Interview

with

Lois West

University Libraries
University of South Carolina
Interviewer:  
Herbert J. Hartsook

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Location:  
Office of John C. West, Seibels Bruce Co., Columbia, SC

Synopsis:  
Mrs. West describes her life as wife of the honorable John C. West, particularly as First Lady, 1971-1975, and wife to the ambassador of Saudi Arabia, 1977-1981.

Transcriber:  
Brian Newsome
[Begin Tape 1, Side One]

Hartsook: Your husband claims not to have charisma. If you agree with him, how do you explain his great success as a politician and especially a leader throughout his tenure as a legislator in South Carolina and as ambassador?

Mrs. West: I think John's real talent is people skills. He's always been able to get along with people and to effect a middle ground where people can agree. I think that's his skill, that he has tact and that he can solve problems by getting other people to think it's their idea and do it. That's always been his way.

Hartsook: Do you agree with that portrayal, though, that he lacks the charisma of a Fritz Hollings?

Mrs. West: [Laughter] I think he's got more myself, but I'm prejudiced. I caught him early and raised him to suit myself. We met in the first grade in school. He didn't tell you that?

Hartsook: Yes, he did. [West laughing] I argue that he has an intellectual charisma. That when you speak with him the native intelligence shines so brightly that you have to be drawn to that.

Mrs. West: I think John is smart. He's always applied himself, but I think his greatest talent is ability to judge people and to work with them. And he works with them. He doesn't tell them what to do or any of that. He encourages them to solve their own problems. I know when he was in the legislature, there would be something to come up, and John was in the middle. And it would always get done. He'd give a little here, and somebody else could give a little, and he'd work it out. I think that his skill is people skills.

Hartsook: He said something once at a lunch meeting with [some] other university people. He remarked that individuals who become involved in politics have to have big egos, but the most successful politicians are those that can disguise that ego. Do you think that is true?
Mrs. West:  I think politicians generally have a pretty good ego or they couldn't do what they do.  But I think John really doesn't have that big an ego.  I think he wants to accomplish things, and he really doesn't care who gets the credit.  I think probably history will treat him very well because so many things he did he probably didn't take any credit for, and over the years I think he'll be seen in a light as having accomplished a lot.  But I don't think he has a super ego, no.  [laughter]

Hartsook:  He refers to you constantly [West laughing], and [it] seems clear that your marriage is very much an active partnership.  I wonder if his life of public service has suited your character and your hopes and ambitions.

Mrs. West:  [Laughter]  Oh, no.  I didn't want him in politics.  We had agreed he wouldn't go into politics, and what happened is we had a hospital that didn't have any facilities for children, and we had a sick child.  I carried Jack, I believe he was about a year old, we had him out on a cot in the hall because there wasn't any room for him.  The next day John talked to his uncle and said it was a disgrace.  And he said, “Well John, we're trying to build new hospitals but we can't get anybody to serve as chairman of the board.”  John said, “I understand,” so he became chairman of the board which decided to build a new hospital rather than renovate the present one.  That's how he got involved.  In order to build the hospital, they had to have a bond issue.  It was difficult to do that.  You were limited on the bond issue, and you had to pass an act through the legislature.  So, he ran for the Senate to get the hospital built.  He laughs and says that he won by three votes, and the hospital won by fifty.  That's how he got into politics.  He backed into it because he needed to build a hospital.  That's what he was out to get.  It wasn't his ego; he didn't want to be senator particularly.  Once he got there, he saw some other things that needed doing, like school accreditation.  The kid in the rural school didn't have half the chances the kid in the Greenville or Columbia schools had, and they needed help.  Reverse investment; those things just sort of came along.  He did the constitutional convention--the revision of the constitution.  One thing just led to the other, and as he saw the needs, he tried to do something about it.  That's the way he works.

Hartsook:  How does that jibe with what you wanted to do with your life together?
Mrs. West: [Laughter] John and I have always done whatever we needed to do, and when he got in it, you can either go willingly or be dragged kicking and screaming. So I figured I'd go gracefully, and I tried to help every way I could. It's a hard life. It takes a lot of effort. You get some criticism that you really don't enjoy, and your children are subjected to some of that. I tried to tell our children that they had some privileges and opportunities that they wouldn't have otherwise, and at the same time they were going to get some criticism that they wouldn't have otherwise, and it would sort of balance out. But that's the way we went about it.

Hartsook: What are the hardest things about raising a family in the public light?

Mrs. West: Children are in the spotlight, a little bit, and ours were very fortunate because we managed to keep them out of it as much as we could. I remember when John was campaigning for the Senate, there was a little grocery store in Camden called Haile Street Grocery. Over the years, I had taken the Cub Scouts there. I was Cub Scout leader, and after we'd have a meeting, we'd go by and get a hamburger from Mr. Horton at the Haile Street Grocery. John was running for the Senate, and somebody came in there just before the election at lunch time spreading the rumor that John's oldest child was such a bad boy. Mr. Horton jumped the counter and got at him and said, "I've been feeding that boy for ten years, and that boy doesn't do anything wrong." Those are the things that you appreciate, people speaking up for you.

Hartsook: When did you first perceive that Governor West had true political ambitions? [West laughing] When did you realize that it wasn't going to stop with just getting the hospital built?

Mrs. West: The day he got trapped into running for the Senate to build the hospital, I knew right then we weren't going to stop. I just knew that he would go right on. He might not get elected, but he'd go all the way if he could.

