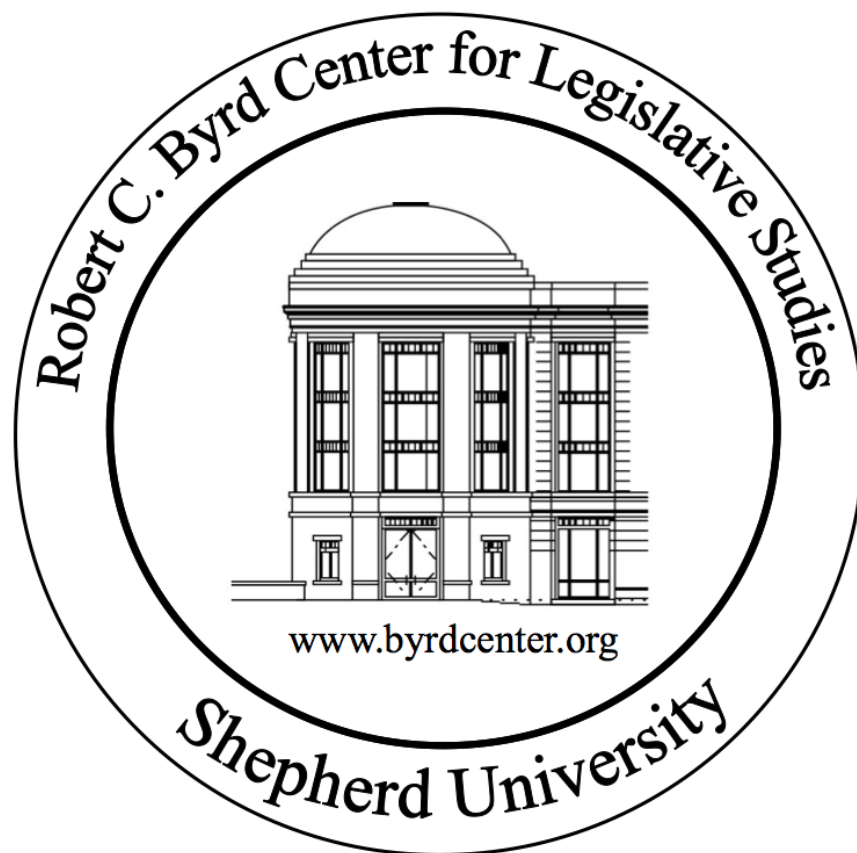


Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project

Oral History Interview

Virginia Tabb

October 10, 2012



Preface
By Jay Wyatt

Virginia Tabb is a longtime resident of Jefferson County, WV and friend of Senator Byrd. Her late-husband, Lyle, was a member of the Democratic Executive Committee and chairman of the Jefferson County Democratic Party for several years. In this oral history, Mrs. Tabb discusses her family's move to rural West Virginia from the Pittsburgh area as a youth, growing up on a working farm during the 1930s and 40s, and her family's forty-year friendship with the Senator and Erma Byrd. She situates the genesis of this friendship in 1964, when Senator Byrd helped settle an ongoing dispute between the Tabb's, the Department of Agriculture (DA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Mrs. Tabb remembers fondly the Byrd's many visits to the family farm at Avon Bend, where she prepared cooked poke, a regional West Virginia dish, for the Senator. She describes Senator Byrd as someone who fit in as "just one of the gang" and a "down-to earth" person, despite his lofty position in national politics.

Mrs. Tabb also briefly shares her perspective on Senator Byrd's political career. She claims that Senator Byrd's longstanding popularity within West Virginia and his numerous political achievements were rooted in the fact that he was "someone that could be trusted" and the dedication with which he approached his work. Mrs. Tabb notes that even while holding leadership positions in the Senate and being swamped with work on issues of national importance, Senator Byrd always made time to honor his commitments to the people of West Virginia.

