

 [Click here to find out more!](#)

 [Back to Article](#)

 [Click to Print](#)



Friday, May. 21, 1965 Pages 56-58 in print

Lyndon Johnson's School Days

The torrent of action on education and the reminiscence about it that pour from the White House is forceful evidence that its occupant recalls his own school days with singular relish and vividness. Before he turned to politics in 1932 at the age of 24, Lyndon Johnson was a not-to-be-ignored student in half a dozen schools and a teacher at three levels: grammar school, high school and college.

Johnson's boyhood interest in schooling came by family tradition: his father had taught in two one-room country schools in Texas, and his mother, who was the granddaughter of a Baylor University president, had taught classe; in "expression" in Fredericksburg, Texas, and later in her home. In 1912, when Lyndon was four, she taught him to read simple primers ("I see the cow") in their Texas hill-country home. Then she sent him trudging a mile down a ranch road, lunch pail in hand, to Kate Deadrich's one-room tin-covered Junction school, where rules were waived to let him enter first grade short of his fifth birthday. Mrs. Johnson's aim was not wholly pedagogical: with the lively Lyndon confined to school from 9 to 4, he was less likely to fall into the Pedernales River.

Lyndon's "Miss Kate," now Mrs. Chester C. Loney, 72, who lives in the Sierra Nevada foothills near Rough and Ready, Calif., was 19 then, remembers Lyndon well. "He was an adorable boy," she recalls. "He always sat on my lap when he recited his lessons. He would put a little finger under each word. You could see he was real pleased a he slowly made out the words, a letter at a time. He was bright and very affectionate." Yet for all her softness toward her youngest pupil, Kate Deadrich, at 5 ft. 10 in. and 165 lbs., was an imposing disciplinarian.

Tears over a Donkey. Next year, Lyndon shifted to another country school in nearby Albert, riding the four miles to and from school on a donkey. Johnson recalls that other kids poked so much fun at this that he often dismounted in tears. Then his mother told him about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on an ass. "I never cried again after that," says Johnson. "I felt like that little donkey was a white charger."

When his family moved into Johnson City (pop. then 350), Lyndon attended the two-story pink limestone

school-biggest building in town. Five teachers taught grades one through eleven, carrying two or three grades each. Lyndon helped(sweep the floor and stoke the potbellied wood stove. His favorite subjects, largely because of the able teacher, Superintendent Scott Klett, were civics and history. "I didn't like math or science much," says Johnson.

Lyndon was no angelic student. He was once thrashed for stamping on a board to splash muddy water on girls at the outdoor fountain. He got into a fistfight when a boy broke up his marble game, found solace in his teacher's judgment that he had a right to get mad.

He'd Rather Reason. Lyndon's saving grace was what a fellow student, Dr. Emmette S. Redford, now on the University of Texas faculty, calls his "inquisitive mind and intense interest in everything related to politics." That interest was encouraged by his father, a state legislator, and spurred Lyndon's lifelong interest in public speaking. As a high school debater. Lyndon with another student won a countywide debate competition. In most of his dealings, recalls Redford, Lyndon "tried to win his points with words-he'd reason and argue instead of fighting-and in those days kids had plenty of fights."

A bean-pole six-footer at 15, Lyndon played forward on the basketball team, pitched and played first base for the town baseball team, took studies casually. "I wouldn't say I overapplied myself at all," says Johnson. "I liked to play and enjoy myself." No bookworm, he shunned fiction-and still does. Whenever his mother gave him something to read, he would ask: "But Ma, is it real?"

Completing eleventh grade at 15 with just five 1924 classmates-every one of whom, surprisingly, went on to college - Lyndon disappointed his parents by not turning immediately to college. Instead, as he told a recent graduating class at Johnson City High, he "headed West to seek the fame and fortune that I knew America offered." Less grandly, that meant that he and a few buddies piled into a rattletrap car early one morning and stole away to California. Twenty months later, totally broke, he hitchhiked home, worked on a road gang under a searing sun for a dollar a day. His mother kept drumming college into his head, and Lyndon finally conceded that "I'd rather use my head than my back to earn a living." He chose Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos because "it was nearest my home, I could get in, and it was most economical."

Southwest Texas, then a collection of six drab stone buildings set amid giant live oaks and honeysuckle atop steep Chataqua Hill, was, and still is, on no one's list of top colleges. Yet it gave the free-swinging youth plenty of elbow room. Since Johnson City school was unaccredited and had only eleven grades, Lyndon first had to take a sub-college cram course at San Marcos to qualify, was found fit in just three months, entered in March 1927.

His father had gone broke trading cotton, so Lyndon arrived on campus with just \$75 borrowed from a Blanco bank and began earning \$15 a month as a janitor. Yet board and room cost \$30 a month. The school's kindly

president, Dr. C. E. Evans, let Lyndon put a cot in a small room above Evans' garage. In return, Lyndon became Evans' long-striding legman, running errands all over campus. By eating just two meals a day, Lyndon cut his food expenses to \$15 a month; his laundry cost 50¢ a week. When Lyndon ran short, Evans found odd jobs for him to earn cash, such as painting the garage. "They say the president's garage had more coats of paint on it than any house in San Marcos," says retired Government Professor Howard Mell Greene, the teacher Lyndon once introduced to President Kennedy as "the man that started the fires under me." Lyndon also peddled Real Silk socks and, recalls fellow student Bill Deason, "Dr. Evans wound up with more socks than any man in the U.S."

