pay structure overhaul—a very meaningful one—that made the Capitol Hill

staffers competitive in salary to their downtown executive counterparts. It also produced an extensive enlargement in committee staff structures.

Prior to the '46 Act, most committees had one clerk and one clerk typist. The exception in my memory is that in 1942, the Appropriations Committee had eight staffers, and the Ways and Means Committee had six. But everyone else had one. Well, a new era unfolds with this huge influx of new staffers on the Hill. In my very early years there was something like 1,700 of us on the entire House side. In the House wing proper, Speaker Rayburn knew everyone. He made it a point to know everyone. I recall one occasion that I met him in the Cannon subway on my way to an assignment. I said, "Good morning, Mr. Speaker." He replied, "Good morning, Ben." I was absolutely flabbergasted. But that was his manner. He made it a point to know everyone. But that all changed, slowly but progressively. There were many, many staffers, now in the office buildings, and the House wing and the Capitol.

As a footnote to the press gallery, there was one tragic aspect to the Reorganization Act of 1946 that involved our staff and those over in the radio gallery. (There was no television gallery yet or periodical gallery.) The history of the journalistic profession was one of low pay and long hours. Ironically, the press gallery staff was compatible and a perfect blend. My early years in that office consisted of long hours, a six-day week, and low pay: \$960.00 per annum, I can recall with exquisite accuracy. And the common belief was that to go into that profession you had to have what was called "ink in your veins." Well, that attitude found its way into the Standing Committee over the years. I can remember Mr. Donaldson telling me that it was virtually impossible to get a raise through the Standing Committee.

Unfortunately, the procedure of the House required that it be authored through that route. So, the great pay breakthrough for our congressional colleagues was but a train racing by for us. As a consequence, for 10, 12 years, we were the lowest-paid office on the Hill—as were the other media galleries. And that started to change in about 1955 or so, some improvement because the attitude of the reporters now serving on the Standing Committee was starting to flex a bit. The basic attitude was well, we shouldn't have press gallery staffers making more salary than the reporters they're working for—that was the basic logic. And we did not have much muscle to overcome that except by the passage of time. But eventually that got repaired. To the credit of Senate Press Gallery Superintendent Harold Beckley, as the 1946 Reorganization Act was making its way towards certain passage, a last-ditch effort was made to include the House and Senate media galleries as part of the Reorganization Act while it was in conference. I've forgotten the leading proponent on the Senate side. But on our side it was [Almer Stillwell] Mike Monroney of Oklahoma, who later became a Member of the Senate. Alas, there was one committee member—Appropriations Committee member—who steadfastly refused to allow “new matter” being added in conference. As a result of his adamant position, we were left out for quite a number of years. It was our collective staff destiny in the media galleries—to some degree—to reflect an income level commensurate to those we have been career assigned.

Returning to your parent question of the Reorganization Act effect on the press gallery, and the changes it prompted, I would list the expanded need of staff at committee hearings, full-time monitoring of House proceedings, expansion of information services, processing far greater volume of press releases from Members' offices and committees, and assisting press aides now growing in numbers. In a few years the press gallery rooms became a popular

site for Members to conduct press conferences—thus adding to staff workload. During a recent visit, I was told the press conference now has found a new home: the radio-TV gallery. Prior to the '46 Reorganization Act—I believe I'm correct—a Member's congressional office was limited to three clerks. With the Reorganization Act, I believe it doubled. This increase in staff allowed Members to employ a press aide. Now the emphasis on press relations in those days was quite minor compared to now. Members now having a much larger role in committee activities—no longer relegated to almost a specific topic in one isolated standing committee—found themselves exposed more frequently to national attention and national press coverage. That inspired some of the higher-echelon members of committees to have a press voice. Members from urban areas and large population centers would have a press aide. I remember in the 80th Congress, which would have been 1947 to 1948, there was a Member from New York City by the name of Jake [Jacob Koppel] Javits, elected in the Republican side, and who later became a Senator from New York. He utilized his House years grooming himself for the Senate. He had a press aide—and I remember his name to this day because he practically lived in the press gallery—by the name of Roy Fisher. Three times a day, on average, Roy was in the press gallery distributing another statement from Mr. Javits. In fact, one day the superintendent invited him to be a member of the staff, he was in the press gallery so frequently. So that was a good example of the new attention to press needs by a Member of the House. That, too, reflected on the volume and the routine of the press gallery. With the advent of television, there was an almost instant surge in the congressional investigative format—perceived by many as a ticket to national prominence. A press aide was fashionable and a must.

JOHNSON: Earlier, you mentioned the vastly increased press coverage.

WEST: Yes.

JOHNSON: How did you . . . in the press gallery, how did you assist the reporters? How did you help them with their jobs?

WEST: Well, as I mentioned a moment ago, having a staffer in the chamber, one: because that gave a reporter some leeway. He could linger longer at a committee hearing or in a conversational interview with a Member of the House, knowing that he has a backup in the chamber covering him there, and he can quickly become abreast of what has occurred. It gave him a little more option of movement. Also, our information system was slowly improving, but it was nothing that I would boast about. That became a bit more attractive and added to the volume of the press gallery staff labors. And the fact that you had this far vastly increased volume of committee hearings each morning. A reporter might have two assigned to him. Well, he would know that at least if they were very newsworthy, there would be a press gallery staffer at one of those hearings he's assigned to. And, again, there's another backup for him—a second reporter, if you will, for that bureau.

JOHNSON: Were these just for major hearings?

WEST: By and large, we concentrated on what the superintendent would evaluate as not necessarily a headline-making hearing, but a newsworthy hearing. And, basically, that was my evaluation each afternoon when I assigned staff for the forthcoming committee list the next morning. So the emphasis was on the newsworthy element. Now, one technique that I introduced was if a staffer had a major assignment, then he went there initially, but if I thought I had a

borderline hearing, I would then say, “Well, when you leave Banking and Currency, stop by Veterans’ Affairs and do a pickup.” Well, generally that was productive, but the tardiness of arrival pretty well found a cleaned-out room. But sometimes you would get useful handouts or statements the committee has issued, so it was worth the stop. The ’46 Act prompted this vastly increased press gallery activity. And, also, it produced a meaningful increase in the reporter population of the gallery as well. The two combined to make for an entirely different atmosphere and scene.

JOHNSON: How do you think the increase in subcommittees resulting from the Legislative Reorganization Act changed how the press covered Congress?