About the interviewer: Alan Sturm is a retired educator, former teacher, principal, and assistant superintendent of Upshur County Schools. He also served for two terms on the Jefferson County Board of Education. He has a BA in history from West Virginia Wesleyan and an MA in Public School Administration from West Virginia University. He has made the study of West Virginia political history his lifelong hobby, and he has been working to collect interviews for the Robert C. Byrd Oral History Project since July 2012. He lives with his wife, Libby, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Interview #1
Wednesday, October 10, 2012

Sturm: Today is Wednesday, October 10, 2012. I'm Alan Sturm. I'm working with the Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies on the oral history segment of the Robert C. Byrd Legacy Project.

Today it's an honor to be speaking with Mrs. Virginia Tabb. We're in Mrs. Tabb's home on Leetown Pike in Jefferson County. Mrs. Tabb is a lifelong resident of Jefferson County and a member of one of the county's leading farm families. Her late husband, Lyle, was longtime chairman of the Jefferson County Democratic Party. The Tabb family had a longstanding relationship with Senator Byrd.

Mrs. Tabb, I want to thank you for taking the time to do this interview. As you know, this session is being recorded. Is that all right with you?

Tabb: That's fine.

Sturm: Mrs. Tabb, I'll ask you a few questions today, but for the most part, I want you to just feel free to talk about Senator Byrd as you and your family knew him. I'd like for you to share your stories, personal observations, and anything that you feel comfortable discussing with me.

Tabb: All right.

Sturm: Let's begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, and your family.

Tabb: All right. I came to Jefferson County in 1937 when my father had bought the farm down at what is now Avon Bend. My sister, my brother, and myself, mother and father came here, and I thoroughly enjoyed the transition from city life to country life.

Sturm: What city did you move from?

Tabb: We lived in Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, which is in Allegheny County below Pittsburgh.

Sturm: Yes. I'm familiar with that.

Tabb: We came here, and, of course, my brother Chuck and I were the two youngest ones. My sister had graduated from high school, and so we started school here also. I started in the ninth grade and Chuck started in the sixth grade. We, of course, went through the war years down there at that farm, and at that time I was about the only help that my dad had, so I was given work permits to work on the farm, and then I would go back to school for so many weeks,

pick up my work and then back at the farm. I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy farming. We didn't have any electricity, running water, anything like that. It was a real farm.

We had an apple orchard down there, and we also did crops, and we raised cattle and sheep. So I had lots of variety in what had to be done and what I did. When I went to school, I would tell the girls what I'd learned to do. I was so proud of it. They said, "Oh, don't learn to do that."

I said, "Why not?"

Says, "Because then you'll have to do it."

I said, "Well, what if I have to do it and I don't know how? So I'd rather have it." I was very fortunate that I felt that way, and that was my philosophy through life, because there certainly were times when I really utilized everything that I knew. I often teased my boys, of which I have five, and one girl, that the only thing they wouldn't let me drive was the combine, and they didn't think that I really needed to do that, but I always really wanted to. Now I'm to the point I really don't want to. [laughter]

Sturm: Did you ever get to do it?

Tabb: No. No, they never let me on the combine.

Sturm: Never would let you do it at all? Oh, gee.

Tabb: But other than that, I ran bulldozers and big trucks and everything that moved.

Sturm: Sounds like, by and large, you all were pretty self-sustaining. You grew everything that you needed, basically.

Tabb: Yes, we did. Yes. Of course, with my dad and the apple orchard, that was always all the fall work beside in the summer making hay and putting up the grain and things like that. So I've been through all that series, and I'm glad that at this point that I have seen so many different things happen. Right now I am not electronically inclined, and computers and I don't even get along very well, but we make do.

So then I was married in 1946 and moved to the Leetown area here because Lyle was in partnership with his father and uncle at that particular time. So over the years we moved around on different places here that we either farmed or owned, and in 1959 we moved back to the main house here at Vinemont.

Sturm: That's where we are now.

Tabb: Yes. At that time, we had the six children, and Lyle's dad was sick at that time and we took care of him, but he died that December after we came here, so then it was, of course, settle with the other two boys, his two brothers, as far as what we had to do for the farm and so

forth. So in time, and before Lyle died in 1994, we had paid for all the land that we had bought, which was 1,025 acres.