Hartsook: Allen Legare wrote your husband a scolding note in January of 1968 taking him to task for his “devotion” to Fritz Hollings. He was angry because Governor West’s campaign manager was also serving as Hollings’ finance chairman in his reelection campaign. Legare
wrote -- “he uses you and never once contributes to your welfare....  I just can’t see where continuous protection and favors for Hollings enhances your image.” Obviously the two men have a very close relationship.

Mrs. West:  Fritz and John?

Hartsook:  Fritz and John.  Looking back over their long association, how do you perceive that relationship?

Mrs. West:  Fritz and John were in school together.  I guess I first knew Fritz when he was a freshman at the Citadel, and we knew them in law school when he was there.  We knew his first wife and his children, and we've been friends.  And if you're friends, you're friends. You're either friends or you're not friends.  Your friends may have warts, but you know they have warts, and you like them in spite of their warts.  That's just the way it is.  You're either friends or you're not friends.

Hartsook:  Certainly it seems they share a lot of similarities.  They're both goal oriented.

Mrs. West:  They're not too much alike really, I don't think.  I never thought they were a great deal alike.

Hartsook:  O.K.  [West laughing].  I look at them and I think it's hard to find two more substantive legislators than John West and Fritz Hollings.  Dick Riley falls into that same category.  People that really wanted to achieve something while they were in office, rather than looking to the perks of the office.  I think that's what I was thinking of.  One of the things that we want to highlight in the exhibit that we're going to do in Camden [on the John West papers] is the 1970 campaign.  It seems easy but [is] probably simplistic to show it as a contest between good and evil.  Can you talk a little bit about your feelings toward Albert Watson during the campaign, and maybe talk a little bit about how you think about that period now?

Mrs. West:  We refer to him as Saint Albert.  [Laughter]  I liked Albert.  He was a nice fellow.  He was one of John's students at Carolina.  It was just a campaign, and everybody was
trying to get elected. He picked an issue that was racially motivated. They were trying to divide, and that wasn't what we needed. It was time for that to end, and they were trying to prolong the tension, I think. Did that answer what you want? Not really? [laughter]

Hartsook: I was talking to a student the other day that's done some work in that period. He shared with me his opinion that that was a fork in the road. Carolina could have chosen one of two very dramatically different paths.

Mrs. West: That's right. Well, I think Fritz deserves credit because when the first [black] student was enrolled at Clemson, Fritz said there's going to be no trouble here. The citizens of this state believe in law and order, and that's what's going to happen. He could have gone the other way, and would have had terrible trouble. That was when Harvey Gantt went to Clemson. It's same thing you have anywhere in the South. It was a choice of whether you wanted to try to work together or cause more of a bitter problem.

Hartsook: Do you enjoy campaigning?

Mrs. West: No, not particularly. I like people, but it's difficult to campaign. It's hard. There are parts of it that are nice because you make friends that you wouldn't meet any other way. There's a fellow who lived out at the mill, and I asked him why he worked so hard for John. He said, "I don't have any education. I don't know what's best for me, but I think Mr. West is an honest man, and I think he's smart. If I help him go over there, he'll do what's best for me," which gives you the essence of it all.

Hartsook: That's pretty deep thinking on that fellow's part.

Mrs. West: That's just the way he felt about it. He didn't have the education or the background to decide what were good laws, and he knew it. But he knew enough that if he put a man that he trusted over there who was smart, it would be better for him.

Hartsook: What else do you like about campaigning besides those kinds of opportunities to meet people?
Mrs. West: I think it was good for my children because they got to see parts of life that they ordinarily wouldn't experience. They got to meet a mill shift and see a grandmother who'd worked in the cotton mill all eight hours. That's the way she had to keep bread in her mouth. Most kids who have a pretty normal lifestyle with a fair[ly] good income don't ever know about that. I think it affected my children. I think it made them better people.

Hartsook: What do you recall of the hunger tours?

Mrs. West: I didn't go with John on those. Fritz and John went out on those. I didn't actually go on those. I worked in summer camps a lot when I was coming along, and I remember I worked at a camp in King's Mountain. The first morning we had yellow grits, and one of the kids said, "Oh Lord, we've got WPA grits." [laughter] That was the sort of thing that you saw kids that just didn't have any opportunity. It's nice to see that they have more opportunity.

Hartsook: I know when Hollings did his initial tour that there was a lot of criticism that he was pointing out problems that were universal and that the society nationally was looking at it as a purely South Carolina issue and that it might hurt us in terms of development. Was there any kind of backlash like that when Governor West made his tours?

Mrs. West: I'm sure there's hunger universally, but if you're hungry it doesn't matter if somebody else is. It's you you're thinking about. I think the people in South Carolina need to take care of their own people. If they're hungry, they're hungry in South Carolina, just like they are in Indiana or where ever.

Hartsook: Do you recall any kind of criticism of Governor West?

Mrs. West: I didn't get too much of that because I stayed in the background more than in the political part.

Hartsook: Was it hard to stay in the background?
Mrs. West: No. I was a housewife. That's what I was.

Hartsook: I don't think I've ever heard anybody refer to you as a housewife. A lot of people talk about your athletic ability. A lot of people talk about how wonderful you were on the campaign trail.

Mrs. West: I'm a good chauffeur. I was a chauffeur on the campaign trail. No, I was in the background more. I didn't really have to deal with policy and things like that.

Hartsook: And yet you were quite interested. That's obvious.

Mrs. West: We talked about things. John and I have pretty much the same values. If something came up and he wanted to have a sounding board, he would talk to me about it. But he made all the decisions. There wasn't any question about that.