WEST: Well, actually it became an obligation because in some aspects the ’46 Reorganization Act devolved into yesteryear with the growth of the subcommittees. You’re in effect back to 48 committees again. And so you’ve got 48 chairmen and subcommittee chairmen. And it became rather evident that most subcommittee chairmen viewed themselves as equals, so to speak. They become newsworthy. You had maybe a six or eight-year grace period and now you’re back to yesteryear, it’s just different names and different labels on the door as you walk in. Beyond investigating duties, these committees were reporting a large volume of postwar legislation. As it found its way to the House Floor, the hours and days of House sessions escalated. Not surprisingly, this increased legislative pace overall attracted more and more press coverage. More press meant more impact on the press gallery. All combined, it was a self-perpetuating tour de force. It clearly transformed the press gallery from a kind of leisurely paced hamlet style entity into a modern-day office facility and focal point of activity—ofttimes in a frenzied state.

JOHNSON: A few minutes ago you had a good quote. You mentioned the “tyrannical chairmen” that resulted from the Reorganization Act. Because there were less committees and, therefore, less chairmen, did you have a different relationship with them in the press gallery?

WEST: Well, actually I would say that the circumstance changed as most committee chairmen became more press-aware. I’m not sure that we as gallery staffers or as a superintendent contributed to that initially. Now, I believe that I proved to be very helpful to a number of chairmen when I was superintendent—albeit location of the hearing room recommendation or which reporters you would want to give priority. The ’46 Reorganization Act permeated Capitol Hill and the Congress became comfortable with it. There was a chairman or two I’m not sure that ever fully accepted the transformation. But the chairmen became more public relations-oriented, and I think that factor increased the relationship between committee chairmen and press gallery superintendent. It wasn’t anything markedly conspicuous at the time, but it slowly evolved. And perhaps self-serving, the chairmen became a bit more dependent on the superintendent’s guidance as the years progressed. So, that was a new ingredient in press gallery operations—that we were sought after a bit more by the chairmen or the staff director. The staff director became a rather preminent personality on the Hill then, unlike the old clerk of the committee. But the staff directors, many of them, became powers unto themselves, and that’s understandable. They’re sort of the gatekeeper for the chairmen and by and large for the membership of the committee in its entirety. So there is a new instrument on the Hill. The superintendent became far more involved with staff directors as well, if nothing more than intermediaries between he and the chairman of the committee. Some of them I grew up with as low-echelon staffers like myself. And unlike a couple

other of the superintendents, I could pick up a phone and have sort of an earlier opportunity to plead my case.

JOHNSON: Because you already had an established relationship?

WEST: Yes. Some of us played poker at night over in the Cannon Building when we were young hirelings years before. And so we literally grew up together. We trusted one another implicitly. And it just made for a very mutually efficient operation. And if I call up and my old friend Felton West of the Agriculture Committee—no kinfolk—and I would say, “Hey, old boy. I’m looking at about 60 reporters. How many seats you going to give me, 65?” Well, he’d laugh, you know; there weren’t 65 seats in the whole room. But that type of relationship made it workable for him and survivable for me. So again, that’s sort of another product of the ’46 Reorganization Act.

JOHNSON: Switching to the second reorganization act, the one in 1970 . . . One of the significant aspects of this was to make committee hearings open to TV and radio broadcasts.

WEST: Right.

JOHNSON: How did that affect your gallery?

WEST: Materially. The sheer fact of equipment present with radio and television coverage made for major logistical problems, both for the committee conducting the hearing and for the superintendents. Fortunately, with rare exceptions—and they were rare blessedly—the superintendent of the radio-TV gallery, Bob Menaugh, at that time, and Mr. West, knew one another

over the years. I knew Bob Menaugh since 1942. We were groping along ourselves as to how to bring a working meld to this new medium and conflict. Both of the superintendents were intelligent enough to analyze the circumstance in that manner and in that measure. So by and large, there were no crises or grabbing one's lapel and saying, "Get that damn tripod out of my way here, I got reporters trying to see." Once or twice it was dangerously close. But in the overall it worked rather well.

Now, there was a story given to me from the Senate side—and I may have alluded to this earlier—but I think it's pertinent right at this point to your question. There was a Foreign Relations hearing in the '60s. Televising was a committee decision on the Senate side. Speaker McCormack continued the Rayburn ban. During the Republican-controlled 80th and 83rd Congresses, Speaker Martin, lifted the ban and permitted televised committee hearings. This was a Foreign Relations hearing back in the '60s. The technology was still primitive. The lighting was overpowering—overpowering. At this hearing, there were lights behind the committee and lights behind the press tables. So, the reporter in the press table was blinded by these background lights and couldn't distinguish the Members. So he sent a note up to Chairman [James William] Fulbright. "If the lights aren't canceled, the *Times* is leaving." The note came back marked "Farewell." That story provided to me served as the symbol of the emergence of a new technology and a new dominance, I'm now obliged to concede.

JOHNSON: A changing of the guard.

WEST: Yes. Newspapers were king in my early years in the press gallery. But the emergence of and the growth of television, slow but sure, became the

dominant factor. Rather an amusing anecdote that comes to mind. Senator Bob Dole, former Majority Leader of the Senate, and renowned for his keen wit, was asked in a recent interview: “What is the most dangerous place in Washington?” He said, “The space between Charlie [Charles Ellis] Schumer and a television lens.” Well, that kind of symbolizes the emphasis of today. That it is television.

In my visit to the press gallery when I left here the last time—back in November, I believe, or October—the one reporter there that I knew, he said it was quite rare that there was a press conference in the press gallery any longer. And in the photographs that I brought with you this morning, there’s a picture of a press conference in my main room. You might want to look at it when we go back.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: And they’re virtually hanging from the tops of the telephone booths. But Larry tells me that’s no more, everybody goes across the hall. The AP reporter goes across the hall.

JOHNSON: To the radio-TV gallery.

WEST: To the radio-TV gallery. That is now the dominant media arm, and that is the preeminent factor for Members of the Congress.

JOHNSON: In an earlier interview, you mentioned that you considered the Nixon impeachment hearings of 1974 so significant that you at the time were

superintendent, and you wanted to oversee the hearings yourself. Can you elaborate on that belief?