Sturm: Wow.

Tabb: So that really felt good.

Sturm: I'll bet it did.

Tabb: Of course, we bought it at a much cheaper time, but wages were cheaper then, too, so one went off the other.

When I was asked about this thing of Senator Byrd, my first real connection with Senator Byrd was in 1964 when we were taken off of the milk market because of a chemical that had gotten into the milk through a spray that had been recommended by the Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, to work on weevil.

Sturm: Now, which agency created the problem for you? Was it the Department of Agriculture?

Tabb: Well, the Department of Agriculture was the one that told us we were to use this spray to get rid of the weevil, so that we had alfalfa. Well, then FDA [Food and Drug Administration] was testing milk and so forth, and they found out that it was systemic, and when the cows ate the alfalfa, then they, in turn, had the chemical within them.

Sturm: Then it came out in the milk.

Tabb: Came out in the milk, yes. So we went to Washington [D.C.]. My husband I went to Washington, and we knocked on senator and House of Representative's doors, as many as would let us in and give us a few minutes to tell our story, because we were not the only ones in the United States that had used it. It had been used all over United States. And because Lyle was also on the board of Maryland-Virginia Milk Producers, he called those people to find out and to warn them what was coming. Well, there wasn't anything you could do right away if they were already contaminated. It was something that had to wear out of their system, and, of course, no more alfalfa and other foods.

So for five months, we were off the milk market, and that meant that there wasn't any calf, there wasn't any pig, there wasn't anything that was removed from this farm, because we were under quarantine.

Sturm: It couldn't even be sold for meat?

Tabb: Could not even be sold, no. So what do you do with milk from over—at that point we were milking almost three hundred cows. Of course, they had to be milked, so we went ahead and milked them, and we would take the—maybe I shouldn't even say this. [laughs] We took it out into the field and dumped it down groundhog holes to get rid of it, because there was

no other way, beside what we fed to the calves and what we fed to the pigs and so forth, of getting rid of it.

Sturm: I'll bet you had some big groundhogs on the farm. [laughs]

Tabb: Well, we got some groundhogs, because they would come up out of there, and we'd hit them in the head with the lid and knock them out. [laughter]

But it was a very trying time. We had two workers here that were helping us at the time. Of course, the children were all in school, and they helped out by working at the school to get free lunches. Then we would eat. Of course, thank goodness, I had a big vegetable garden. We had our own meat. I made over two hundred pounds of butter from the milk, which we put in the freezer. But, of course, there's always expenses that go on too.

Sturm: You said this went on for five months?

Tabb: This went on for five months. By the time that the five months had rolled down and we were not getting anywhere, and we had been at that time down to see Senator Byrd, as I said, and several of the other ones. They got in with the Food and Drug Administration and said something had to be done, that this was something that was dangerous, yes, but it was also all over the country, and the Department of Agriculture had been responsible for it. So somebody had to pay for it.

So they finally decided that, well, no, we weren't getting anyplace with it. So finally Lyle made up his mind. He said, "You know, they're not doing anything. Then I'm going to go to the news people and I'm going to tell my story." Up to that time, we were not allowed to publish it. Now, we could talk to the senators and so forth, but we were not allowed to publish anything.

So he informed them down in D.C. that we were going to take all the cattle, we were going to dig a large trench, we were going to shoot the cattle, put them in there, cover it up, and take it to the press, have the press come in when this was going on, and let them know that we were serious about this, that we couldn't exist doing what we had been doing for the five months.

But through that time, of course, Senator Byrd had called us and we had visited him several times, and, as I said, he got in with the Food and Drug and told his people to talk to also the Department of Agriculture. When they heard that we were going to expose them, then that did it, but that was a real struggle.

Sturm: I'll bet it was. Did he help with the Department of Agriculture in solving the problem here on the farm for you?

