

**Exit Interview with Mary Burns, Operator, White House Switchboard**

**Interviewer: Marie Allen, Presidential Papers Staff**

**October 31, 1978, Room 492, Old Executive Office Building**

**Transcriber: Lyn B. Kirkland**

**Allen:** I was going to ask Mary who is retiring effective Saturday, November 4...?

**Burns:** [Whispers:] Is the mic on?

**Allen:** Yeah, It's on.

**Burns:** Saturday, November 4, 1978.

**Allen:** I was going to ask Mary some questions about her service with the White House switch board. To start off with, I am going to talk to her a little bit about the years before she came to the White House. First, you were telling me that you grew up in Washington. Have you lived all your life here?

**Burns:** Yes I have. I was born and raised here, went to school here. My first job after high school was with the C and T Telephone company. That is where I got my training as a switchboard operator.

**Allen:** Now, how did you come to work for the C and T? Did they come to the school and recruit you or how did you...?

**Burns:** No, I just called to see if they had any vacancies and they said yes, they would be looking for people and I went down for the interview, and of course, they train you.

**Allen:** Now, this was during the war...or at the beginning of World War II?

**Burns:** Just before, because I graduated from high school in June of '41...and therefore, December 7...it would be....?

**Allen:** I believe that after a year it seems you went to the Treasury Department and you worked there until 1949?

**Burns:** Yes, I went to the Treasury in December '42 and worked under Secretary Morgenthau and it was quite an experience.

**Allen:** Now, what was your job like? Were you running the switchboard?

**Burns:** Yes, the main Treasury switchboard. It was quite a large board and there were quite a few of us...about eighteen or nineteen of us. We had a nice group over there and we'd have our busy times and quiet times.

**Allen:** Were dial telephones in use by that time?

**Burns:** Not very much, no. No. They would call in and we would have what we would call a multiple, when they would call by name or extension. Quite different than it is today.

**Allen:** And did you...how many operators were there for all of the Treasury department at that time?

**Burns:** There might have been about 20 people then. Secretary Morgenthau had his...what he called his secretarial operators, someone who handles calls mostly during the day. The evening shift was a little different. I was an operator trainee when I first went there and it was really nice.

**Allen:** Now, this was during the war...a good many of these years. Do you remember any particular wartime type of calls that you had at the Treasury Department during that time?

**Burns:** Not particularly. I really don't.

**Allen:** Now, when...this was an unusual time during the war when there were a lot of women in the work force because the men, of course, were off in the armed services.

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Was this a new thing for you or was it a new...what was the situation like of the women suddenly being in the work force and many of them had never had jobs before. They had been at home.

**Burns:** Well of course we had, usually women were the only telephone operators. We did have a fellow who worked all night on the midnight to 8:00 shift, but we did have one man who worked during the day. That was kind of unusual, but usually in the Telephone Company and Treasury they were all women. With telephone operators you very seldom came across a man...it would be kind of unusual.

**Allen:** So the end of the war didn't make much of a change as far as the personnel there at the Treasury?

**Burns:** No, no, it really didn't but, of course, the Treasury is a pretty large place. I think during peace time the Coast Guard used to have its own switchboard but in wartime it's under Treasury, I believe.

**Allen:** Now on February 7, 1949, I believe, you came to the White House.

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**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Do you remember your first day?

**Burns:** Yes, I do. I remember I came to the northwest gate. I didn't even know how to get in, but a Mr. Frank Sanderson who worked in the personnel office was there to greet me and he escorted me in and I went down to the telephone room to Miss Louise Hackmeister, the chief operator. President Roosevelt brought her here when he first came into office and she interviewed me. The funny thing is Hacky, as she was known, she didn't believe in your being married or having children because she felt your place should be at home with the family and I think she was right because the job here has always been a very demanding job.

**Allen:** Was she a single lady?

**Burns:** Yes, she was, yes, she was. German, good German stock. And a very nice person, really stern, but a lovely, lovely person. So, we had our interview and I think I reported for work maybe about a week later. And I was thrilled to death...all together a new life.