Hartsook: What do you remember as being some of the most difficult decisions to make?

Mrs. West: That he had to make?

Hartsook: Yes, the ones where you actually had to really talk it through to figure out what you felt was the right thing to do.

Mrs. West: John made decisions without much trouble. The one on the death penalty probably bothered him more than anything else, but he didn't believe that he had the right to put somebody to death. At that time, there was a great deal of sentiment for capital punishment, and he felt that his convictions were what he should do, and so he's never been for capital punishment. I know he talked to the children about it and told them how he felt. Although a lot of people--probably the majority--were for capital punishment in South Carolina, the letters he got, most of them who disagreed with him, still said, "We think it's good that you believe in what you believe, and that you stand up for it." So, even if they think you're wrong, if they think you're doing it for the right reasons, they don't object. There wasn't any question in my mind
which way he'd go on that because I've always known that.

Hartsook: What's the hardest thing about being a first lady?

Mrs. West: What's the hardest thing? [laughter]

Hartsook: What was the most uncomfortable aspect of that role for you?

Mrs. West: Nothing really. Like everything else it was a job that you could do, and all you could do was the best you could and enjoy it. Do you know about “Friendly Ben?” Did he tell you about that one? “Friendly Ben” the radio man? There was a talk show where you call in and complain about something, and everybody has their say. Somebody called in and complained that the first lady got a salary of $2,000 a month, which was not true. That's what the story was about. Everybody called in and was saying whether it shouldn't be that much [or] it should be more. Finally, one woman called in and said, "Friendly Ben," you just leave Lois alone. She's got to put up with that darn fool John. She ought to get all that she can." [Laughter] And John swears I'm the one that called in.

Hartsook: Did they ever do a retraction and clear the air?

Mrs. West: Oh, no. Who cared? I thought it was funny myself. That was "Friendly Ben." I had a good time. It was hard work. You had a lot of fun things, and it's like everything else, some things are more fun than others.

Hartsook: What was the most fun aspect of being in the governor's mansion?

Mrs. West: I think I liked it when the kids came through. One of them came through and she asked me about the flowers. All the jonquils were blooming that particular day, and she asked me about the flowers. And I said, "Well honey, they're your flowers. This house belongs to you." I went on about my business, and about an hour or so later her mother called me. She was a brownie scout as I remember. She [the mother] said, "Lois, my child came home with all the flowers she picked out of your yard." I said, "It's my fault. I told her they were her
Hartsook: I get the impression from talking to Governor West that his favorite perk was the golf privileges.

Mrs. West: Oh, he liked to golf. He hit golf balls out there, and occasionally he missed the ball and would go banging on the balcony there. I don't know of any particular thing. It was just four years that we lived there, and we did what we could. I think the nice thing is that we tried to have people share the mansion. We made a point of inviting members of the legislature to come for a weekend and bring some of their friends and we entertained them. It was their house, too. I never will forget the time John invited the state employees. He called up and said, "I've invited all the state employees there." Anne Agnew had gotten to him and said he wanted to have a reception. I said, "John do you know how many state employees there are?" He said, "No." I said, "There's something like five thousand." He said, "They won't all come." And I think all of them came. We were in the receiving line from about 11:00 that morning until after dark. They came, but it was really a pleasure because people came who ordinarily didn't get invited. It was very nice. The only time the line would stop was when the coffee pot would run out and we would have to refill the coffee pot. It was fun.

Hartsook: Do have any regrets when you think back to your years in the mansion? Something that you wish you could have achieved?

Mrs. West: We did everything that we could--both of us--for the whole four years, and I don't think there's anything I could have done differently. I left happy, and John left happy. It was a good four years. We tried to do the best we could, and we were happy to leave. It was fine.

Hartsook: Did you think that was the end of his political career?

Mrs. West: We thought so, because he hadn't planned to do any other election or any running. The phone rang one morning. It was my daughter, and she said, "Wake up, Mama. You haven't read the paper. The President's going to appoint John to his cabinet or ambassadorship or something. You've got 'instant beauty' again." [laughter] That's the way it was. When you
leave, when we walked up the steps after the inauguration of Governor Edwards, we went from Who's Who to Who's He and old What's Her Name. [laughter] Then, when President Carter appointed him as ambassador, we had ‘instant beauty’ again. It works that way.

**Hartsook:** Where does ‘instant beauty’--that term--come from? Is that a West family [term]?

**Mrs. West:** It's just something [daughter] Shelton said, but it was true.

**Hartsook:** I've not heard that. I'm sure I'll use that at some point. [West laughing]

**Mrs. West:** Well, you know how it is when you're governor. People sort of tend to [say], "Oh, You're so right. You could do no wrong, Mr. Governor." Except your wife, who tells you you're crazy and haven't got any sense. His mother told him that on occasion. Did he tell you that story about him buying the land?

**Hartsook:** I don't think so.

**Mrs. West:** There was some property in Camden that was adjacent to his mother's farm. The fellow called up John and said he wanted to sell it; was he interested in buying it? John said, "Yes." He used to go on Sunday and go to church with his mother and then bring her back to over to Columbia to have mid-day dinner with us. So this particular time she said something about it and he said the man had called him and [West had] said, "What do you want for it." I think he wanted maybe $200 an acre; I don't remember the figure. His mother said, "Hmm, that land's not worth over $10 an acre," because of course she was equating back to when she bought their land. So nothing was said, and about a month later he was picking her up, and she said, "Did you buy that land? I saw in the paper where you bought that land." He said, "Yes Ma'am." She said, "What did you pay for it?" He told her. And she looked at him and said, "Hmm, you don't have sense enough to be governor of this state." [laughter] Of course, later he sold it for $2,000 an acre or something.

