

## LADY BIRD JOHNSON

Lady Bird Johnson, Texas' first First Lady, was born on December 12, 1912 in the tiny town of Karnack, near Caddo Lake. Her mother named her Claudia Alta Taylor, but one of the family's maids observed that she was "cute as a Lady Bird," and the name stuck. As she grew up she said she hated the nickname and her nose as well, but learned to live with both.

Her father T.J. Taylor was a merchant, farmer and "Dealer in Everything" according to the sign on his general store in Karnack. He brought his young wife, Minnie Patillo, from Alabama, and they lived over the store where both Lady Bird's older brothers were born. Minnie went home for a visit and told her husband she wasn't coming back until she had a proper house. Taylor took her seriously and purchased a plantation home built in 1842 called "The Brick House." It was there Lady Bird was born, and there where her mother died five years later. She was a lonely child, she said, who loved books, the trees and wild flowers of the piney woods of East Texas, and Caddo Lake, where she told her children and others she often swam with alligators lurking nearby.

While Mrs. Johnson's first two years in high school were spent in Jefferson, she enrolled at Marshall High School, and graduated in 1928, third in her class. As a child and a young woman, she was shy and not as confident as she would like to be, so she opted to spend the next years at St. Mary's in Dallas, an exclusive girl's school operated by the Episcopal Church. Then it was on to the University of Texas, where she earned a BA in Liberal Arts in 1933, followed a Bachelors in Journalism in 1934.

On a sightseeing trip to Washington, D.C. she met Lyndon Johnson. He proposed to her over breakfast the next day, but she made him wait five months before accepting his proposal. They were married Nov. 17, 1934.

By 1938 her husband was a congressman from Texas, and by 1942, using \$17,500 of her inheritance from her mother, she purchased KTBC, a struggling radio station in Austin. Innate business sense - some accumulated from her father - enabled her to turn the station around financially; after World War II it included the new medium of television.

Meanwhile, supporting husband Lyndon in politics, she said she left shyness behind and became a veteran campaigner. Johnson made a successful try for the U.S. Senate in 1942. Before long, the Texan was Majority Leader of the Senate, the most powerful post in the U.S. Congress. In 1960 Johnson left the Senate to accept John F. Kennedy's offer to run as Vice President with Kennedy in 1960.

Following Kennedy's assassination on Nov. 22, 1960 in Dallas, Lady Bird found herself mistress of the White House, and her husband's most listened-to advisor. It was a tumultuous time that saw her husband push through Congress a prodigious legislative package, including the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 and 1965, Legislation creating the War on Poverty, Medicare, Medicaid, the National Endowment for the Arts, The National Endowment for the Humanities. Lady Bird supported all those efforts, and became the honorary chairman of Project Headstart, one of the War on Poverty's most important programs. But one bill was especially important to her, and the president made it clear to all that the Highway Beautification Bill was "Bird's." He pushed it as hard as he had the rest of his legislative package

Following Johnson's death in 1972, his widow organized the effort to build an endowment for LBJ's Presidential Library on the campus of the University of Texas in Austin. She also became part of the management team for the library and the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

But Mrs. Johnson's great love was conservation. Her father had given much of the land on which Caddo Lake State Park was built. During her days as First Lady she promoted the growth and protection of the country's national parks, and the planting of wildflowers on the nation's highways.

She established the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, and it moved to permanent headquarters in 1996. Two years later, its name was changed to "The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Research Center."

Among Lady Bird Johnson's many awards was the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. She is also one of the few living Texans with an official historical marker. It is located in Karnack, near the Karnack Post Office, a building constructed with bricks salvaged when her father's combination general store and gasoline station was razed.

Mrs. Johnson lives on the family ranch in Johnson City, but makes periodic visits to Marshall. A red satin dress she wore on the occasion of a visit by the Japanese Ambassador is part of the exhibits in the Harrison County Historical Museum.