**Allen:** Do you remember what the switchboard was like then? First, where was it located?

**Burns:** The White House switchboard?

**Allen:** Was it in the same room it's in now?

**Burns:** No, actually it was in the White House itself on the second floor. In fact, the President's office was downstairs and we were up above. I believe it was about a five division board and one division wasn't even connected up. A very small staff and not too many operators, maybe five or six operators. Of course, you had your 24 hour coverage here at the White House as we have now, always, and, uh, her assistant, Miss Earl, trained me...and it was just wonderful. There was an awful lot to learn, an awful lot to learn.

**Allen:** Why do you say it was wonderful?

**Burns:** It was such a thrill to think you're working in the same place where the President works...the President of the United States....quite an honor.

**Allen:** When you say the second floor of the White House you don't mean the living...the personnel quarters, do you?

**Burns:** No, it would be the West Wing offices in the middle of the center of the White House would be the living quarters. East Wing there by the Executive Dining Room and then the West Wing.

**Allen:** So you were on the second floor of the West Wing above the Oval Office on the first floor.

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** When you say there was a five position switchboard, what do you mean by that? I don't know much about telephone jargon. Do you mean there were five phones?

**Burns:** No, there were five positions where an operator would sit—it would be five operators. But the fifth one, if I am correct, and I think I am, would be disconnected. Therefore you would just have four and you'd hardly have more than maybe four people on the board and maybe three.

**Allen:** Do you remember how many phones...individual lines there were in the White House?

**Burns:** Well, when I came to the White House it was mostly all manual. You must remember, a very small force. They would just pick up the phone and get the operator. Nobody had dials. Call in an office—give me the mail room. Give me so and so. But it was a lot to learn.

**Allen:** And was that switchboard just for the White House or did it also include the Old Executive Office Building?

**Burns:** White House only. White House only.

**Allen:** Did the EOB have a separate?

**Burns:** There's was entirely different. It was called the Executive Office switchboard. And they were different governing...there was no connection with the White House at all.

**Allen:** So, you dealt primarily with very high level calls because you worked directly in the White House and dealt only with White House calls?

**Burns:** That's right...the President, the Vice President, the cabinet members.

**Allen:** Do you remember the first time you got the President on the phone?

**Burns:** Yes, I do. I remember President Truman. He happened to be in one of his assistant's offices. I was new and I wasn't prepared to answer the President yet...afraid I might make a mistake. I believe he was in John Steelman's office and I remember the signal came up and I answered it and he said "Give me the Presidency" yeah "This is the Presidency, give me so and so" and my boss, who was a lovely person, strict German, she kind of got after me for answering him and said "What are you doing answering the President?" I said, "Well, he's in Dr. Steelman's office." So that was all right.

**Allen:** Did you handle the President's calls in a special way at that time or was...other than the...? Did you say "Mr. President" ...address him every time on the phone?

**Burns:** Oh, yes. If you answered the President you would say "yes, please." And he would ask you for so and so and say "Thank you, Mr. President."

**Allen:** And as long as he called from a phone where he was supposed to be, you knew automatically who it was.

**Burns:** That's right. You would know it was the President.

**Allen:** But you wouldn't know... There were a number of phones then in the White House by the time you came and during the Truman presidency.

**Burns:** Oh, yes.

**Allen:** There weren't only five or six or seven as there were early in the history of more.

**Burns:** Oh, no. There would be much more than that, of course ...this would be '49.

**Allen:** How has telephone service changed since 1949? I know for one thing you are over in this building.

**Burns:** Yes. The Old Executive Office Building. Well, it's a lot more mechanical. A lot of direct dialing. Most of the time when you would answer, at that time, you would just pick up the phone and get through and their name was above the light—President or Mrs. Truman--- Margaret.

**Allen:** And you would speak to each person that called.

**Burns:** That's right. Uh huh.

**Allen:** And did the changes occur....when did you move to the old EOB to start out? Do you remember approximately....in which Presidency?

**Burns:** I think umm ... I believe with President Johnson.

**Allen:** And was that the time at which you put together the White House and the Executive Office switchboard? [Burns whispers "What do you mean, 'together?'""] Aren't the White House and the EOB on the same switchboard now?

**Burns:** Oh, no. No, they're not. No, the EOB is 395-3000 which is the National Security Council, Council of Economic Advisors, Bureau of the Budget....or as known now, Office of Management and Budget. We are really a separate switchboard. Always have been. We work

closely now with those people, but people will call us and we'll tell them, "That's Management and Budget. Here's another number."