Tabb: Well, it was getting the Department of Agriculture to say, "Yes, it was our fault." I mean, it was their fault.

Sturm: That's what I mean.

Tabb: Yes, it was their fault. The Food and Drug was doing their job of going along and trying to find things that were going wrong.

So then all at once, why, the last two tests that came through were perfect. But Lyle said, "But I'm not through with you yet. You're going to have to do something to reimburse us for all this loss that we have had." But, of course, that was like the end of September when that happened, but we were put back on the milk market.

I must say that Senator Byrd kept with us. He would call at least once a week as to what was going on, and if he was happened to be in this area, he would come by and stop in, but I think that was the thing that really put our partnership or our friendship together, was that particular episode, and after that I felt like we were very close friends. We knew his wife, and he would bring her with him and she enjoyed coming up here into Jefferson County. We would have them come and eat with us at our regular farm table. In the spring, I always saw to it that Senator Byrd got poke. Either I would cook it and see that he got it, or if I couldn't get it to him raw, I would fix it and put it in the freezer.

Sturm: Why don't you explain a little bit what poke is.

Tabb: Well, poke is a weed that grows out in the field. It comes up in the spring, and when it's about six to eight inches high is when you cut it. It's tightly twisted leaves at that particular time, so it kind of reminds you a little bit of asparagus, a little bit heavier than that, but green. You had to run it through three boiling waters, and then it was ready to eat, with a little bit of vinegar, salt and pepper on it. It was almost like one of the remedies, one of the old-time remedies that that was supposed to help with your blood and so forth, get you ready for spring and summer.

Sturm: Now, is this something that he had acquired a taste for when he was growing up?

Tabb: When he was growing up, he knew exactly what poke was, and, of course, you don't get it in the city. So when I found out that he liked it, why, I saw that he got some each spring.

Sturm: You mentioned that he and his wife came together.

Tabb: Right.

Sturm: So frequently over the years, you don't ever hear anything about Mrs. Byrd being involved with any of the political things. Tell us a little bit about the relationship between the Senator and Mrs. Byrd as you saw them here in your house.

Tabb: Well, of course, we welcomed them in and were so glad to see her because we feel like that behind every good man's a good woman. She wasn't very talkative, but you could get her started on some particular subject, and she was interested in what was going on at the farm and what you did for hobbies, you know, that type of thing.

In later years, of course, she got very frail, but you could tell that she was a sturdy woman. And Senator Byrd just loved her. He just blossomed whenever he looked at her, and you could tell that there was a very good relationship between the two of them. But we never met any of the family until Senator Byrd died. Well, I think we did meet them when the wife died, when Erma died, because we had gone down to the funeral and so forth.

But he was always very—I don't know what word I want to use, but whenever he was in this area, he always saw to it that I got a special invitation. Lyle and I got special invitations to attend whatever was going on. It didn't make any difference whether it was Harpers Ferry, whether it was down here at the Leetown Hatchery. Remember out at the research place that they planted a tree for Mrs. Byrd and she was there. She helped plant. It was a type of plum that they planted out there.

But no matter where it was, if it was Shepherd College and you were in a crowd of several hundred, he'd pick you out. I really didn't look forward to that, but I knew that he wouldn't have done it unless he really wanted to.

Sturm: Your relationship then with him, you and your husband's relationship, began before your husband became involved in politics here in the county then?

Tabb: No. He was on the Democratic Executive Committee at the time.

Sturm: At the time back when you had the problem with the farm?

Tabb: Oh, yes.

Sturm: Okay. Because I wasn't sure what the time frame was there.

Tabb: Yes.

Sturm: Your relationship became more than political. It became a personal friendship.

Tabb: Oh, yes, a personal friendship.

Sturm: Because, you know, so many times people have political connections but they really don't have a chance to see what a person is like personally.

Tabb: Right.

Sturm: It's all political and at the meetings and at the county fair and that sort of thing. So it's not very often that somebody actually can say that he came to the house and ate. Did he ever spend all night with you?