WEST:

Well, it was a professional challenge for me, with a bittersweet note. I knew Richard Nixon personally from the old House Un-American Activities [Committee] years. And we had something of a continuing friendship, even when he got to the White House. The upcoming impeachment hearings for a press gallery superintendent, then having roughly 1,200 “constituents” accredited to the press gallery, was an impending assignment with nightmarish overtones. That became more of a focus later because in the initial meetings with Chairman Rodino—I knew Chairman Rodino slightly from other hearing days—I gave him high marks for his help to me. And, apparently, I must have helped him because I have a very nice letter at home that he wrote me afterwards in appreciation—very, very glowing terms. A treasured possession, to be sure. But Mr. Rodino felt strongly that this was to be a moment in history, and indeed it was, and he wanted that to occur in the Judiciary Committee Room. He was very intense in that goal. He acknowledged, generously, that in response to my recommendation that we adjourn to the Cannon Caucus Room, that it was far more functional; he conceded that it would be. And we could accommodate far more people. But he had this penchant for history; he wanted it to occur in that room. So from that point on, we had to sort of improvise. It was a study in improvisation, logistical improvisation.

Ultimately, I was assigned 77 seats for the daily press gallery. I believe the periodical gallery was assigned 12. On the other end of the room, Mike Michaelson was assigned 20 seats and space. Mr. Rodino was very intent on reserving 20 seats in the back for public use. We built on this numerical

structure. Obviously, the central part of the room was reserved for witnesses, lawyers, and those involved in the actual hearing, and some staff. Also, a long shadow reaching over me was the specter of impeachment articles being voted and coming to the House Floor. I have 90 seats in the chamber for 1,200 people—"constituents," I'll continue to use the term. So, confronting this superintendent were some really awesome tasks and responsibilities ahead. As a planning precaution, I quietly placed with the Speaker's Office my request to annex 50 seats in the public gallery adjoining my regular portion of the chamber. When we got underway, to accommodate the overwhelming demand that I had, I used 10 of my seats back at the door coming off the corridor and rotated them every 30 minutes. That way, I eased some of the demand by those doing color, who were not actually covering the hearing *per se* in its legal aspects or potential, but just the color and flavor of the hearing—the atmosphere, if you will. So that eased the demand somewhat, but I still had a line of reporters waiting in the corridor day in and day out to access those rotating seats. But once underway, I decreed a one-man-per-bureau rule. I put in a two-man-per-bureau rule for the wires. They were not pleased, but the superintendent spoke. And that brought a measure of democracy to my 1,200-numbered constituency, and it gave a top-heavy representation to the largest papers in the country and therefore the largest segment of readership because I took that into account as well.

I had arranged with the chairman of the committee that I would have total and immediate access to the Xerox machine in the offices behind the rostrum that when amendments were offered by a Member and it was brought down to the clerk and he would read it for the committee membership and the public at large. It would be handed to me momentarily. I could go in and

make copies for the press, so forth. So the logistics were pretty well preordained by now, and the hearings get underway. Well, like many well-prepared events, some things went awry the first day or two, but nothing serious. My recollection is that much of the first week was consumed by introductory speechmaking and everyone standing in awe of the solemnity of this moment in history—that sort of oratory. Mr. Rodino loaned me two Judiciary subcommittee rooms to convert to press rooms; my Rayburn press room couldn't possibly handle the traffic, and he agreed. So, I set up two additional press rooms and assigned the space to various news bureaus. Desks and file cabinets were assigned. With the aid of Jim Holland, who is now deceased, bless his heart, he—with lightning speed—brought in private phone lines to these press rooms for the bureaus. The logistics are pretty well formed now and I would say, perhaps a touch immodestly, rather well planned.

The hearings are now underway. After several days we get to the formal introduction of Article I and an amendment is offered. I went over to the table as pre-arranged and I asked Jim, the associate counsel, for the amendment. He says, "You can't have it until it's adopted or disposed." I said, "No, no, no, no, that's not the agreement." He said, "You can't have it till it's adopted or disposed." Well, you know, immediate consternation. I go over and I sit down in the chair and I am hot. The reporters are angry. I am not warm; I am hot! Dev O'Neill [the House Photographer] sees this, and he takes a picture of it. Well, you know, Ms. Johnson, I don't have to elaborate here, come the luncheon break, that glitch got repaired—instantly. So as amendments were offered, I would go over to the counsel's table, get it, and give it to my staffer to make copies. And so there was one glitch now erased. With the exception of some telephone traffic, which again Jim

Holland was a man on the scene, it was quickly repaired. Most of the time, it went very smoothly within very confined quarters and accommodations. It was a pressure on both the members of the committee and their staff, and also on the press covering it and staffers like myself. It was a Herculean task and, fortunately, it seems that most of us were up to it.

JOHNSON: Did you primarily deal with Chairman Rodino? Or did you also have interaction with other members of the Committee on the Judiciary?

WEST: I was friendly with Bob [Robert] McClory of Illinois and had some friendship with Larry [Lawrence Joseph] Hogan, who also was my Congressman from Prince George's County. I knew his staff aide well, Del Malkie, a former Senate Press Gallery staffer. But for the most part, it was those two that I knew, other than by name. I knew everyone by name.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: But those two were more in kind of a friendship category, yeah.

JOHNSON: What do you remember if anything about the women that served on the committee? Barbara [Charline] Jordan became . . .

WEST: Well, Barbara Jordan was probably the prime woman favorite with the press. I did not know her personally. But she had a style of oratory that was kind of captivating, and was seemingly a woman of solid intellect, as well, to accompany it. She became a popular figure with the press corps. As time or activity permitted, I was very attentive whenever she spoke. I enjoyed her

professional preambles to some questions. I think there was one other woman on the committee.

JOHNSON: Liz [Elizabeth] Holtzman.

WEST: Holtzman, that's the one, right. And I would say she probably was more active than Barbara Jordan. But Jordan commanded the attention and the press focus when she spoke or was making a point. I remember Mr. [William Joseph] Randall of Missouri. He was kind of the committee's comic relief. He had these old Ozark sayings and analogies. He would produce a chuckle now and again and break the tedium and decorum.

He was the refreshing interlude now and again. I recall an afternoon he became impatient with the responses he was getting to his questions. Finally, he exclaimed: "If you believe that, then you believe in pink elephants." I do remember Mr. Randall. But individually, I'm not sure any member of the committee soared to fame. I think they were a unique blend, almost bordering on uniformity of person. That would be my assessment of the committee at large.

JOHNSON: Well, so far you've described a very hands-on approach that you took as superintendent. Did you attend the hearings every day?

