

Traphes L. Bryant, Oral History Interview – 5/13/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Bryant was a White House electrician in the General Services Administration from 1948 to 1972, and unofficial Kennedy family dog wrangler from 1961 to 1963. In this interview, Bryant discusses all of the dogs that lived at the White House during the Kennedy administration, as well his interactions with the Kennedy family and their interactions with the dogs, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Traphes L. Bryant

May 13, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: We are now interviewing Traphes Bryant who is a White House electrician. Mr. Bryant, how many years have you been at the White House?

BRYANT: Approximately thirteen years.

TURNURE: So that would cover three administrations?

BRYANT: Yes, and this would be the fourth, counting President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson].

TURNURE: Yes, I see. And your job primarily is to work in the evening, I understand.

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am.

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TURNURE: Setting up lights or...

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am, I am the only electrician on duty from 3:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.s. I'm on emergency call in case they have elevator trouble or lights out in the building or just more or less emergency work. If I go from one location to another, I let the White House operator know where to reach me.

TURNURE: And can you, by any chance, remember the first time you met the President [John F. Kennedy]? Did that stick out in your mind for any particular reason?

BRYANT: Well, when I first met him, I actually carried a light in when the photographers took a picture of him. In his office, yes, Ma'am. Of course when you first see the President, you always get a big thrill out of it. He is the most important man in the government.

TURNURE: Yes, did he shake your hand or say "hello"

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to you? Do you remember?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am, he had.

TURNURE: And then with Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy], do you perhaps remember when you first saw her?

BRYANT: Right after we got Pushinka, the Russian dog... [Tape recorder turned off; resumes]

TURNURE: Excuse the interruption. The first time was...

BRYANT: Well, right after we got the Russian dog, Pushinka, and she asked me would I mind taking the dog upstairs and let Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] get used to the dog. So I went to the second floor to the living quarters, in Caroline's playroom, and let her play with the dog and try to get used to the dog. John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] said, "Bryant, let's take Pushinka in Dad's room." I said, "John, you can. I can't." (as the President was in his private room). John took Pushinka to his room and brought Pushinka back later.

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TURNURE: Did they receive Pushinka fairly soon after they moved to the White House? Do you remember? So Pushinka came maybe in June after the inauguration?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am.

TURNURE: Did you find that Mrs. Kennedy was very interested in dogs? That she liked animals?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. She's very interested in animals. She liked dogs, horses, deer, etc. She knew how to handle them also. She was so kind to them. Caroline's pet parakeet was buried in the West Rose Garden with a marker.

TURNURE: Do you remember how many dogs the family had?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am, nine counting the Pushinka pups.

TURNURE: Or their names?

BRYANT: Clipper, Wolf, Charlie, Shannon and Pushinka. And Pushinka had four pups and their names were Blackie, Butterfly, White Tip and Streaker.

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TURNURE: Did the dogs all get along well together or at times were they...

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. They got along good together but once in awhile, Charlie would get a little bit jealous of Wolf, President Kennedy's dog.

TURNURE: And someone told me that the President really enjoyed the dogs and they rather distracted him from daily pressures of his life. Did you find that to be true?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. I took the dogs out three times in the evenings. If the President got only a few minutes of pleasure out of the dogs each week and got his mind off the world problems for a short time, it's worth my trouble. He would pat the dogs, like when he'd come in on the helicopter from a trip; he'd like to have the dogs out there and he would get off

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the helicopter and walk straight to the dogs and pat them and ask how the dogs were and then thank me before he went into the Oval Room of the White House on his way to the second floor to his quarters.

TURNURE: Do you ever remember what sort of questions he asked you about the dogs? When he came to see you, did he sort of mention the dogs?

BRYANT: Every time he would see me he would ask me questions about the

dogs' health, etc. Sometimes I saw him once a day. The President would fire questions to me, "How long would the pups keep their eyes closed? When they would be on solid food? How many days? When could they walk? When could they go out on the lawn to play? Would they have short or long hair? (Charlie had short hair. Pushinka had long hair.) When should they get their shots?" and so forth. I would try to guess what questions he would ask me later.

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I would call the veterinarian, Dr. McEwan, President Kennedy's private veterinarian, and load up on future answers. President Kennedy paid for the veterinarian services for the dogs. One month his bill for nine dogs cost him over \$100.00.

TURNURE: So in other words, he was extremely interested. Do you think he favored one dog to the other? Or did he like all the dogs?

BRYANT: He liked all the dogs. Of course, Charlie was their first dog and when they got Wolf, well, he liked Wolf very much. I don't know, but I believe Shannon was his favorite. I showed Wolf to the President at Squaw Island and the President showed Shannon to me at the same time.

TURNURE: And what about the children? Was little John scared of Wolf?

BRYANT: No, Ma'am. He would get out on the grass and roll on the grass, and wrestle, and play with

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him and have a big time.

TURNURE: And Caroline liked them too?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. She did too. She'd get out there and play; throw a ball out there and they'd chase it. Caroline once told me, "Bryant, don't feed Pushinka peanuts. The vet said it wasn't good for Pushinka." I quit the peanut feeding.

TURNURE: And someone tells me that the President took Pushinka's puppies up to the Cape once. Was that planned or was that a surprise to the children?

BRYANT: That was a surprise to the children.

TURNURE: And they all went up in the plane with the President?

BRYANT: I took Pushinka and her four pups to Hyannis Port (Squaw Island) to

the air field by plane and a station wagon to Squaw Island.

TURNURE: And when they arrived, were the children excited?