**Hartsook:** He has talked about how good real estate investment has been [to him].
[Tape 1, Side 1 Ends; Begin Side 2]

Hartsook: [We found in the collection a humorous note dating from the gubernatorial campaign criticizing West for wearing the same tie in the various photographs featured in his campaign flyer.] In all there must have been seven or eight photographs. All little photographs showing him at different occasions . . .

Mrs. West: With the same tie?

Hartsook: With the same necktie on.

Mrs. West: I have the same thing -- my hair. They used to comment on my hair, but you'd get that. I got it about my clothes, too.

Hartsook: I don't think that fellow was mean-spirited. I think he was poking fun at the man he intended fully to vote for [West laughing], but I did think it was just a riot.

Mrs. West: Those things happen, but you have to take all that. It doesn't bother you. It's just part of it.

Hartsook: Who else besides family can come up and say something like that--that that's stupid or you've made a mistake?

Mrs. West: To John?

Hartsook: Or to you.


Hartsook: Whose opinion did you really respect?
Mrs. West: All his classmates at the Citadel talked to him any time they wanted to. He's no different from anybody else just because he happened to be governor. I think the answer is that John never felt like he was up on a pedestal. He was still the same person. The only time that you were aware of that is when a kid would come up and say he wanted to touch him because he was governor. John said, "It makes you realize what a responsibility you have to these children because they think that this is something special to be governor, and you have to live up to that." So you can't just goof off, and you can't misbehave.

Hartsook: I was just fascinated reading [the diary,] particularly the Saudi diary entries, and amazed at how difficult that must have been to be immersed so quickly into such a foreign society.

Mrs. West: In Saudi?

Hartsook: Yes. And it seemed like when he would talk about your efforts to prepare a meal on the spot--[some kind of] American cuisine.

Mrs. West: I was a cook. [laughter]

Hartsook: How hard was that for you?

Mrs. West: I think the main problem we had was the fact that the food was not available. When we arrived in Saudi Arabia, we had no help. The former ambassador had gotten his nose out of joint because he had been replaced, and he fired all the help. When I came in there was only one house boy there, and he spoke not a word of English. He was from Sudan. But we learned to converse, and the other house boys used to laugh because I could talk with him. I didn't speak Sudanese, and he didn't speak English, but we could carry on conversations. One time he came in and said, "[West making noise for gibberish]." I said, "O.K. That's all right. You go ahead." The other house boy said, "Do you know what he said?" I said, "Yes. He said if he didn't go a day early on his vacation that he'd have to walk to his village because the bus didn't run but on certain days, and if I let him go a day early he could catch the bus when he got to Sudan." He said, "That's right, but how did you know?" I said, "I don't know how I knew,
but he and I've communicated over the years, and I knew what he meant." That's the way you got along. When we first got to Saudi, we didn't have a commissary. They'd used up all the food in it. So I had to shop on the local market, and you'd have to bargain there. That was different, and of course I didn't speak Arabic at first. I picked it up because I had to bargain, but eventually we had a good commissary system there. But it wasn't any problem. We had some strange meals sometimes, too.

Hartsook: It just seemed like a very difficult assignment to be the ambassador's wife in Saudi Arabia, especially at the start, there were problems with staff and all.

Mrs. West: They were digging ditches out there, and I went out and I said, "You speak English?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Stand up. You're no longer a ditch digger. You're a butler. Come on." [laughter] That's the way I got them. Of course you had little quirks like when they set the table every night. I checked it because all of a sudden the knife would be on the wrong side. It would go fine for six months and then all of a sudden they'd switch it. But all the house boys were real good. In fact, I still hear from them. They come over to America to see us. One of the cooks I had is working in Greenville. He's an American citizen now, he and his wife. He has four sons. They all changed their names. Fahad became Fred and Ali became Al. I hear from him every Christmas. He sends us a Christmas card and wants to know how we are and thanks us. We had good friendships with them, and we see them.

Hartsook: How would you describe the duties of the ambassador's wife? Because you really worked.

Mrs. West: It wouldn't be the same now because they have a new embassy in Riyadh that is adequately furnished and staffed. I'm sure it's just like any like any other ambassador's wife now. But at the time we were there, Saudi Arabia had been a Class 4 embassy, and it was changed to a Class 1 embassy because the Saudi affairs were becoming internationally recognized and the oil wealth was such that it was a very important place at that time. But the embassy was an old house. All of a sudden you're Class 4 and now you're Class 1, overnight, and it wasn't equipped that way. So in order to entertain, you had to make do. We took [the] screen porch and glassed it in and made a big dining room. We could seat one hundred and
twenty people at a time, and John felt that entertaining at a meal was one of the ways that he could be effective, and it was so. For instance, we had some bankers from the United States come over who wanted to get on the S.A.M.A. [Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency] list to deposit their money in their banks in America, and we had a dinner for them the night before they had the meeting, which made it so much easier when they went to the meeting the next day. They got the money. You'd have a hundred and twenty people maybe. But it works out. You learn how to do it.

Hartsook: You were supervising a staff of about how many?

Mrs. West: Let's see, I had a cook, a driver, and two house boys I guess.

Hartsook: And did you get extra people to work when you had the large affair?

Mrs. West: No.

Hartsook: You'd serve a hundred and twenty people with that staff?