WEST: Every day during the impeachment proceedings. If a hearing was particularly newsworthy in normal times, I would attend with the staffer I have assigned there just to kind of ease his responsibilities as he's getting underway. Bear in mind, the principal task of a press gallery staffer at hearings is to acquire the committee statements that it will issue, individual Member statements that

the Member will provide, witness testimony and distribute those to the press in a very quiet, efficient manner. Sometimes that becomes a bit of an overwhelming chore—just the sheer volume of material, for example. Or “Well you’ll have to wait 10 minutes, my copies aren’t here yet” or that sort of thing. So, if it was going to be a tough hearing, a lot of times I would stroll over and be on standby. And then once in a while, I would walk over just to check on what kind of job my staffer was doing. But if it was of great national consequence, I made it a practice to handle it personally. Now, generally, I would take an aide with me—impeachment, to be sure. The many weeks of the Select Committee on the Assassinations of Kennedy and King, I handled. Well, at least those two come to mind at the moment. But it was not unusual to see the superintendent personally working that hearing. It was a departure for the superintendent role. Mr. Donaldson didn’t do that, and Mr. Embly didn’t do that, but I did. I felt that if it was banner headline stuff, I belonged there. And I didn’t particularly want my assigned aide having the full responsibility of such an awesome assignment, particularly a single-handed one. Now and again, I would assign two aides to one hearing. And the second one might break away 20 and 30 minutes later. But if it was a headline-bearing type of undertaking or hearing, I thought I personally should be there to oversee it.

JOHNSON: Did you have any guidelines, suggestions, or advice that was given to you from the previous superintendents—from Mr. Donaldson or Mr. Embly—on how to handle such blockbuster events?

WEST: Well, Mr. Donaldson introduced me to my first boilermaker. And that was an ill-fated experience. Mr. Donaldson, by 1942, when I joined the staff, was kind of in his earned semi-retirement status. And he was not a hands-on

superintendent. He was highly reliant on Tony Demma and—well, I'll correct that. The first assistant when I joined there was Chester R. Thrift. About a year after I was on the staff, he awoke one morning, put one foot on the floor, and died of a massive stroke. So, Tony became the first assistant. And Bill Donaldson was very reliant on Tony. Tony was fiercely dedicated to Mr. Donaldson. He would hear no ill word of Mr. Donaldson. And I'm proud to say I was of that disposition as Mr. Embly's first assistant. So, Mr. Donaldson was not a hands-on superintendent. And truth be told, nor was Mr. Embly. He was highly reliant on his first assistant. And, in particular, about the last four years, when Dick was commuting to his farm up in Cecil County [Maryland], he was there about a five-hour day, and I was acting superintendent much of the time. But he found me totally trustworthy, highly reliant, and it worked well. It certainly added to my labors, but it worked well. There were no traditions being handed down.

JOHNSON: So you had to learn on the job?

WEST: Well, I think in the modern-day jargon it's called "winging it."

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: And so . . .

JOHNSON: Fair enough.

WEST: But I did have one advantage in that I was something of a gung ho staffer in my low-echelon days and a keen observer of things around me. I had the advantage of being a borrowed clerk on the Senate side so many times

because I was the only touch-typist on either staff. So I sat in many Standing Committee hearings. I watched superintendents function—House and Senate—and I made a point of remembering much of that. So I had some inbred skills suited to the task. That stood me in good stead. But by and large, I'd learned on the job. And thinking I was pretty well schooled, it wasn't long until I learned that there were nuances and behind-the-scenes responsibilities that did not come into public view.

JOHNSON: Did you pass along what you learned from the impeachment hearings to your employees, so that they would have something to go back to?

WEST: Essentially, yes. I operated a very close-knit staff operation. I was a bit of a taskmaster, I concede. But it brought us a universal reputation for efficiency. And I will touch on that aspect in another topic a little bit later on. But I enjoyed an immense reputation in the Washington press corps, and to some degree across the country because many of my former Washington colleagues were now editors back home or some in corporate levels. Together with my staff, we were viewed as “Mr. Efficiency.” As a consequence, no matter what echelon of the staff you were in at the time, you learned well. Now it was up to you to nurture that knowledge and maybe take the superintendent aside one day and say, “Well, how would that work in this or another?” And, I concede, with the exception of Mr. [Jim] Talbert, that didn't happen.

But the staff was equipped to handle the next echelon of promotion. My basic structure was that there would be one expert in every field confronting the press gallery obligations, and there would be a trained backup for him. Being the only one in history to have served in every staff echelon, you had three people skilled in that one responsibility. Unfortunately, that began to

deteriorate with the latter-day, more-progressive Standing Committees and actually was one of the ingredients in my retirement consideration. Because I was compelled to follow their instructions and direction, and that changed the format and structure of the staff.

I could see some early erosion of the product. I didn't want my name associated with it. But in my heyday, after a couple of years of my being a department head, the staff was renowned as "Mr. Efficiency." Actually there's two references of that a little bit later on.

JOHNSON: Okay.

WEST: To show you how widespread it actually was.

JOHNSON: Going back to the concept of institutional history, can you speculate about how the role that your gallery played in covering the impeachment hearings in '74 might have played for how the gallery handled the [William Jefferson (Bill)] Clinton impeachment hearings in '98?

WEST: Well, I would have to speculate on that. Because I was obviously not present here. I watched my golf game. I'm sure that there must have been some consultation between the two superintendents once it reached the Senate judgment. But [Jerry] Gallegos worked those impeachment hearings with me. So he would be something of an in-resident veteran. Now that would certainly complement his role in the Clinton impeachment period. And I can only assume that the Senate Superintendent would have been intelligent enough to make inquiries of Gallegos as to how you fitted that many people in the various details and logistics. But I'm sure that there were methods

from the Nixon impeachment that proved to be useful in the Clinton impeachment period. So, yes, I'm sure that the trailblazing I did had some usefulness in the impeachment of President Clinton. But I can't give you any specifics as to how it translated, because I was not on board and I can't make that comparison.

JOHNSON: Well, if it's all right with you, I'd like to stop for a minute so we can switch CDs.

WEST: All right.

END OF PART ONE - BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: In a previous interview, you remarked, "There's a massive amount of preparation that goes into covering a presidential nominating convention." You provided some great details about what it was that the press gallery would do during this process, but you alluded to a historical change in the process that occurred. Could you provide some more detail on that?