**Allen:** But you handle calls within the Old Executive Office Building on the 4 and 6 line...?

**Burns:** Oh, yes. Yes, we do. More so now in the last year or so than we had before.

**Allen:** Has that been a very recent change then?

**Burns:** Yes, that happened only when President Carter came in.

**Allen:** You used to then be in this building only handling White House calls?

**Burns:** That's right. The other board was always known as Executive Office...a different telephone number even.

**Allen:** Ahhhh! Where was that switchboard located? Was it in this building too or was it in another building?

**Burns:** The funny thing is when we moved over here, I suppose to have more room, but they didn't have time to build a switchboard, it would take months to do that and to do it properly. Up on the fourth floor here, in room 405, that was a large room and that was part of the Executive Office switchboard. We had to use it, so we had to have a wall put up...no connection with us. We needed the switchboard as part of the equipment.

**Allen:** So you were in room 405 at the time?

**Burns:** Yes, we were.

**Allen:** Now, when was that? Was that when you first came over?

**Burns:** When we first came over...until our new board downstairs was built...and that was about August, perhaps, 1966...the weekend after Lucy Johnson was married.

**Allen:** So [inaudible] it's only been since the Carter administration that you have been handling calls within the Executive Office Building as well as the White House?

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Now, where is the other switchboard now? Is there still a switchboard in room 405?

**Burns:** No, it's downstairs right across from us in the basement. It's what they call the console board. We don't have that. We couldn't use that type of board in our space. Two...[consoles?]

**Allen:** I can stop the recording anytime you want me to... Why was it that a couple of years ago, I think at the beginning of the Carter administration, your responsibilities were expanded to cover this building? Was it felt that...what were the reasons? Do you know?

**Burns:** Well, I really don't know the real reason but I think we worked very closely with Management and Budget, as it is now known, and National Security, and CEA, the Council on Economic Advisors.

**Allen:** And because you worked so closely with them, it was felt that you should handle some of their calls?

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Okay. The White House telephone operator has frequent voice communication with very high levels of every administration.

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** You've been here through one, two, three, four, five---seven presidents you say.

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Do you remember memorable calls from each one of these...with the Presidents or with their families?

**Burns:** Well, with President Truman....I don't remember too many but I do remember in particular Margaret Truman was on vacation and she was sailing to Europe and about the second night she was away, President Truman picked up the phone and asked me to get Margie for him. In about ten minutes I had Margaret on the phone and they talked and right afterwards I answered the President again and Mr. Truman said "No one has had such service. Thank you." I thought that was very nice...because he deserved the best.

**Allen:** What about President Eisenhower?

**Burns:** I really don't recall much with President Eisenhower. I do know when they celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I believe it was, they invited us, those who could be spared to go, to their Gettysburg farm to help celebrate it. The staff and some of us were included and it was very lovely and I remember I must have snapped some pictures up there and after I returned to the White House about a week later I had them developed, and, of course, the Presidents had top photographers to take their pictures. I had taken one or two I thought were very nice. I sent them over to the usher and he sent them up to President Eisenhower and he called me on the phone and thanked me for them. I thought that was very nice.

**Allen:** Ah. What about President Kennedy?

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**Burns:** Well, with President Kennedy, well, I remember little John-John. I don't think he was quite—maybe not over two years old. They were sitting in the family quarters. They had the phones on the coffee table, the end tables. And John-John picked up the phone one evening and said, "What is your name?" So I told him. And he was repeating again. And I could hear in the background President Kennedy...his voice. He was actually egging him on..."and her name is Mary Crow." He was awfully cute, the little one. And one time, I used to work a lot of night work, and President Kennedy got that he could recognize my voice, and one time, one of the Christmases, we were in line, greeting the President, and he said, "Which one is Mary Crow?" and one of the ladies said, "Here's Mary Crow, Mr. President." He said, "You're Caroline's friend." And I said, "Yes, Mr. President. I have her on the phone quite often." Another time I was working on Sunday, just myself, that long ago and she wanted to speak to Santa Claus. Well, the only person who was around, a man that was available, was the telephone man. So I said, Caroline's asking for the President. Could you get on the other phone and talk to her? So he did and pretended he was Santa Claus. And she was asking about the reindeer and said she left some cookies on the mantel for him and talked a couple of minutes and hung up. And then about five minutes later President Kennedy got on the phone and said "Operator that was very, very good. Who did you get for Caroline?" And I said, "Mr. President, I just had a telephone man here and he was glad to talk to her." He was very pleased.