Tabb: No, because, of course, where we were close enough that he would go back home.

He really loved his little dog, and I would send the dog a birthday card. I've been trying to think what in the world that dog's name was.

Sturm: Oh, I've read, but I don't remember.

Tabb: I can't come up with it. Billy, I think. I think his name was Billy. But it was a little white dog, a little fluffy dog, and he really loved Senator Byrd. We had seen the two of them together, too, you know. Of course, we always had dogs here and cats.

But he was just a down-to-earth person. It didn't make any difference what your background was, he could talk to you person to person.

Sturm: I was going to ask you what kind of a houseguest was he when he came for meals and that sort of thing?

Tabb: Well, you wouldn't have thought he was any different than any of our kids or the hands that were here.

Sturm: Just a regular person.

Tabb: Just a regular person. There was nothing put-on about him. I mean, he might have been dressed up a little bit more than we were, but other than that, no, he was just one of the gang.

Sturm: That's fascinating, because, as I said, not a lot of people had that opportunity to see him like that.

Tabb: Right.

Sturm: I know you were friends till the end, but were you still close when his wife became ill?

Tabb: Yes, we knew.

Sturm: What change did you see in him when she started to decline, when her health started to decline?

Tabb: Well, he would not stay away at night. He had to be back to his home every night. So he didn't travel as much. When she went with him, of course, he would. He would go all over the state and everything, but when she took ill, why, he never—it wouldn't make any difference how late the meeting was, he would go back home. He had to get back to his Erma.

Sturm: What happened as far as he was concerned after she died? Did you see a big change in him after her death?

Tabb: Well, yes, but, of course, everybody was getting older too.

Sturm: Well, that's true.

Tabb: He wasn't getting around as well, but he had some very good staff and he had drivers. I mean, he didn't—in the later years, he did not drive himself.

Sturm: Did he drive himself in the earlier years?

Tabb: Oh, in the earlier years, yes.

Sturm: Because I always remember that Jimmy Higgins, the little short fellow, was his driver when I really got to know him, and Jimmy was with him for years and years.

Tabb: Yes, yes.

Sturm: So he did drive himself. That's interesting. I don't think I ever saw him driving.

Let me ask you another question about his personal life. One tragedy that happened to him after he was a senator and became well known was the death of his grandson. Did you have any contact with him during that?

Tabb: Yes, we did. We did. He would not play his fiddle, and we worked on him for a number of years of getting back into that, that he shouldn't give that particular talent that he has and people enjoyed it. I have one of the records of him playing. But, no, that was very hard on him, and, as I said, that was the one thing that he did not do, he would not do, is play the fiddle.

Sturm: I hadn't heard that.

Jenny Tabb: Like it took the joy of music out of his life.

Tabb: Yes.

Sturm: Tell us who you are for the—

Jenny Tabb: I'm Jenny Tabb. I'm the fourth of six.

Sturm: The fourth of six.

Jenny Tabb: And, yes, I worked on the farm too.

Sturm: She's with us here today during the recording session, so I just wanted to make sure that we got you on the tape here.

Okay, so I lost my train of thought here.

Tabb: We were talking about the grandson dying.

Sturm: The grandson, yes. Did you all go to the funeral or anything?

Tabb: No, no, we did not get to that that time.

Sturm: When he came to visit you all, did he play his fiddle when he was here sometimes?

Tabb: No, no. I had heard him play, usually at the fair. I don't remember what year he gave me the record. I really don't. Of course, it's a 78 [rpm].

Sturm: A 78?

Tabb: Oh, yes. [laughs]

Sturm: I've got one of the big 33s of him, but I didn't know there was a 78.

Tabb: Well, now, it is big, so I assumed it was a 78. I don't know.

Sturm: I don't know, though. If it was earlier, it may have been a 78.

Tabb: Because the 33s were smaller.

Sturm: Those are the 45s, the little ones.

Tabb: I mean the 45s, yes.