[A 28-minute, 50-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

WEST: So, the tie to the convention work, and the massive amount of work that goes into it, spilled over into both sort of the press room debacle on the Senate side, the firing of the Senate Superintendent because of it and a bid to depose the House Superintendent because of it. And one other slight aspect here—it is only three times in history, and I use the word "history" very carefully because I'm an amateur historian by confession—but to my knowledge, and only in modern times, only three times has the autonomy of

the Standing Committee of Correspondents—dating from 1877—been intruded upon and reversed. To be scrupulously accurate, the other two instances did not involve decisions formally placed for official approval; they were rejections predetermined beforehand by the committee's informal inquiry. I was involved in one instance personally: the infamous [Charles Wayland] Curley Brooks veto of the Standing Committee's refusal to accredit Louie Lautier as not qualifying for membership in 1947. The '46 Reorganization Act and rising gallery membership effect on the workload in 1960 had become very, very meaningful. The Standing Committee felt that Mr. Donaldson, now in his 47th year, who was in the office infrequently in a titular role, should retire as superintendent. They met officially to discuss it. I was not present at that meeting, even though I was the first assistant at the time. No, I'm mistaken; I was the second assistant at the time. So Dick [Embly] was at the meeting. I was not, although he filled me in on the meeting. And the upshot of it was that the committee wanted Mr. Donaldson to retire. He was way beyond his maximum eligibility entitlement. So, the decision was made to request Mr. Donaldson to retire, which he rejected. The committee decided that, informally, they would approach Speaker Rayburn to see what atmosphere awaited them should they put some official muscle into this.

They met with Speaker Rayburn, who was a longtime friend of Bill's [Donaldson], and Mr. Rayburn was adamantly opposed to forcefully requiring or officially requiring Mr. Donaldson to retire. Well, the committee made some inroads with him by noting that the workload of the press gallery was becoming overwhelming. And that was not just a picture I had painted; it was visible on sight. In a day or two, Dick and I learned Mr. Rayburn summoned the two Standing Committee people back, one of whom

knew Mr. Rayburn very well. A compromise was reached: Mr. Donaldson would retire as superintendent, but at the same salary level would be appointed to a new staff position designated as special assistant to the superintendent. That would be approved; Mr. Donaldson accepted it. I'm sure he did it with silent sorrow, but he accepted it.

That was the second time that the autonomy and initial decision of the committee had been rejected. It would have been rejected, I was told. Standing Committee autonomy is set forth in the rules of the House of Representatives, Rule 34, Section 930, I still remember that.

JOHNSON: I'm not surprised.

WEST: Standing Committee autonomy is not spelled out in the Senate; the Standing Committee now has the title of advisor to the Sergeant at Arms on staff selection.

JOHNSON: During your recollections today, you mentioned Speaker Rayburn and Speaker O'Neill.

WEST: Yes, right.

JOHNSON: And, generally speaking, what was the relationship between the Speakers of the House and the House Press Gallery during your tenure?

WEST: Well, that's a pertinent question. First, you have to know the personality of the Speaker to describe the atmosphere and the relationship. Now, in my opinion as a novice historian, Sam Rayburn was the last of the dominant

Speakers. There was a run of the velvet-clad ironfisted Speakers of the House. I don't think there was ever a musical written about it, but probably Uncle Joe Cannon epitomized the all-knowing, all-governing Speaker of the House. I mentioned earlier that I had something of a link to Speaker Cannon between Bill Donaldson, Jimmy Griffin, and Scottie Shaw, who were Pages in the last year of Mr. Cannon's "reign," I'll use the word. And, in fact, Mr. Cannon, if he didn't like the Republican Ranking Member on a committee, he'd appoint a Democrat as chairman. And he was very democratic: If he didn't like you, you didn't become chairman, and that was back in the era of the Speaker appointing committee chairmen and committee membership.

JOHNSON: Right.

WEST: Mr. Rayburn was something of a latter-day descendant of that era of Speakership and dominance. I'm sure he was far more tactful than Mr. Cannon was—and probably more patient as well. And, to a degree, he helped bring that line to an end when he collaborated with Jack Kennedy—President Kennedy—to water down the Rules Committee to eliminate the fiscal conservative, Southern bloc domination of that committee—and obviously being the legislative traffic light. And he and the erstwhile, curmudgeonly, old Carl Vinson of Georgia, who served 50 years in the House. In fact, I think recently I read John [David] Dingell, [Jr.], is about to eclipse his record for tenure in the House, and that was in a little blurb in some gossip column I was reading here a couple weeks ago—a fact worth remembering, then. So, the result of he and Carl Vinson siphoned off enough Republicans or enough Southern Democrats to enlarge the Rules Committee that neutralized their voting bloc on the committee. So, in a

form, he slightly helped undo the dominant-Speakership reign. But John McCormack, who I—and you’ll find several pictures of “Big John,” as I affectionately call him because he knew me as a teenage lad—was more diplomatic and into collective thinking than Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn was a take-charge personality, and I daresay he was revered and feared, depending on the quarters from which the emotion was coming. The press relationship with him—he had some favorites, particularly among the Texas reporters—but by and large, I think he was fond of them and they of he.

One time at a press conference, we had a new photographer—I think it was a UPI photographer. And it was well known that Mr. Rayburn was uncomfortable about his lack of cranial adornment, to wit, hair. And so, this new photographer—it’s Opening Day of the Congress, I think. On Opening Day, Mr. Rayburn would allow a still photographer in. Otherwise, no recordings, no photographers, nothing; pen-and-pencil reporters are still king. This photographer goes behind the desk, about to take a picture of Mr. Rayburn from the back. Mr. Rayburn: “Here, here, here, get out of here. Shoot out front.” He was a bit squeamish about that, but press-wise, he liked the press. And, of course, it’s a different press temperament in Mr. Rayburn’s years as well. Nobody heard of “gotcha” journalism in Mr. Rayburn’s tenure. The adversarial role of reporters, I don’t think—I know—was not the crescendo of today. So, you’ve got a different press environment, and you’ve got a different Speaker personality there.

Now, Mr. McCormack was more of a collective-style decision maker. A good example of that is a press conference one day, at which I was present; I was substituting for Mr. Donaldson that day. And Mr. Rayburn’s having his pre-session press conference, and a reporter said—very early in the session—

said, “Mr. Speaker,” he said, “this new legislative agenda that you have issued”—because he had issued some kind of a statement a day or two before—said, “this new legislative agenda that you have issued, have you conferred with the Democratic Caucus?” And Mr. Rayburn turned over to his longtime aide, John Holton, and he said, “Do we still have one of those?” Well, that gives you an idea of the dominant-Speaker role of Mr. Rayburn. Well, with Mr. McCormack, things were now starting to find more people involved in decision making: chairmen, maybe a Ranking Democrat as well. Mr. McCormack was persuaded by this consensus input. I won’t say that the dominant-Speaker role ended with Mr. McCormack, but it waned during his tenure.