**Allen:** Do you remember anything about the funeral, the Kennedy funeral or that period? I imagine your switchboard was swamped at that time.

**Burns:** President Kennedy's assassination. It was a horrible thing. Naturally we were terribly, terribly busy. And, uh, I had got off that day and when I heard at home naturally I headed right back for work. You couldn't even pick up your phone and get a dial tone. The lines were all jammed all over the city. One of our girls was out sick about a week. We even called her in. She came in and she couldn't even talk, but we needed everyone in place. There were thousands and thousands of calls. It was a tremendous job trying to get the foreign dignitaries here for the funeral from all over the country, but we all worked very, very hard.

**Allen:** Do you remember talking to Mrs. Kennedy during that time...concerning funeral arrangements?

**Burns:** No, I think I remember having her on the phone the next day asking for someone...one of the mayors or something. She was just crushed.

**Allen:** You could tell in her voice?

**Burns:** Oh, yes. A terrible thing.

**Allen:** With President Johnson, I understand President Johnson was a very demanding communicator.

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**Burns:** Well, I tell you, with President Johnson you knew how you stood with him. You knew what he wanted and sometimes he might seem a little gruff but he really didn't mean it. I remember one time he was in a meeting [unintelligible] and I had one of the top men ask me to speak to him, one of the cabinet members, and I told the cabinet member he was in a meeting and he said he had to reach him, so I rang it anyway. And he said, "Girl, I told you I didn't want any calls. Do I have to write you a memo?" And I said, "No, Mr. President." So he took the call. It was something important, I am sure.

**Allen:** Do you remember any other contacts with President Johnson?

**Burns:** We started traveling when President Johnson was in the office and we would go to the ranch every so often and one particular time was near the holidays. To be on the President's plane was quite a thrill and came about perhaps the twenty-third of December they invited the whole staff who could come to their residence just for a little get together for the holidays. We went over and different people had their picture taken with him in their ranch home. It was nothing really elaborate, but it was very nice....and he was like an old shoe, really.

**Allen:** When you traveled with the President what did you do? Did you operate mini-switchboards?

**Burns:** With President Johnson, just to the LBJ ranch and the military men were usually on that but he wanted some of the ladies to come along. You see, down there you have to have the radios. We did not know how to operate the radios. It was a tremendous ranch. Of course, very nice. Quite different. He would prefer the ladies during the day but then have the men on in the evening for the all night shift.

**Allen:** He preferred the sounds of your voices or he preferred your efficiency or do you know why he...?

**Burns:** I think he just liked the ladies' voices. Of course, the men did a very good job too.

**Allen:** And did you have a small...?

**Burns:** We had about a full position board down there. They took four lady operators. Two for the day shift and two for the evening....up to midnight....and then, after that the men. But it was quite a change, nice experience.

**Allen:** Did you see other big changes in the telephone system during the Johnson presidency?

**Burns:** No, we didn't. Mr. Johnson had a large staff, but no, not much of a change.

**Allen:** You moved over to this building at about that time. Was the President...was an increase in service the reason for that, you move or was it just a personal thing—getting better quarters?

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**Burns:** I think it was we needed a new switchboard really, a larger switchboard.

**Allen:** In order to expand your service.

**Burns:** That's right. So they built one here in this Old Executive Office Building in the basement.

**Allen:** And you were already doing 24 hour service, weren't you? The switchboard had always provided 24 hour service. Is that true?

**Burns:** That's right. That is right.

**Allen:** And so, how do you do that? Do you take turns with the night shifts or do you...?

**Burns:** Oh yes, we have...the ladies work it 'til midnight. We have several girls on during the day and we only have two or three girls that come in 4:00 to 12:00 and then they have two night men that cover midnight until 8:00 in the morning.

**Allen:** So you have always tended to use men in the very late hours?

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** Are these White House employees or are they WHCA or are they military?

