



A Hill Country Valentine

by Betty Sharp

In ancient times - spring 1964 - I stood on a road fronting the LBJ ranch. From across the fence, I petted a horse I was sure President Johnson rode. I know now that most pictures of him on horseback were posed for the press. LBJ preferred driving cars at breakneck speed around the ranch, scaring the daylight out of passengers—often foreign dignitaries—and making his Secret Service agents nervous. One of the pleasures of memories, however, is that you can edit them as you please, even in the face of conflicting information. I prefer to remember President Johnson sitting tall astride his horse. What I remember from my 2014 tour of the



Texas White House—the Johnson home in the Texas Hill Country—is how much love there must have been in that house. Love for nature, for friends and family, for this country and its people. Still comfortably furnished as it was when the Johnsons lived there, it's a home in which all of us would feel welcome. It and the surrounding ranchland were deeded to the American people in 1972 by President and Mrs. Johnson, known as Lady Bird. Tours are available year round at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park off of 290 between Johnson City and Fredericksburg.

LBJ and Lady Bird stipulated that the ranch be maintained “not as a sterile relic” but as a working ranch. Visitors can learn something of agriculture, specifically the Hereford cattle operation and the self-sufficient hay production system. A self-driving tour around the lovely ranch is available. At \$4 the accompanying audio

CD is a bargain, providing a compelling history of the Johnson presidency. The CD includes a house tour ticket and a bonus DVD with eight features that are great fun. My favorite is the home photo tour accompanied by the song “Landslide Johnson.”

There's a gift shop in the Visitor Center headquarters, and a smaller shop inside the hangar through which the home tour begins. Numerous books are available about the Johnsons, but perhaps the best recognized is Pulitzer Prize winner Robert A. Caro's series, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson. The Path to Power*, the first volume, provides historical information about Hill Country rural life. I doubt that you could pick up any book about LBJ that didn't mention that he was a philanderer. That he had other women in his life was most certainly difficult for Lady Bird to bear.

Here's what I think about that. No marriage is all sugar and roses—it's also lemons and thorns. I look at the CD cover picture of Lady Bird and LBJ holding hands, walking through the field of flowers on their ranch, and I know their national story includes a great personal love story. That's what I felt in their home on that tour. How fortunate that they left us such a gorgeous legacy, and I hope I am right in believing that they had a great love for each other. When I listened to Billy Joe Shaver's *Hill Country Love Song* recently, I thought of Lady Bird. She had a great passion for nature, for wildflowers, for preservation and conservation, for this country's natural treasures. She had a great passion for Lyndon and I think Lyndon did for Lady Bird.