Now, press-wise, Mr. McCormack was not all that warm towards the national press. And there may be a reason or two for that. As Majority Leader, one day Mr. McCormack took the floor and was quite angry. It seems that a columnist by the name of Drew Pearson, who was nationally syndicated, had written a column with which Mr. McCormack was left displeased. Mr. McCormack was saying and recalling how he had sort of given a hand now and again to Mr. Pearson getting his column launched and the like. He felt it was ingratitude. Mr. McCormack is Speaker maybe two years—perhaps three—and there’s a report in the *Washington Post* alleging that a lobbyist was availing himself of the telephone in the Speaker’s rooms, seemingly with the Speaker’s knowledge—not necessarily by his invitation, but with his knowledge. I don’t recall now if it was ever proven or disproved, but Mr. McCormack got very upset about it. It never reflected with me or our long friendship. But he had a standoffish attitude about the press. Now the *Boston Globe* guys, that’s a natural, but for the most part he was a bit

reserved; he would talk with you, but it didn't seem to have that note of relaxed rapport of Mr. Rayburn.

Mr. Martin, and he was a fine gentleman, and I knew him not quite as well as I did the other four. Mr. Martin had been Minority Leader for years, and the press never really sought him out for anything, so he was a stranger in the woods when he became the Speaker in 1948. But he got along with the press rather well. And he sort of had to learn to keep pace because some of these Ranking Minority Members—Republicans who were now committee chairmen, and they're newsworthy—and poor Mr. Martin, you know, he just presides over a dull House, so he has kind of a catch-up chore ahead of him.

Then he had a new Member from Connecticut, Clare Boothe Luce, and she was hot copy all the time; every day she has some kind of a limerick or another. And I guess it left Mr. Martin so flustered. One day he's giving a speech to the House at large on the warlike Cold War atmosphere, and an item called the guided missile. In the fervor of the moment, Speaker Martin warns the world on the dangers of the "gilded" missile. {laughter} So he was not all that press-wise and every once in a while and I'm sure it had to be a source of annoyance for the Speaker, you see a little blurb about the "gilded" missile. Now Mr. [Carl Bert] Albert—well, to close on Mr. Martin. He was very fond of an old-timer that worked for the *Washington Star*, by the name of William P. Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy wrote a Sunday column for the Springfield, Massachusetts, paper, which apparently was one of the local papers in Mr. Martin's district. And so they had a very warm relationship. Also, Charles Groves of the *Boston Globe*.

Mr. Albert, I won't say he was reclusive by any means, but he was not quite as an outgoing public personality as his predecessors. And then, of course, you know we're now in a situation where we've got the Watergate Babies, you know, "We're going to save the world, we're going to save this Capitol building," and all that. So, he kind of has that to focus on and, indeed, to cooperate with. They were a rather dominant force for a while.

But he was mindful of small things about him. Mr. Albert was a former Rhodes scholar. For a personal moment, my daughter was a Marshall scholar, which is not quite the equivalent of the Rhodes scholar, but it's the runner-up British government program. And Jane Howell was the aide-de-camp outside Speaker Albert's door. Jane and I got along famously. After the appointment of my daughter, the British Embassy hosted an afternoon champagne reception to mark her selection. They announced that they had named this Maryland resident . . . in fact, I think she was the first Maryland resident to be a Marshall scholar. And so, I got a call from the British Embassy one afternoon, and this dear, lovely woman, she says, "Mr. West." I said, "Yes." She says, "Penelope, here," and that woman called me, I know, 20 times. And I enjoyed that accent so much. She said—well, now, I know I can't imitate her accent, but she says, "I know you're aware of all the society writers in Washington." I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I am." I knew Dorothy McConnell of the *Washington News* and Imelda Dixon at the *Washington Star* and all those, so, I called them and told them about this, and they all showed up, you know, so she was there. And she told me later, she said, "Sir Hugh was delighted." Fine. But Mr. Albert—the picture, the *Washington News* had a photographer there, and they ran a picture of Sir Hugh, me, my wife, and my daughter at this reception with a caption.

Apparently Speaker Albert read it. The word got around the Capitol that was my daughter, and I didn't do anything to squelch it.

JOHNSON: You must have been very proud.

WEST: Yes, Jane telephoned. She said, "Speaker Albert read about your daughter and wants to meet her." She said, "You know he's a Rhodes scholar, and the Marshall scholar is kind of in the same league." And I said, "Yes, that's my understanding." Couple days later, my daughter and I are down in Speaker Albert's office. He's talking about his Rhodes scholar days and she's talking about what she anticipates. He had 20 minutes for the small personal touch. I know that personally, and I've heard of other similar events. In my view, Speaker Albert was a scholarly man, always with a moment or two for those of us in the ranks. But he seemed ill at ease with press attention.

The ubiquitous Tip O'Neill—I never had a greater friend. To this day, I regret that our schedules never permitted us to have a meeting on the golf course. He invited me a couple times, and it just never squared off schedule-wise. I've talked to one fellow who played with the Speaker, and he said it was just a show in itself. {laughter}

JOHNSON: I can imagine. {laughter}

WEST: Mr. O'Neill was adored by the press, and he was comfortable with them. The O'Neill press conference was prone to good copy. "All politics is local" is legendary. President Carter's chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, was "Hannibal Jerkin," for his inaugural affront. More than once, it was a festive exchange and atmosphere.

I would say Tip was kind of skillful at utilizing the press conference as well. And he knew just kind of the right moment. I remember he set up a press conference in the Statuary Hall, and I decided I would handle that personally. So, it's maybe two minutes before the scheduled 2:00, whatever it was, press conference, and I had put chairs up similar to this configuration here, and I had put out his statement and those of a couple of others who were participating. And he came up, and he slapped me on the back, and he said, "Are we ready to go, Ben?" And I said, "Mr. Speaker," I said, "Another minute, and I said we'll have an exquisite format here. So, I'll be back in a minute." So, he was easy to get along with, and he knew how to deal with the press. And I think, on occasion, he kind of used it to his usefulness—I won't say "advantage," but to his immediate usefulness. So, sort of cataloging the personalities of Speakers changed with each incumbent, as did the complexion of the accompanying press corps. They adjusted to each other. The five Speakers I knew are individuals now chronicled in history or destined to be enrolled there.