**Burns:** The men that they have working the midnight to 8:00 shift came from WHCA. They were in the service and when they came out they volunteered at the White House switchboard and they are very good.

**Allen:** We have gotten as far as President Johnson. What about President Nixon?

**Burns:** I believe President Nixon was the first President to have acquired a very large staff and they didn't travel with him at first but then after he was in a while, I'm not too sure how long, maybe a year, maybe longer, he started traveling. Of course, he had his home down in Key Biscayne, Florida, and a home in San Clemente, so you had to have both places covered plus the main switchboard here, so it was quite an operation. We really didn't have enough people. But sometimes you wouldn't have much notice that he was going to go, so you had to plan on having some of the office cover Florida and the White House here and then in San Clemente.

**Allen:** Did you have permanent people then in Florida and California, or did you just take people there when the president was there?

**Burns:** We just took some of our operators here at the White House switchboard to the different places.

**Allen:** Did you do some of this traveling?

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**Burns:** No, I didn't travel. My former boss, Beverly Cole, she traveled with President Nixon to those places. I stayed here at the White House switchboard.

**Allen:** Do you remember calls that were significant of the Watergate era and the Nixon resignation?

**Burns:** Well, of course, that was a terrible tragedy. We were very, very busy, but we were the last to know what was going on. We heard it on the news. "Oh, that's why we are trying to reach so and so today" or "That's where we found him." Not really, of course. We knew nothing about the calls. They were just calls, certain ones, we just put the calls through. But I do remember, it might have been the night before, I know I worked all day and was so terribly busy and I thought I would stay around that night to midnight but I think the telephone man told me, from perhaps the 24 hour coverage of incoming calls, and this is unbelievable, when Mr. President resigned—a 102,000 calls.

**Allen:** In that single 24 hour period.

**Burns:** I don't believe hardly any of those could get in to the switchboard, but whatever equipment they had in the telephone company, they even knew how many did not get through. It was terrible. People would call us when they did get through and say they had been trying to get through for 3 hours and I would say I am terribly sorry but we are terribly busy here. It couldn't be helped.

**Allen:** Did President Nixon have a direct manual phone or did he direct dial? Do you remember?

**Burns:** All the Presidents have his own light. It is a red light that says president on it. In the Oval Office where there'd be the quarters—it would say red room, or....

**Allen:** So he would just pick up the phone and ask you for someone? Were you surprised to learn that your voice probably appears on tape recordings from the telephone tape recording system?

**Burns:** I really didn't know that it had appeared. Perhaps so.

**Allen:** There were several listening devices connected to several of the telephones, so if the President had picked up and asked one of you for a line, of course, your response would have been recorded along with the conversation.

**Burns:** That's right, we would have no way of knowing that... whoever the President asked for, cabinet person, or the vice president, whoever it might be, staff member... we would just get the call as quickly as possible and connect him.

**Allen:** Do you remember any particular calls speaking to President Nixon during this time period when you remembered the incident?

**Burns:** Not really, you might not know what they were calling about and, of course, you wouldn't question them. [Allen laughs.]

**Allen:** Presidents Ford and Carter were the last two that you served under. Do you recall....of course, President Ford was only here a short time?

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** What about President Carter?

**Burns:** President Carter and his staff were very easy to work with. They seemed like just nice plain folks.

**Allen:** Have you had problems with his accent or his soft voice?

**Burns:** Yes, I have a little difficulty hearing him because he speaks so soft, but I'm inclined to speak just a little bit too loud. But he's very nice. He told me, if you don't understand you ask me again. He was very nice about it.

**Allen:** Of all these presidents you have worked for, who was the most demanding?

**Burns:** I would say President Johnson.

**Allen:** Who was the most polite?

**Burns:** [Pauses] Well, I believe they all were polite. President Truman, I believe, was about the easiest going one. He didn't want to put anyone out....very considerate of everyone.

**Allen:** You never saw any incidents of his renowned temper then?

**Burns:** No, never did.

**Allen:** Who was perhaps the one who gave you the most difficult requests...more phone calls in the middle of the night to difficult people or give you the hardest...?

**Burns:** I think President Johnson and I say that for this reason, he liked to telephone. He was very good about taking his calls. President Nixon didn't take....he took his calls but not too many.