Sturm: Well, he's a fascinating man, he really was. Over the years, how did your relationship with him change? It started out politically. You talked about the problems with the FDA. How did you all become personal friends?

Tabb: Well, of course, Lyle would talk to a fencepost if it would talk back to him, so they always had an awful lot of things to talk about, and I think that he felt very, very comfortable, because Lyle didn't push him on political things. It was if he would ask an opinion, Lyle would give him an opinion, but he did not say, "Well, you know, I want you to say this about this particular thing," or something like that. That was not Senator Byrd.

Sturm: So it really was a personal thing between them.

Tabb: It was a personal thing, yes.

Sturm: That's absolutely fascinating to know, because, as I said, Senator Byrd, so many politicians have political friends, but you never really find out about personal friends and personal relationships that they have, so and that's one reason I thought it was important to talk with you, because people kept telling me that there was much more than a political relationship here between your family and the senator.

Tabb: Oh, yes.

Sturm: We've talked about the FDA. I guess that's what I have on my note here, "saving the family farm." I guess that's where he helped you.

Tabb: I think that's right.

Sturm: Did you ever get any reimbursement for it?

Tabb: Oh, yes. That's an interesting little bit. Yes. Of course, then we had to come forth with how many pounds of milk we had dumped and any feeds or anything that people had let us have so that we could keep the cows alive and so forth. So we presented more or less a bill, and they worked it up.

So on the 31st of December, we got the check, and it was quite sizable, of course. So we were grateful that we could put it—I think we got it into the bank before the bank closed that day, so that it went on the year that we were off, which was '64.

Well, then, of course, '65 rolled around, we were trying to get things straightened up here and back on the milk market and all that, and the cows, of course, needed attention. Well, we all needed attention. But, anyhow, then it was time to file income tax. Well, of course, the first thing they did was to go over our thing and wanted to see where every bit of that money was spent and if they couldn't tax us. So that was another big job, that we had to prove that we had paid back bills and so forth with that money, that we hadn't squandered it or anything like that.

Jenny Tabb: We didn't go on vacation, I can tell you that. [laughter]

Tabb: No, no.

Sturm: Did Senator Byrd help you with that part of it too?

Tabb: Oh, yes, yes. I mean, any question or anything that we had, no matter what category, he was always there to give us as much help as possible.

Sturm: And you all visited him in his office? He came here? You called on the phone? It was just an open line of communication between you.

Tabb: Open line, yes.

Sturm: That's absolutely fascinating. Tell us a little bit about when he was running for office, how the relationship between your husband and the senator was – the political relationship.

Tabb: Oh, well, of course, anytime Lyle had a chance to talk about Senator Byrd, he did, because he just really felt like he had been our savior as far as when we were off the milk

market. I mean, not that we didn't know him a little bit before that, but not for the things that were the most important to us, and they were important to him, because he didn't feel like that the Department of Agriculture had been right in the first place to have put something like that out, let farmers use it, and then come back and penalize them.

We had several articles. One was the *Farm Quarterly*, which was out of Ohio, and the fellow from the *Farm Quarterly* came and interviewed us and put a story in the paper, or in the magazine, rather. It no longer exists now, but it was a good magazine and they did a wonderful story, telling our story. The fellow that was the editor of that actually came and stayed with us, and he had a photographer and so forth. They took pictures and all. So we have a real record of what went on.

I'm sure that along the way, but, of course, the Department of Agriculture doesn't want to say anything about it, that they probably had some other things that they were real quick on getting pulled until it was really proven. But the farmers, we were at the mercy of the Food and Drug. They would not listen to us about what was going on.

Sturm: What did they think this thing that was in the milk would do? What harm was the—

Tabb: Well, it just shouldn't have been there.

Sturm: It just shouldn't have been there.

Tabb: Yes. It just shouldn't have been there.

Sturm: They hadn't identified that it caused birth defects or anything like that?

Tabb: No.

Sturm: It was just something that they didn't want in the milk.

Tabb: Mmm-hmm.