JOHNSON: Did you see a trend as time went on and during the Watergate era, and you mentioned the more adversarial stance of the press . . . Was there more of a trend for the Speakers to rely on the press gallery and the superintendents, or to ask you for advice?

WEST: Well, we touched in an early . . . We touched on that near-topic in an earlier segment.

JOHNSON: But particularly in this case, with the Speakers. Because you didn't talk too much about what the Speakers' . . . their relationship with you as superintendent.

WEST: Advice? Yes. Increased trend? I would say unequivocally, no. Going back to the dual-master doctrine, they understood my mandate, and yet they were fully aware of my devout loyalty to the Speaker and to the House of Representatives. If that is tainted in any way, it's the detached duty status that the House of Representatives actually bestows on us. So, every Speaker knew that I abided by their mandate. My loyalty to them applied equally to the constituency to which I was assigned. Not once was a "for-or-against-us" tone voiced by either party. Possibly a "trusted neutral" fame preceded me.

I had a very warm relationship with each Speaker. I was not that close to Mr. Rayburn that many times, but he took the trouble to know everyone on the House wing. And because of my frequency of going to the rostrum to pick up the old onionskin roll call sheet, he saw me two, three, five, ten times a day. And so when I was in the press conference, there subbing once in a while for Mr. Donaldson; he knew who I was. And I knew the tradition that the superintendent of the press gallery always stood on the left corner of the Speaker's desk for the press conference. In fact, there's a picture of me in that book standing on that left corner of Carl Albert's desk. So, to answer your question in the overall, absolutely no. No, if anything, I believe it enhanced it; if indeed there was a deterioration between the Speaker and the press collectively—if that existed—it enhanced my role and popularity with the Speaker.

JOHNSON: Switching topics now, you had mentioned earlier, before we started taping, that you wanted to talk about an intern program in the press gallery.

WEST: Yes. With some pride I speak to it because I was instrumental more in expanding it than introducing it. The Medill School of Journalism started a Washington program for its senior journalism class. I'm unsure of the number now, but I think it involved 30 individuals who came to Washington for a semester. They learned the city, learned of government, and learned of the profession. Neil McNeil was the longtime Washington director of that program, and his father, and one of my greatest press gallery mentors, was Marshall McNeil, a longtime Washington correspondent for Scripps Howard newspapers. Neil and I came to know one another, and the Standing Committee allowed use of the press rooms for four Medill interns, only when unused by reporters. And that way they would, with the strict caveat that if it was being used or, rather, well utilized by regular reporters, you skedaddle, you get out of there.

Well, as the years kind of progressed, why, it got expanded to six, and it kind of leveled at six. One day I get a call from Neil, and he explained that he was having logistical problems on the Hill, as security is becoming enhanced. More and more, these interns can't move around or get in a committee room or sometimes the Capitol building. Simultaneously, several bureaus were complaining that their community couriers hired to pick up "handouts" were encountering similar access problems. I decided we needed some kind of identification for couriers and interns. So, with the help of Speaker McCormack, I drew up a suggested identification marked "press courier." It was subsequently approved by Speaker McCormack and the Standing Committee and issued, but with the understanding it would be used and

issued to the interns in limited numbers. So, I armed some of the interns with these little press-courier cards. The Senate side followed suit.

Bob Blanchard, a professor of journalism at American University, called me one day. He had learned of the Medill program and wanted to have a reduced version for his students. And I said, "Well, yes," but I said, "I'll tell you up front that if you insist on equal opportunity," I said, "I will have to recommend that we abolish this existing program." And I said, "I see traffic congestion here." He said, "Well, I don't want that kind of access." He wanted the opportunity to bring 20 top students up, give them a lecture, show them around, and let them get their feet wet. It sounded reasonable to me. Within the scholastic world, I'm now getting popular. And so, I worked it out for Bob, with the requirement that it be on a Friday morning, and I would give a little 10- or 15-minute lecture. We would schedule it on a Friday when the House was not in session. We would go into the chamber, and I would seat them in the front couple of rows and provide a lecture. And that worked well, that worked well.

JOHNSON: How often did this occur?

WEST: Well, I held it to twice a year per school. And in the Medill one, it got to that stage, but not quite as formalized. It was more of an *ad hoc* thing. One day Neil would say maybe we could have a lecture with this new group I have. But I never had any problems with it. Now, there was some reluctance on the Senate side about expanding the program. And, obviously, I had the blessing of the Standing Committee and the sort of making it a little more formal in issuing a press-courier card and the like. But as far as the lectures

and expanding it, I sought no Standing Committee blessing on that; I figured that was my prerogative.

There was one other program run by the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. But all they wanted was a once-a-year lecture in the Rayburn Press Room. And their Washington man who was the former Washington *Saint Louis Post Dispatch* reporter, he did the lecture, which was fine with me. I had all the lecturing experience I wanted.

The overall program didn't create any logistical problems because I was very strict in the application of its use. And my teammate, Professor McNeil—if you think West was a taskmaster, you should have met him. And, in fact, he told me a story once. I was relating an encounter in the Rayburn Press Room, which I patrolled rather frequently. And there was a couple of interns in there, and they were kind of, literally kind of dancing in the middle of the floor. And it's true there was only one reporter there, and he was in a phone booth with the door closed. But I didn't think it was in keeping with the dignity of the House. And so, and one I knew by name. And so I called Neil, and I explained my misgivings, and he said, "They'll be on an airplane tonight." I said, "Now, hold it. Hold it." I said, "I'm not even going to give you their names." I only knew one of them. But I said, "Maybe just have a little reminder that, I know I'm a dying breed up here but," I said, "I'm kind of hung up on decorum and dignity of the Congress, and particularly the House of Representatives." And I said, "Don't press me." I said, "I know it's fading a bit." So he said, "You got it." I never had any more problems; it was always "Mr. West" or "Can I ask a question, Mr. West?" Or usually it was a preface: "Are you busy Mr. West?" that sort of thing. So, actually I kind of

found it very pleasant dealing with them. And so, it never did flourish like that on the other side. But it did on my side.

JOHNSON: Well, we are winding down the series of interviews, but I wanted to ask one final question. I thought it would be a nice wrap-up. If you had to offer advice to a prospective employee in the House Press Gallery, what would it be, based on your 44 years?