Mrs. West: Yes, we could do that. It wasn't that hard because we had it worked out to a science and they knew how to do. Occasionally we might have some other people in to help, but Mursal and Somali and Obeid.... There were three of them because the driver would serve. He worked, too. Then if I was pushed, the cook would come out and serve, too. John's secretary, Betty Bargmann, was always a big help, and if we had more people come than we expected, she would just say, "Oh, I have to go back home now. I'm not staying." She's get her meal on the way out. We had a pecking order. Our children would go out. We had certain ones that were willing to disappear if we didn't have the room. It worked out.

Hartsook: Was that really a good opportunity for your children to be exposed to a culture that was that different?

Mrs. West: Actually, our children weren't there. They came and visited us.
Hartsook: Didn't Shelton stay with you?

Mrs. West: Shelton stayed with us for about a year, and it was a wonderful opportunity for her. All the others visited us. It was fun. Shelton went with us when we visited Iran and Egypt and places like that. It was a good experience.

Hartsook: What most surprised you about the ambassadorial experience?

Mrs. West: I really didn't have any preconceived notions about what was going to happen, and when I go to something like that I just do what needs to be done. It was not typical of an ambassador's residence, I'm sure, because I visited the one in Paris and I've been to others like that. But because Saudi was not in the main stream, so to speak, all the other ambassadors were very gracious about it. I know one of them told me when I first got there, "Don't ever be surprised at what happens at your dinner party. Just laugh because everybody else will laugh with you because they've had the same thing happen to them." [laughter] So it was a very friendly area. I enjoyed the other ambassador's wives, and I made a lot of friends from different countries. I joined a cooking club and each one did something from their country, and that was fun.

Hartsook: And what kind of things would you prepare?

Mrs. West: I don't remember what I did. Probably shrimp stew or grits or fried chicken. But we made a lot of friends over there that we still see. I had one visit me two weeks ago, as a matter of fact. Came in from Switzerland. It was a nice experience. It was hot, and it was primitive in some ways, and there were some, not unpleasantness, but difficulties, because you couldn't get this and you couldn't get that. Later you could do all those things. We had a South Carolina group from Fluor Daniel. They were stationed up in Riyadh. I had them for a dinner party at Christmas. I had managed to get some celery from the commissary in Riyadh. They were just thrilled to death. They hadn't had celery in a year, so as they went out I took all the celery I had and put it in a basket at the front door and gave everybody celery to take home. It was a little thing, but it was very meaningful to them because they hadn't had any celery. When you couldn't get sliced bread, and if I managed to find some I'd bring some back to everybody.
As the ambassador's wife, I could do things that other people couldn't sometimes. Everybody shared and everybody enjoyed the company of each other, and because we had difficult things to do, I think we got along better than most people do. We had a party in Camden a year or so ago. A friend of ours who had a brain tumor wrote and said he wanted to see us, so we decided to have a party in Camden, and we had something like forty-five or fifty people come from all over the United States of that group, just to see Buster. And it was just a marvelous weekend. They came from Texas, Louisiana, Washington, Florida, [and] everywhere. But because they had lived in Saudi Arabia at the same time and had shared these experiences, we are like a big family. It was just a family get-together. It was something that you don't find probably in lot of places that don't have the difficult living conditions.

Hartsook: Was it very difficult for you, especially at the start, being in a society that values women so differently than our own?

Mrs. West: Strange that you should ask. I don't think they do. I think that mothers run the sons over there. I never saw such a matriarchal society. Everybody thinks that it's male oriented, but it's not. I've seen grown men hide their cigarettes because mama came in the room. The thing I found interesting was it was very much like the South. Uncle Jim's brother's sister's cousin had married Aunt Susie's uncle's brother's sister. Same thing I was used to in the South. They had the same customs. You were polite. You went in and you spoke. You always went around the room and spoke to everybody. You told everybody goodbye. It was very similar to the Southern society, and I didn't have any problem. I adapted immediately. The people from other sections of the United States found it a little strange, but I didn't find it strange. I got along like gang-busters. I had fun.

Hartsook: It sounds like a good bit of shopping was done, reading the diary. [West laughing] There are so many entries about visits to . . .

Mrs. West: Souk. The Junk Souk. John did the shopping. I didn't do as much as he did. He loved to go. That was recreation. He liked to buy rugs, so he had a good time. But what else do you do?
Hartsook: I was going to ask you that.

Mrs. West: They had the Red Sea that you could go up and go snorkeling. That was a nice thing. You could go out in the desert. Have you ever seen a baby camel just after it's been born?

Hartsook: No.

Mrs. West: It's the cutest little thing you ever saw. I've been to all the ruins out in the desert. I've been where Lawrence of Arabia was, at the railroad. I've been to the Roundhouse and all that where the railroad was. I've been to the Natabian tombs. I traveled all over Saudi Arabia while I was there because it was a good opportunity. I found it very interesting.

Hartsook: Did you always feel safe?

Mrs. West: Oh yes. I never had any concerns about my safety, and they're a very gracious people.

Hartsook: If you asked a question, did you always feel like you were going to get an answer?

Mrs. West: Yes, they had one little problem. If you invited them to have a meal with you or come to see you, they always accepted because they thought it would be rude not to. Now, that didn't mean they were coming. So you never really knew who you were going to have, and it also didn't mean that if they had three people visiting [that] they wouldn't bring them with them. You had protocol, and you had tables of eight, and if you had to move one [guest], then that shifted everybody's table because you had to have everybody in the right spot. All of a sudden, the fellow that said he wasn't coming came and brought three friends, and the fellow that said he was coming didn't show up at all. So I kept place cards in my pocket, and as they came in I counted heads, and I'd go in and shift. That was the trickiest part of it--the protocol part of it--because you just didn't know who was coming and who wasn't coming. But they did it because they were polite, and they didn't want to hurt your feelings. They never refused an
Hartsook: I was interested too at the gift-giving custom.