**Allen:** So, President Johnson perhaps talked on the telephone more than any other President?

**Burns:** Yes, he did.

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**Allen:** That's interesting.

**Burns:** Yes, it is.

**Allen:** Who talked on the phone least of the presidents you have worked with?

**Burns:** Well, that is kind of difficult to say. I would think maybe President Nixon.

**Allen:** Tended to refer more of his calls? Do you have an arrangement as to who you refer ...suppose you get an incoming call for the President. What do you do with that call? Do you determine who's calling?

**Burns:** Yes. We usually say...ask them who's calling the President and if it's a regular citizen's call, well, of course, the President couldn't even take them. He gets hundreds and hundreds every day. And they say, well, I just want to talk to him a minute. That's a minute from one person. So, we have an office where we refer the calls and they are glad to take messages anyone wants to leave for the President, or the first family. But if it were to be an official person, a senator, congressman, cabinet member, we would check with the President's secretary to see whether or not he is available. And they'd tell us whether or not the President can take it.

**Allen:** So, you never put a call directly through to the President himself?

**Burns:** No, we don't. If the president gives you a list of calls, whoever he might be asking for, one at a time or several, then you go ahead and try to greet them as quickly as possible...and then give them directly back to him.

**Allen:** You don't have to go through the secretary necessarily if he has asked, if he has initiated the call?

**Burns:** That is right.

**Allen:** But if you are placing someone through to him you check with the secretary or with the presidential message board that would keep messages for the President.

**Burns:** No, we wouldn't have to check with them at all. Sometimes the President has asked for the calls. Maybe there would be a delay on them. Couldn't help it, but we wanted to get whoever we can and he'll pick up the phone and say I can't take anymore. He has appointments. We abide by what he tells us to do.

**Allen:** But if you get just a citizen calling in to speak to the President, you said that you refer them to an office that took messages?

**Burns:** Oh, yes, we tell them we are sorry. That the president isn't available ...that he is in a conference. And they call the office, the comment office, people want to leave a comment...and

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they get deluged with calls mostly every day. In fact, the young lady there in charge of it to today asked me if I had seen last night's *Star* and I said, "No, I hadn't"...Action Column. If you want to call the President to get a birthday greeting for anyone, call the White House. And she was so busy today, and so were we, as a result of that being in the paper.

**Allen:** Have your instructions always been the same in regard to what you do if someone called and asked for the President? Have you treated them the same through all presidencies or did you have some presidents give you very different instructions?

**Burns:** Well, I remember my former boss and dear friend who worked with President Roosevelt and you didn't get hardly any calls. The public only, they wouldn't think to call the White House. Of course, you had official business. And that has sort of been the same from Mr. Johnson on down. We're sorry he wasn't available, however, lots of times maybe he might like to talk. It might be a legitimate call, as far as a good reason to be calling, a reasonable complaint, but the President is so busy he couldn't really take them and the public doesn't realize that.

**Allen:** Have you noticed a big increase in the calls directed to the President from Johnson on or from...?

**Burns:** Well, from Johnson, but the biggest surge was with President Nixon.

**Allen:** You saw a big increase in calls?

**Burns:** A big increase in calls, because after he would have a speech, quite often during the evening when there would be a night press conference or whatever it might be, people would call up and complain that it knocked their television program off the air. Oh, they'd be furious. Get him on the telephone. No matter how important, get him off the television. So then, we started with President Nixon, a large staff, I would say. And quite often, after these speeches of President Nixon, we might have senators and congressmen calling. Therefore, you try to refer them. [Mr. Stedbull?] would have a certain way to take these calls and would want to hear the reactions to the President's speech. That would be legitimate.

**Allen:** So he gave you special instructions as far as...

**Burns:** That's right.

**Burns:** What to do? If you get calls from senators tonight, congressmen, governors then we'll handle them. That lasts about an hour, then we'd say, "How about these other calls after an hour?" "The White House operator can handle them." [Allen laughs.]

**Allen:** Have you noticed then beginning with President Nixon, an increase with every president...with President Ford and then with President Carter? Has it gotten more and more?