WEST: Go elsewhere. {laughter} You knew that was going to be the answer.

JOHNSON: I sensed that, yes. {laughter}

WEST: Well, prefacing the answer, I think it would be required to note that there's a different environment here now that I would be speaking to. Although there are obviously segments of it still intact and remain. One of the "drudgeries," and I use the term advisedly, of a press gallery career is both the quantity and the unpredictability of the hours. But in some measure that applies to any House employee. No doubt, you've undergone that problem now and again. One soothing aspect that I did not enjoy is they now have an instrument called "overtime." Now, I personally have thousands of hours still logged of uncompensated overtime, for which I seek no reimbursement in this latter time. I'm quite comfortable financially. But that would be one soothing balm to press gallery labors, is you know that if you're pulled off voluntarily or otherwise for overtime—all of it involuntary in my tenure—at least there's some compensation awaiting you.

Secondly, as to the unpredictability, never make concrete plans. I can say that with great experience. I didn't really see my children growing up. We

never had a family vacation. By the introduction in latter years of the so-called August recess, my children are virtually grown. We relied upon, and we had many Friday-Saturday-Sunday weekend vacations. My two children were extremely bright. In fact, they were taught to read and write at home before they ever walked into a school door. So, we didn't mind taking them out of school on a Friday, and away we'd go to Corning, New York, to see glass made and other places of interest. So, never make plans in concrete that can't be broken. Beware of prepaid, no-refund deals.

However, there are subtle compensations, at least for this old warrior. I value the fact that I was in that infinitesimally small number of United States citizens that labored in the Capitol building and was an eyewitness to its history. To me, that was a form of compensation. Indeed, at one time in my career, back in the late '50s, I was prepared to leave the press gallery, as much as I loved it, for economic reasons. But one of the staying features was that eyewitness-to-history premise. It was something I really valued, so that's a form of compensation.

No doubt, in your tenure as a new press gallery staffer, no matter how low on the echelon, you would have experiences like me. I was assigned to the 1946 Armed Services Unification Act hearings. I met General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower. He's a national hero. He was the opening witness: "General, do you have statements? I have over 100 reporters here." He turns to this colonel. The colonel said, "We have 18." I said, "Eighteen for 100? General, I'll be a casualty here!" So he turns to the colonel: "We don't want any civilian casualties. See what we can do."

Well, that's a fringe benefit of being a gallery staffer. I met every President of the United States from Franklin Roosevelt to [George Herbert Walker] Bush, Sr. I knew several of them personally—baseball players, Hollywood stars, astronauts. It just was in your path as a press gallery staffer. So that's another emolument. It's an intangible; you can't spend it at the grocery store, but it's an enrichment in my opinion. So, for a new staffer, there's going to be a myriad of disappointments, inconvenient hours, but there are riches ahead in this legislative vineyard, I'll put it that way.

JOHNSON: Well, thank you. I think that's a perfect way to end. Thank you for sharing so much.

WEST: Well, okay. Well, if you shut the button, I have been saving a question for today.

JOHNSON: Okay, sure.

NOTES

¹ Mr. West later asked that the following statement be appended to his response: “I have recently found a paper authored by Frederick B. Marbut (professor of journalism, University of Pennsylvania, 1961) that appears to authoritatively trace the Standing Committee of Correspondents’ origin to the era of Speaker Samuel Jackson Randall in 1877, imperfect records show. The actual first use of that designation seems to have occurred in 1879 and continues until today. Given Mr. Marbut’s high level of accuracy on modern-day events that I witnessed, his examination of origin and date for the committee seems praiseworthy and to be authentic in my view.”

² From the Latin, meaning “without setting a day.” A *sine die* adjournment signifies that Congress has adjourned (suspended its business) at the end of an annual or special session.

³ Mr. West later added the following: “A case in point: In a late session well into the evening, the House was embattled by a controversial proposal to sell jetfighter planes to Taiwan. Customarily, accredited foreign reporters spend the bulk of their day at the State Department, but in this topic area it is headline stories back home. As a result, the press gallery is well-populated by Pacific Rim reporters on this night. Finally we reach the roll call stage on this reversed question, resulting in the approval of the sales proposition. Instantly I am besieged by 20-plus Asian reporters convinced that the proposal had been defeated. I was unconvincing to all of them as they fled to the State Department for confirmation of the defeat. Sadly, they found it there—at least initially. Fortunately for the two of them—one Japanese and one Korean—my reputation preceded me, and they returned to the press gallery that night to discuss my version of the events. I converted them to my description, and they based their stories accordingly. I still remember the Korean’s parting remark: ‘Mr. West, if you are wrong, I will be fired tomorrow.’ Well, later on he became the Washington bureau chief. Perhaps my role aided his career.”

⁴ Mr. West subsequently requested an insertion of additional text to provide more information on the oversight and funding of the House Press Gallery: “When the House adjourned to its new south wing in 1857, one of the early resolutions designated the area on the third level immediately behind the central motive for correspondents and letter writers and ‘...to be fitted with bills, reports, stationeries and telegraphic cable.’ Furnishings, telephone, typewriters, and staff were subsequently added. Historically, the Congress has fully funded press gallery operations. In the early ’70s a group of large monied bureaus combined in a semi-cabal to offer challenge to this concept. It was their view that the subsidized system left journalism tainted and beholden to the Congress. Surprisingly, the idea found some sympathy with reporters representing middle size papers of lesser financial circumstance. I learned of it as the discussion spread through the galleries. I viewed it a deep pocket hysteria distilled from managerial ignorance. I was aware, however, of some congressional sentiment over the years for ‘user pays.’ I spent several days eliciting estimates from various offices for costs. My estimate overall reached about \$3,000 per reporter per year. This is lunacy on the horizon. It is a sacrifice to imagery. I spoke with numerous one-person bureaus who reported automatic departure from the galleries. How would you assess a visiting reporter for a week? Cost allocation at conventions? Fortunately, after a couple of months and behind-the-scene lobbying, it became apparent Congress would not relinquish this traditional role and the controversy faded.”

⁵ Reference to Donald A. Ritchie’s book on the Washington, D.C. press, *Reporting From Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶ Reference to William Joseph Donaldson who served as superintendent of the House Press Gallery from 1913 to 1960.

⁷ Reference to Representative Robert C. Word Ramspeck of Georgia, who sponsored legislation to promote civil service.

⁸ The 1976 and 1980 Democratic National Conventions both were located in New York City.

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