Sturm: Okay. I wasn't sure whether it was something that had been identified as a health hazard or whether it was just an additive, because you know you hear so much today about things that are in the milk and the growth hormones that people feed their livestock and that sort of thing, and they don't realize, I don't think, what effect that may have on people.

Tabb: No. No.

Jenny Tabb: The name of it was Heptachlor.

Tabb: I couldn't think of it.

Jenny Tabb: Yes, Heptachlor. If you look it up, it can cause liver damage, or I think it was kidney, mainly, but what the problem was, was the rate of application. My dad had applied it to the alfalfa at the rate of application that was recommended by the USDA, and it was too high. It's not even on the market anymore; it hasn't been for years, the Heptachlor. But it was a pesticide. It killed the alfalfa weevil. Now they don't really have to spray the alfalfa because farming practices have changed. If they see any weevil, they go ahead and cut it and make haylage out of it, so it doesn't have to get as tall to actually make hay.

Sturm: So this must have been, then, like DDT and all the rest of the pesticides that were used at that time.

Jenny Tabb: About that time, DDT was starting to go out.

Sturm: Yes, about that time. Initially nobody thought anything bad about them except that they killed whatever it was they were designed to kill, and then they found out, I guess, that it did other things to the long-term effect on people.

Jenny Tabb: There was a long-term effect, and it did stay in the cattle's fat. So we basically had to starve the cows, and we lost quite a few cows because we had to get them thin to get the Heptachlor out of their system.

Sturm: To get rid of the fat.

Jenny Tabb: Get rid of the fat, because the Heptachlor was staying in the fat and, of course, milk is fat, so we had to basically starve the cows. If they would get sick, we couldn't afford the vet bills, even though our vet was wonderful. So we did lose some cattle just from disease, because they weren't getting the nutrition as they had previously.

Sturm: That's a terrible thing, and you were so dependent on that. That was your living.

Tabb: That was our living.

Jenny Tabb: That was our only income.

Sturm: So that was your income, yes. Of course, you had the orchards and that sort of thing.

Tabb: No, no, not here.

Sturm: No, you didn't have them at that time?

Tabb: No. See, that was my dad had the orchard.

Sturm: So this was totally a dairy farm at the time.

Tabb: That's right, and we raised our own feed.

Jenny Tabb: As a ten-year-old kid, I had a different perspective, but my perspective of Senator Byrd was he was somebody you could trust, and he really did care. He wasn't flippant or anything about—he wasn't doing it just for the political reason.

Sturm: I was going to ask you. You felt he genuinely cared.

Jenny Tabb: He generally cared. Even as a ten-year-old child.

Sturm: Was he credited in the news stories or anything with helping you out?

Tabb: We kind of left that up to him. If he wanted to tell his part of it, that was fine, but we didn't push that.

Jenny Tabb: He didn't exploit things like that. As long as I remember, and I even, as an adult, contacted his office about some things and they got resolved. If a state agency or someone else got a letter from Senator Byrd, they knew they'd better crank it up and get it settled, because they didn't want him and his staff to be on them about something. But he was honest. He was a really good person, and he really, really cared about the state of West Virginia. He loved the state of West Virginia.

Sturm: That was his life.

Jenny Tabb: That was his life. It wasn't to have his picture up there at the top of the heap. He cared about people. And as I said, as a ten-year-old child, that came through very, very clearly from the first time that I met him.

Sturm: And children have an intuition about things like that.

Jenny Tabb: Right, and you can't con children.

Sturm: Right. You're absolutely right, you can't. I have six grandchildren. [laughs]

Jenny Tabb: They know.

Sturm: They know. They absolutely do.

Let's talk about something else here that I've heard about, and I don't know anything about it firsthand, except you did tell me it happened. I understand that at one point Senator Byrd actually had a Lyle Tabb Day in the county.

Jenny Tabb: Well, he came to the memorial service.

Tabb: Yes. He came to Lyle's burial, I mean to the service that we had for him. In fact, he wanted it. He asked us to have this particular service because he wanted to come.