Mrs. West: You had to be careful with that. I had one friend [with whom] I'd go down to the souk--the gold souk and the jewelry souk. And she'd say, "Oh, don't you like that?" And I'd say, "No, it wouldn't look good on me," because if you admired anything they were going to give it to you, and you can't do that. Americans can't accept gifts like that. I know Zaki Yamani gave me a beautiful ring for my birthday, and of course we had to give it back to him. We couldn't refuse it when he gave it to me because he had guests there, but the next morning John gave it back to him. He [John] said he can't accept it. He [Zaki Yamani] said, "It isn't worth but ($100 was the limit) $99." John said when he counted the third or fourth diamond it was worth a lot more than that. They are generous people, and that's their custom--they give. We didn't have to compete because we couldn't. Like in the clothes and things like that, I never had a problem with what I had to wear because I couldn't compete with their Paris fashions. So I just wore what I had, and it didn't bother me a bit.

I enjoyed watching the jewelry, because they had the most gorgeous jewelry I've ever seen. The first time I went to a party--it was the second day I was there--and I came home and John said, "How was it?" I said, "You won't believe it, but they had on what I call a knuckle-buster, a ring that would come over past over your knuckle and you couldn't bend your knuckle because there was too much ring over it." He said, "Oh you have to be kidding." I said, "No." So he went out to lunch the next day and he came home and he said, "I apologize. I saw a knuckle buster." [laughter] They had absolutely gorgeous jewelry. They would have things like diamond and ruby necklaces and then the sister would have on emeralds and diamonds and the next sister would have on sapphires and diamonds. Identical things except different stones. I thought it was cute until that day I saw a little girl come out and she could hardly stand upright because the diamond she had on her neck--she was about three years old--was so big it was making her lean forward. [laughter] They had absolutely gorgeous jewelry, and it was a pleasure to see it.

Hartsook: What else do you remember with great fondness?
Mrs. West: I made a lot of friends, and I enjoyed their customs. I got to visit in their homes, and that was very interesting to me.

Hartsook: I have another quote to share with you. Shirley Ealum’s autobiography speaks of you—“They seemed to have a perfect union. He was powerful, but it appeared to me she was the strength behind him.”

Mrs. West: [Laughter] Shirley said that? Well bless her little heart. Yes, we were with them in Riyadh.

Hartsook: What do you think of what she said?

Mrs. West: I guess that's her opinion maybe. [laughter]

Hartsook: It's clear from the governor’s diary that you both have a real love of art. I wondered if you could comment on the role that art and artists such as the Yaghians and Anne Worsham Richardson have played in your life?

Mrs. West: Dot [Yaghian] and I were very good friends. She and Ed came over to visit us, and they did some paintings while they were there. Very nice. I've always thought that they were outstanding artists. I like Dot's work probably more than Ed's because it's simple. Ed does beautiful work, but his is in the oils. I just happen to like her watercolors more.

Hartsook: How did you come to appreciate art like that?

Mrs. West: Dot taught me. She told me what she did, and she would explain things to me. I know when she had arthritis in her finger and had to have a joint replaced, she was stir-crazy because she couldn't paint. So I took her down to Kiawah for a week while she was recovering. I'd take her down in the jeep--take her down to the end of the beach with an ice-chest, sandwich, candy bar, and her paints, and she painted left-handed. It made me so furious because she could paint equally as well with that left hand. Isn't that ridiculous? I bought the only left-handed Yaghian there was that she painted while she was down at Kiawah. I gave it to a
friend of mine, Francis Coffee, who was the mansion director when she left the mansion. But it's a beautiful painting. Dot and I just were good friends.

**Hartsook:** How did you meet?

**Mrs. West:** I met her at an art show that she gave in Columbia back in the 60's. I went in to buy a painting because I wanted to give it to John for his office when he was elected lieutenant governor. I picked out the one I wanted, and Dot came in as I was leaving, and I told her I had just bought it for John. She said, "Come and tell me which one you bought." She said, "Wait a minute, I'll tell you which one you bought." She picked it out. She said, "That's the best one I've done."

**Hartsook:** That was indeed the one?

**Mrs. West:** That was the one I'd picked. So we developed a friendship and were very close friends over the years until her death.

**Hartsook:** Have you ever had your portraits done?

**Mrs. West:** John had his done, and Dot did one of me. But it's not exactly the formal portrait that most people have. It's my back end. I was taking a sand spur out of my dog's foot, so it's my back view and the dog's back view, and you can recognize it. Everybody who sees it knows who it is immediately. [laughter]

**Hartsook:** Where's that portrait?

**Mrs. West:** In my daughter's bedroom.

**Hartsook:** In Hilton Head?

**Mrs. West:** Yes. But she did some funny ones of me. She did a beautiful portrait of my daughter, Dot did, which I have.
Hartsook: Governor West told me that you and he were reviewing the resume of Cynthia Luckie, our John West graduate assistant, and you asked if he thought a young girl from Georgia could ever understand Edgar Brown. What do we need to know about Edgar Brown?

Mrs. West: I asked that? I don't remember. I don't know what he meant by that.

Hartsook: I assumed you were talking about how interrelated South Carolina politics is and how you have to know all of the players and a good bit about them to really understand how government works in South Carolina.