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**Burns:** Not too much with President Ford, although people loved him very much. But I'll tell you what happened since President Carter has been in office. I think shortly after he was in office, he came in in January 20, 1977, I believe they had one Saturday in March that the public could get him on the phone. They didn't mean they could call the White House, because we were swamped. They had a special set up. We had nothing to do with it. Just so many got through. I don't know how many—whether it was ten or twenty, but people thought that they could call here and get through to him. They would say, well, "Get me Walter Cronkite." I would say, "No, Walter Cronkite is not handling it." But ever since then, to this day, they'll call and say, "I had a special number I could call him on...toll free." And I will say, "Oh no. If you call, you have to pay for the call." I would say, "He's far too busy. He couldn't even talk to you." "Well, I had something very important to say."

**Allen:** Now, you were not involved in the telephone call-in that President Carter did at all, then...these were separate operators?

**Burns:** Not at all. Not at all.

**Allen:** But you got a number of calls because people got the White House number?

**Burns:** We were flooded with calls.

**Allen:** And ever since then you have noticed an increase in your phone calls?

**Burns:** Yes.

[Allen and Burns take a break and acknowledge it on the tape.]

**Allen:** We have talked about most of the presidents you have worked for and we have talked about the paper work that you kept, such as the logs of telephone calls coming and going. Have you always kept telephone logs dating back to President Truman or did this practice start at a certain time?

**Burns:** Well, I am sure we have had them since President Truman and probably even to President Roosevelt.

**Allen:** Did you keep a log just for the President's calls or did you expand this for the first family or staff members?

**Burns:** Mainly for the President and Mrs., and the social secretary in some administrations.

**Allen:** But not for high level staff members in the West Wing...for instance, high level staff members?

**Burns:** No, we didn't keep any for them.

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**Allen:** Do you...you say that you remember a great volume of calls during the Eisenhower presidency with the social secretary there, didn't you?

**Burns:** Yes, Mary Jean McCaffrey was the social secretary in the Eisenhower administration and she got many, many calls regarding social functions and we kept a log on her calls.

**Allen:** What do you put on a telephone log?

**Burns:** Well, we put it under the proper one—whether it be for the President or Mrs. Any calls coming in, if they can take them or not, the two of them, and if not you would take a “leave word” on it.

**Allen:** Take a what on it?

**Burns:** A “leave word” on it...a “leave word that they called.” And if it were late at night and you knew it was someone who they'd probably want to know had called them, you would tell her about it the next day. Tell Mrs. Carter, or whoever it might be, that so and so called them last night...a regular secretary.

**Allen:** And when the President or the First Lady does take the call, do you record the amount of time on the conversation? Do you record disconnect time?

**Burns:** We just put down that they talked and the time they talked.

**Allen:** And do you send copies of that log, you were telling me, to the appointments secretary, don't you, or to Nell Yates?

**Burns:** We send the original over to one of the President's secretaries and we keep our own in case we have to refer to it again. The President may ask if he talked on a call or to go on and continue with his calls so we have to make sure we have it our finger tips to know what's what.

**Allen:** Have you ever had any changes made in that log by a president or by an administration or has it been more or less the same since you started keeping it?

**Burns:** I think after President Nixon went out of office we stopped keeping the calls for a while. I don't believe we kept copies of it. I'm not too sure during the Ford Administration, but with the Carter Administration we do keep a copy of it.

**Allen:** What do you do if you receive a telephone threat to the President's life? Do you have a procedure for that?

**Burns:** Yes, we do. If we have someone threatening a president's life we try to hook up directly as fast as we can to the Protective Intelligence Division, called PID. We push a lever and they get

it on a recording. You have to do it as quickly as possible because they may say it very fast. You may not get down exactly what they said for half the conversation.

**Allen:** Does that happen frequently?

**Burns:** Not too often.

**Allen:** Do you have any other standing instructions for different types of calls?

**Burns:** Well, you may have....not really. Maybe if someone has had duty for a certain time of night they might say, “[Unintelligible], no more calls” or they might say, “Don’t put a call through to me after a certain time.” “Hold them for a while.” But I must say, everyone in this administration is very nice to work for. They are very considerate.

**Allen:** Whitehouse telephone operators have a reputation for being able to find anybody, anywhere. Can you remember who was one of your most difficult people that you have tried to reach?