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BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. They were very excited. I took Pushinka and her four pups on the lawn outside of the living room facing the ocean and then the President called the children out for their surprise.

TURNURE: And they played with them up there?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am.

TURNURE: How long did you stay that time? How long did you plan to stay at the Cape?

BRYANT: I stayed up there almost a month. The President asked me to go up for the weekend. Mrs. Kennedy asked me to stay longer. She said she would appreciate it. I stayed.

TURNURE: That was the time when Mrs. Kennedy lost the baby, so I'm sure it was nice for the children to have their puppies there.

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. I stayed on the rest of the month. And Mrs. Kennedy told me before she went to the hospital that while they were at the Cape, that would be the only time

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that the children would be able to enjoy the pups because when they came back to the White House, so many social things were going on that they wouldn't actually have time to.... The four pups were given away before they returned to the White House. Pushinka missed them.

TURNURE: Did they play with them often during the day and when the President was there on weekends, did he come to see the puppies or ask to have them brought up?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. The President would come in or send word back: "Bryant, bring Wolf or Shannon or one of the pups up there and let me see him." He'd get out on the lawn and roll out on the lawn; the President, little John, the dogs, the pups, all of them run around. I had to keep my eyes open so I wouldn't lose all the pups. Four pups all going north, east, west and south.

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TURNURE: I guess so. Did the dogs know any tricks?

BRYANT: Well, Pushinka could climb a ladder up to Caroline's playhouse. She'd get up to the top of this little platform and then she would slide down the metal chute.

TURNURE: Who taught her that? How did she learn that?

BRYANT: I taught her that. President Kennedy asked me how I taught Pushinka to climb the ladder and slide down the chute. I told President Kennedy I moved a peanut up step by step. He laughed when I showed him the pictures.

TURNURE: It must have amused the children so much.

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am They had pictures made of it—moving pictures and still shots. The children saw the movies of the dogs at Squaw Island and it went to their film library.

TURNURE: Wasn't Charlie a retriever of sticks and things that were thrown? Did that get

[-11-]

to be a problem?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. He got so he'd always bring a stick up and drop it at your feet. If you were sitting down, he'd drop the stick on your lap. While I was up at Hyannis Port, I would throw a ball for Clipper and Charlie and let them chase it. President Kennedy came to the window of the dining room and told me he didn't want the dogs to retrieve. That's all we were doing; he'd bring the stick back and drop it in your lap. The President said it was kind of aggravating because that's all he wanted to do.

TURNURE: I can see why it would be a little bit aggravating. Did the President and Mrs. Kennedy ever take the dogs out for walks themselves when they were here in Washington, in the White House?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. They did very often. Sometimes I would have the dogs out on the lawn

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letting them play or exercise, and even at night, Mrs. Kennedy would start calling for Clipper and the President would clap his hands for Charlie, and would take the dogs for a walk. They would take them out of the White House grounds and walk around the iron fence, on the public street always on the South and come back in Pennsylvania Avenue at the North West gate.

TURNURE: And would someone go with them or did they go by themselves?

BRYANT: Well, they would start walking off by themselves but it wouldn't be long till the secret service car would be behind them and the secret service man following them, at a safe distance. Mostly the public didn't recognize them in the dark. Sometimes it would be raining or in the winter snowing.

TURNURE: But you'd wait till they came back to the White House?

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BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. I'd wait so I could take the dogs back in. This was their exercise period. I remember one night, it was raining quite a bit and they'd started out and walked the dogs, and I don't think the President even had a hat on. President Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy looked like two young college kids taking the dogs for a walk. They looked so happy.

TURNURE: He never did wear one.

BRYANT: No, he didn't.

TURNURE: I remember Clipper when he first came was quite a big, obstreperous puppy. Mrs. Kennedy was very interested in having him trained. Can you tell us something about that?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. She wanted to get Clipper trained and she had a Metropolitan police who put him through obedience school.

TURNURE: And she used to go with him?

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BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. She would take the children and go up there and watch the other police dogs training also. I think the children got a big kick out of that.

TURNURE: And was he changed when he came back?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. It seemed to help him quite a bit.

TURNURE: Was Mrs. Kennedy a considerate and thoughtful person to work for?

BRYANT: Yes, Ma'am. She was. She was wonderful, kind, considerate, and she appreciated the way I took care of the dogs. After she left the White house, why, she sent me an autographed picture and I have a copy of her writing and it says, "To Traphes Bryant, who did so much to make all our days at the White House so happy by taking such good care of Charlie and Pushinka and her pups, Wolf, Clipper, and Shannon." She signed it "Sincerely, Jacqueline Kennedy."

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On November 11, President Kennedy was lying down on the golf green playing with John, and having a wonderful time. The President asked me, "Where is Charlie?" I said, "Mr. President, Charlie is chasing squirrels on the East Side." I brought Charlie to the President.

The last time I saw President Kennedy was on Wednesday night before he went to Dallas. He came out of the Bouquet Room. He had been in the pool or gymnasium. He had his bathrobe on. I was bringing the dogs in from exercising. Wolf growled at Clipper. I held on to Wolf. The President said, "Let him go." When I let loose of Wolf's collar, he went for Clipper and I pulled him back. The President said, "Wolf is angry with Clipper." I explained that Clipper had been picking on Wolf but now Wolf was growing up fast and he would stop

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Clipper from picking on him. Wolf would later weigh about 180 pounds when full grown. Then the President told me that Charlie had snapped at John the other night in the President's office. President Kennedy thanked me and went in to the Mansion to the elevator and in to his room to change clothes before his evening meal. I had many fond memories but this was to be the last.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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