Mrs. West: Yes, Edgar Brown sort of had run the state for a long time. He was very fond of saying that "Governors come and governors go, but I go on forever, and I keep the state straight." [laughter]

Hartsook: Those were the questions I had for you. I always like to offer subjects a chance to answer the question I should have asked but didn't know enough.

Mrs. West: I had no idea what you wanted. Well, I'm very fortunate. I have a lot of friends.

Hartsook: We always like to try to document to some extent the spouses that we think really played a part--someone like you or Gladys Johnston.

Mrs. West: Oh, I'm crazy about her.

Hartsook: We have his desk in the Manuscripts Division reading room. It's what you see when you open the doors -- his Senate office desk with his gubernatorial portrait behind it and state and American flags. And it always amazed me--I sat at that desk for seven years--how many people would come up and not talk about him but talk about her [Gladys Johnston]. And she's not reflected in the collection but I think in one or two instances. People talk about how bright she was and what a good confidant she was to him.
Mrs. West: When John was elected governor, the first thing I did was I went to see Gladys Johnston and former governors' wives to ask them what they did and what they thought was the role of the governor's wife. I went up and had lunch with Gladys in Spartanburg, and she was such a gracious lady, and I was very . . .

[Tape 1 ends; Tape 2, Side 1 begins]

Mrs. West: She was a strong lady.

Hartsook: Do you think it was easier to be very bright and to have a strong personality when you were in the mansion, perhaps, than when she was?

Mrs. West: I think you just do whatever you need to do. I think people express their own personality, and I think you have to do the way you feel about things. When Ann Edwards was following me, she asked me, and I said, "Ann, it's your house, and you don't need to do anything the same way I did it. Be yourself. That's all I can tell you. The easiest way to be the governor's wife is to be what you are. You don't have to do anything the same way I did or anything else. Just enjoy it and be yourself. If you're yourself, that's the only way you can be." She and I are good friends to this day. When the campaign was going on to succeed John, I invited all the wives of the candidates who'd been elected in the primaries to come to the mansion because I said, "One of you will be here. I don't know who it's going to be, but you need to see what you're getting into. This is how we run it, and you might want to be thinking about what you want to do." So they all came up and had lunch and visited. Jim Edwards said I nearly got him out of the race because Ann came home and said, "I'm not going to go up there." [laughter]

Hartsook: Now who all would that have been? That would have been Mrs. Ravenel and Mrs. Edwards, just the two of them.

Mrs. West: No. It would be Ravenel, and there was Red Bethea. I think he was an
independent. So I had all three wives, but it was interesting. I felt they ought to see it and have an idea of what going to be available. I explained the help and all that sort of thing to them and what we had done, and they could make their plans. So it was different.

Hartsook: Had that been done for you?

Mrs. West: Not really, but I had been there before. Josephine [Mrs. Robert E. McNair] and I had been friends over the years, and I had been going there since Fritz, I guess, because John had been in the legislature, and we had the annual Shift Dinner, as we called it, where they invited all the legislators to come and have dinner. We called it the Shift Dinner because they had to come in shifts there were so many. I knew what it had been like. It was fun.

Hartsook: Is it still fun? Your life today and all the things you're doing? We talked off the tape about your fund-raising for Winthrop....

Mrs. West: John and I have kept busy. I've served on the State Museum commission. In fact, I just resigned this past week. I think it's time for somebody else to take over. I've been active in the Muscular Dystrophy Association for thirty-something years or more, and I served as national president of the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and I'm on the board of directors and chairman of the executive committee now, and I keep up with that. That takes a little bit of time. Then, as you know, I went to Winthrop, and I'm trying to help a little bit with their fund-raising. They're having their first ever capital campaign. We're not in the league with the University of South Carolina--almost $300 million. We're not that greedy. [laughter] We'll settle for less. It's interesting. I'm doing some traveling for that. John and I stay busy. My daughter said one night she was trying to invite us for dinner, and John got his little book out and I got my little book out, and he said well I can't come such and such a night, and I said I can't come such and such. She looked at us with all the disgust she could possibly muster and said, "I never saw two old crocks with such schedules." [laughter] But that's what keeps us going, I think, is the fact that we are interested in a lot of things and do a lot. It keeps you moving. John's theory is that when you get older you're supposed to speed up, not slow down.

Hartsook: I've never heard him say that, but it certainly . . .
Mrs. West: We accuse him of having that theory anyway.

Hartsook: Are there things you'd like to be doing now that you're not doing yet? Are there other things you'd like to be involved in or trips that you'd like to take that you haven't gotten around to?

Mrs. West: We've pretty much done all the trips that we want to do. We've been about everywhere. We like to spend some time with our grandchildren. As of today, I'm a great grandmother.

Hartsook: Congratulations.

Mrs. West: Born last night. A little girl. Jack's son Brodie and Kendall had a little girl last night. Of course, Jack said he was too young to be a grandfather. He was going to be a cousin. So they didn't know whether that would make me a great-grandmother or not. She was born today--this morning.

Hartsook: Congratulations. That's great.

Mrs. West: Thank you.

Hartsook: Where are they? Are they here?

Mrs. West: He's a resident at the medical college [in Charleston]. He's a nice young boy.

Hartsook: When will you be driving down?

Mrs. West: Brodie's mother went down last night as soon as she heard and got there before the baby was born. But I don't know when we'll see [them]. Jack went down this afternoon. So we'll get there some time. I kept the crib up from Shelton's little boy for this one. They said, "Don't take it down. We're coming to see you with the baby." So I expect the baby's coming to
see me more than I'm going to see the baby.