**Burns:** I tell you what I remember. I did this during the Johnson administration. We were trying to reach someone. I think they were down in the mountains of Virginia...fishing or something. This man is coming across the field. He hears a public telephone ring. He went in and answered it and said, “Oh no.” It was the White House operator.

**Allen:** [Laughs] Do you remember who that man was? Was it at Camp Hoover down in Virginia?

**Burns:** I believe it was, now, I want to make sure I have my facts correct on this. I think I saw a name today on his letter commending us for it. I think it was Jim Marsh. But I thought that was quite something.

**Allen:** Yes, yes that is quite a feat. You have had police track down the license plates of people you were looking for...I believe you’ve had policemen try to track down license plates of people you were looking for. Do you remember an incidence of that?

**Burns:** Yes, I do during the Eisenhower administration. Governor Adams, who was the top aide, a former Governor Adams, of New Hampshire, who lived up in his home state, his country home, and we had to get him. It was very important to reach him on this particular occasion ...and I remember his license plate, New Hampshire 22, a former Governor. And, uh, we got word to the police. Anyone we could leave word with. It was a country road. Man went out, flagged him down, and the governor shoots right by him.

**Allen:** Did they catch him?

**Burns:** They finally did reach him, yes.

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**Allen:** So you have a way to call local police departments and state highway patrol. Is that true...to track down people?

**Burns:** Yes, we do and I want to tell you another occasion, Marie, I'm not sure which administration it was. The policeman was out fishing and we called wherever they have boats to rent and they said, "No, he's out fishing. You can't get him now." Finally the man came in about an hour or two later. We had someone put a note on a tree. When he came in he saw that note on the tree that the White House operator wanted him. That was a little unusual.

**Allen:** Do you remember who that was?

**Burns:** No, I really can't recall. I'm trying to.

**Allen:** Do you have frequent calls to call in help from the outside to locate people, such as highway patrolmen?

**Burns:** Not too often as we did in the past, but if need be. Of course, you have no problem at all with the governors because the state police usually know where they are at all times. But we have done it. We've had to reach people when they were out of town, yet we want to if at all possible. In case they came back ahead of time, we had someone leave a note on the door to call us. And they've done so.

**Allen:** Is there anyone that, or do you remember occasions when you just couldn't find someone after looking and looking for them?

**Burns:** I suppose so. Right off hand I can't think of the particular incident.

**Allen:** That's a pretty good record.

**Burns:** Yes.

**Allen:** With all the thousands of calls that you've handled...if you can't recall someone, not being able to find someone in particular. That lives up to your reputation.

**Burns:** It's quite often we say, "Well, the White House operator always gets her man." [Allen laughs.]

**Allen:** That's right. Do you remember what the furthest distance is you've ever gone via telephone wire to find somebody? Did you ever find somebody in the Arctic, or Antarctic, or Alaska or Russia or do you remember any particular long distance connections?

**Burns:** I don't think so...I am trying to think. I think when President Kennedy was assassinated. Of course, this would be very unusual; they had to get someone...we got them aboard a plane. I don't think it was a presidential because that would be no difficulty to reach him. But one time, I

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remember years ago, Mr. Joe Short, who was the press secretary to Mr. Eisenhower; I remember I had him on the phone one night, about maybe, oh, maybe 7:00 and I called back later, about an hour, and he was dead. And he had had a heart attack and after he, after that happened, I believe Steve Early, who was an old-timer, was a press secretary even to President Roosevelt, took over for a while until somebody was replaced. Somebody replaced Mr. Short and we tried to get someone, I can't remember who it was, and we had an awful time getting them and he said, "Oh, the White House operator; they'll always get them for you. If they're dead, she'll dig them up."

**Allen:** [Laughs] Well, thank you very much for taking the time and we wish you much...many good times in your retirement.

**Burns:** Well, thank you. It has been my pleasure. I enjoyed it very much.

**Allen:** I understand you are traveling. Is that right?

**Burns:** That's right.

**Allen:** And you've got a nice home in [unintelligible] you are going to enjoy.

**Burns:** Yes, we have a lovely home there. I'm going to become domesticated.

**Allen:** Well, best of luck and we'll try not to call you on the telephone.

**Burns:** Thank you, Marie.