"I Had a Man." "The first time he opened his mouth. I knew I had a man," says Greene, 78, who now lives in the Ozarks near Brixey, Mo. "He was the most anxious to get information of any student I ever saw, especially on political subjects. I think you could trace Lyndon's philosophy back to that time, those classes. That poor boy had to root. It was back there when they had smoked that poor fellow Wilson out. Stupidity was rampant in Washington. We had to have some young blood. Call Lyndon's philosophy what you want, but I call it rational progressivism—adapting our institutions to changing conditions to attain the ideals of our democracy."

While Lyndon scored A's in Greene's political-science classes, other grades were less impressive. "He never ranked in the upper tenth of his class because he had too many irons in the fire," recalls his college dean, Dr. Alfred H. Nolle, who pegs Lyndon's overall average at a B. He once got an F — in a physical-education course. He became known as "Bull" Johnson, recalls classmate Gladys Snavely Bowman, because "he was always promoting something and had such drive."

Bull Johnson was the only freshman on the college debate team — and he was so good at debating that he teamed up with Senior Elmer Graham, now a retired Baptist minister, to win the state championship by whipping Sam Houston State Teachers, which had won 68 out of its past 75 debates. Greene, who coached the team, recalls: "We arranged so that Lyndon would have the final word. Well, when he got through they didn't have a cockeyed point standing, he just drew that string around their necks so slick." One of the big debate topics that year ('27-'28), was: "Should the U.S. use marines in Nicaragua?" Lyndon, recalls teammate Graham, delighted in arguing the affirmative.

As a sophomore, Lyndon won the coveted elective job of editor in chief of the campus newspaper, *The College Star*, and took his role seriously. In his editorial columns, he lectured the students on such topics as the meaning of personality: "A combination of altruistic feelings, novel purposes, talents and individuality. Let your brow touch the sky. Force others to look up." The aims of education: "Developing the highest and best in one. It puts zest and life into existence. It gives purpose and ambition." The evils of cynicism: "Which will you be — a builder or a destroyer? A constructor or a smasher of ideas? A blessing to the world or a curse upon it? It all rests with you."

How Are You? Tired of the financial squeeze after his sophomore year, Lyndon brashly applied for a teaching job in the obscure town of Cotulla, between San Antonio and Laredo. He was named principal of a new red brick Mexican-American school, charged at the age of 20 with directing five teachers, and paid what he now terms "the magnificent, munificent salary of \$125 a month." Yet those nine months in a county where the Mexican kids lived in waterless, crumbling shacks and the median education of Mexican adults is still a mere 1.4 years proved the most rewarding of Lyndon's school years.

Young Lyndon insisted upon respect from his pupils. He spanked disorderly boys, tongue-lashed the girls. He taught fifth, sixth and seventh grades, demanded that his classes greet him daily with a loyal refrain:

How are you, Mr. Johnson? How are you today?

Is there anything we can do? We will do if we may.

We will stand by you to a man.

How are you, Mr. Johnson? How are you?

Lyndon insisted that the children learn English-something no other teacher had tried or cared about. He ordered his teachers to supervise organized play at lunchtime and they went on strike, but his board backed him up. He joined eagerly in the kids' play, spent much of his salary for playground equipment, often tackled the boys on the gravel football field.

By such tactics, Lyndon earned the kids' respect-and their affection as well. "He was eager for all of us to learn," recalls Mrs. Amanda Garcia, now a clerk in a San Antonio store. "We were all just Mexicans in those days and Mexicans didn't mean much. I believe he really loved us as human beings." Adds Juan Gonzales, 50, a civil servant at Fort Sam Houston: "He respected the kids more than any other teacher we ever had." Says Manuel Sanchez, 48, a grocer: "He made us speak English. We did not like it at the time, but now we are happy he did." Echoes Juanita Ortiz, a waitress: "I remember him telling us seventh graders that anybody could be anything he wanted to be if he worked hard at it. As young as he was, he was trying to teach us all he knew. He really cared."


All About String. Back at San Marcos, Lyndon took every course the college offered in government and history and did so well that he was permitted to teach two freshman classes in government. He formed a secret campus political group, the "White Stars," to seize control of campus government from the athlete-dominated "Black Stars," who were plotting to shift student funds away from dramatics and speech, devote them entirely to sports. He put up his friend, Wilgard Deason, for student president. "On the night before the election, we caucused and

decided we were 20 votes short," says Deason. "The rest of us went to bed, but Lyndon went to work; when the ordinary man gives up, Johnson's just beginning." Deason won by eight votes.

Lyndon got his bachelor of science degree with a government major in August 1930, became an instructor in public speaking and business arithmetic at Sam Houston High in Houston the next month. Business Student James Sager recalls that Lyndon "could put a column of ten figures on the board and by the time he got to the bottom he'd have added them all up in his head." He fascinated his speech classes with his personal, pointed anecdotes, loved to throw out a single word and demand that his students ad-lib a speech about it. Once the word "string" stumped the class-but Lyndon promptly talked 15 minutes on the topic. Then, as now, Johnson hated to lose. His Sam Houston debate team came within one point of winning the state championship in 1931-and Lyndon vomited backstage before he could congratulate the winners.

On the side, Lyndon taught Houston's first Dale Carnegie course for businessmen. To teach poise, he would stand in a corner and heckle his Carnegie students as they spoke. His teaching career ended in 1932, when he turned to politics. He enrolled in Georgetown Law School in 1934 but did not complete the semester.

Lyndon Johnson's shift to politics was prompted in part by the advice of College President Evans, who saw Johnson's possibilities as limitless if he were properly pushed by stiff competition. "A teacher is a law unto himself in the classroom," he told Johnson. "His views aren't challenged very much-you don't have to develop to your full potential." That advice proved just as beneficial to U.S. education as it was to L.B.J. For Johnson still insists: "The basis of our whole future as a nation and a civilized society depends on our ability to give every child all the education that he can take."

 Click to **Print**

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,g171.901708.00.html>