**Hartsook:** That's at Hilton Head?

**Mrs. West:** Yes. That'll be different.

**Hartsook:** I don't have any more questions, but I do like to offer a chance if there's anything you'd like to get on the record that I haven't thought to ask.

**Mrs. West:** No. I had no idea what you wanted. I guess John's told you all our background and history with the family.

**Hartsook:** He told some good campaigning stories. [West laughing]

**Mrs. West:** We've all got some good ones.

**Hartsook:** He and I first met, and this was long before we had a commitment from him for his papers or really before I knew a lot about him. While we were talking, he talked a little bit about the threats that the Klan had made and teared up while he was talking.

**Mrs. West:** It was a tough time. They threatened us pretty good. That's when I fell in love with Pete Strom. Pete was head of SLED, and I never will forget they threatened our children. [The Klansmen] said they were going to kill our children. Pete came over to the house. He had a blue seersucker suit on, and he had his pistol on his hip. He pulled his coat back, and he patted his pistol and he said, "Now Lois, don't you worry. I'll take care of your children." And that's when I fell in love with Pete Strom.

**Hartsook:** He's certainly a fascinating person. I think he deserves a lot of credit for the peaceful integration of higher...

**Mrs. West:** Oh, no doubt about it.
Hartsook: . . . education. It's too bad that there will probably never be a biography of him because there are probably just not records available.

Mrs. West: Pete was marvelous, and he did such a good job in law enforcement. I got to know him more when John was governor because when visiting dignitaries would come, they be responsible for them. I would see them in action all the time then, and so I knew what they were doing, and they did a superb job. Pete was an outstanding law enforcement man.

Hartsook: Did it calm your fears about the children's safety?

Mrs. West: Yes. This was back when the kids were little. He said, "I'll take care of your children." He was a cute, nice man. We used to have a dinner party at the mansion for all the SLED people during Christmas, and they gave John a gift. The first year that was lovely. They gave him a clock or something. The next year they had more agents, and it took me two nights to entertain them, so Pete gave me the little gift. I saw him looking at it. I said, "Pete, would you like me to give it back to you and let you rewrap it and give it to me again?" So from then on out, I'd get the gift one night, and he'd give it to me again the next. Then eventually it ended up four nights. So I got the gift four times. [laughter] He was nice. He said I ruined all his undercover agents because they all shaved their beards and dressed up, and said they weren't worth a hoot for at least three weeks until they could get their beards back on.

Hartsook: Was that period of threats the worst period of public service--your worst memory?

Mrs. West: It wasn't a pleasant time, but I think they didn't really scare me that much because when we were campaigning they'd all come to the campaign meetings and they'd all wear plaid shirts, so they could identify each other. Of course, it didn't take me long to figure that out, because I knew one or two of them, so I'd go give them John's card just to devil them. Of course, they wouldn't like it at all. Somebody got to John and said, "John, you'd better stop Lois. She doesn't know what she's doing." John said, "The heck you say. She knows exactly what she's doing. She's doing it on purpose." [laughter] But that's not my kind of people.

Hartsook: I heard somebody say that if anyone had hurt the governor, that you would have
probably killed them. [West laughing] I think they were [being] very literal.

Mrs. West: What happened is they threatened John's life. So I sent them a message back. What happened is the Klan, if they did something, there were enough Klan members on the grand jury [that] nobody ever got indicted. The Grand Dragon lived down near me, down there in the country. So I sent him a message that if anything happened to John, he didn't have to worry about the grand jury, because I'd come kill him right then. I had a list of them. I said, "Now you just remember, whether you do it or anybody else does it, I'm going to get four of you before daylight. I don't care about the jury, but you just rest assured if anything happens to that fellow, I'm going to get you." Boy, they were careful about us after that [laughter] because they knew I meant it, and I did. I would have killed him, because they'd have deserved it if they had done that. That was a bad time really, and I think that's better now, hopefully. They tried to run us off the road one night, and they did things like that. It was not a nice time. But I guess in the long run there are more good people than bad people.

Hartsook: And so many people that want to do right.

Mrs. West: Yes, and this is a good state. It's a nice place to live. Of all the places we've been, this is the best. I'm content because I'm not real hard to please. Wherever I am, I'm happy.

Hartsook: Why is that?

Mrs. West: That's just my nature, I guess. John and I--wherever you put us down and whatever we have to do, we can be happy and enjoy it.

Hartsook: Some people feel the World War II generation has a special regard for public service, we saw that in Bob Dole's presidential campaign, seeking one last opportunity to serve. It does seem like that generation turned out people with a mind to service and a willingness to dedicate themselves to service. Do you think there is a generational aspect to that?

Mrs. West: I think that particular group had no future because the war was there, and they
didn't know whether they'd come home or not, and all of them went. It wasn't a question of who was going; it's 'here we go boys.' Some of them didn't come back, and some of them didn't even get shot at. But at the same time, there was always a possibility that they would, and I think it tempered their lives in some ways. It was different. I know it changed our group because we went other places to live, whereas if we'd been like my brothers and those who came earlier, they would grow up in a small town, they'd go away to school, they'd come back, and they'd stay there. It was just right there, and you didn't go live in New York City or Chicago or Des Moines or someplace like that, and as it was we got jerked up and sent every which way. And then people from those places came to South Carolina. So it was a good mix for everybody, I think. I do think the war had a lot to do with molding the character of the men that were there, that were serving.

**Hartsook:** It's been great. I appreciate it very much.

[Interview ends]