Sturm: I think that's what people have referred to. They called it a Lyle Tabb Day that was sort of—but I didn't realize it was at the time he had died.

Jenny Tabb: They had a dinner down at Cliffside, and even though Senator Byrd was not in good health at that point in time, he came.

Tabb: Well, Erma was there too.

Jenny Tabb: Erma was there too. He came and spoke.

Sturm: He really must have thought highly of your father and your husband.

You've touched on this just a little bit, but I want you to speculate a little bit now, because people who've observed Senator Byrd and his political career, there are two lines of thought about him, I think. There are those people who think that there were two or three different Senator Byrds over the course of his career, because he changed his view on some major political issues. Then there are other people who think that he remained the same man with the same basic core beliefs throughout his life, that he changed his attitude on some things. As times changed, he adjusted. What do you all think about him?

Tabb: I would agree with that statement very much so, yes. He saw what was going on, he remembered what had gone on, and he looked forward to what would happen in the future. There weren't too many of them that would do that that were in the position that he was. I know that when he was the—I can't even think what they called it. He was the top of the Senate.

Sturm: Majority Leader.

Tabb: Majority Leader, yes. He was a busy man, but he always had time for somebody from West Virginia.

Sturm: Did you ever have any occasion to talk to him about his membership in the [Ku Klux] Klan? Did that ever come up with you all?

Tabb: I don't know whether Lyle ever talked to him about that or not.

Sturm: Because that's one of the things that people talk about, you know, that he was at one point in the Klan. Then I've talked with Reverend Lyles here in Jefferson County, and he said the last several years that he was alive, his NAACP scorecard—you know they score people—was almost perfect. So, you know, here's a category where he changed his—

Tabb: I think there are people in this world that they have to have something against somebody, especially a politician, and that was the one thing they kept bringing up. He said, yes, he had done it, he owned up to it, but he said it certainly wasn't the right thing to do. And it really made Lyle and I mad when anybody would say it or even bring it up, you know, about him being in it, because that was in his past.

Sturm: It absolutely was, yes.

Tabb: He had gone beyond that.

Sturm: So you think he grew as a person.

Tabb: Oh, my, yes. Yes. I mean, up to the very last, there was nothing in the Constitution that he didn't know about. He could spout that off. As far as memory was concerned, he had a wonderful memory for—and he memorized a lot of the Constitution. Have you ever watched him when he was in session?

Sturm: Oh, it was fascinating to watch him. It was a lesson in history. [laughs]

Tabb: That's exactly right. Yes. And I know that he published several books. But, no, I would say that he learned from any mistakes that he had made and improved upon his life as time went on, and no one could "up" him on something, because he knew about everything that was going on. He made it his business that everybody knew what was truth and what wasn't.

Sturm: That sort of leads into the next question. We all know and have heard the stories about how poor he was when he was a child and as a young man he was a meat cutter and he had not professional kinds of jobs like so many members of the Senate do.

Tabb: Right.

Sturm: Limited education.

Tabb: Yes.

Sturm: But yet here's a man who became one of the most powerful politicians, political leaders in our country at the time. How do you think this happened, given the fact that he did have a limited background, didn't have the educational opportunities that so many of his colleagues had had? How do you think he came to this position of power?

Tabb: I would say determination more than anything.

Jenny Tabb: And hard work.

Tabb: Yes, because, see, he went and got his degree in law after he was down in D.C.

Sturm: I have a picture of him with President [John F.] Kennedy when he was awarded his law degree. I think that was 1960, maybe '63. [Senator Byrd received his law degree from American University in June, 1963.]

Tabb: I don't remember when it was, but I know that he did do that, and it showed. The thing that really came up to me was, and I think about it now that he's gone, what in the world would Senator Byrd think of what is going on in the Senate now with all this fighting between

one party and the other? That did not make a difference to him. He didn't care whether you were Republican or Democrat. He fought for you.

Sturm: Did he ever talk with you all about working with the Republicans in the Senate? Because, you know, he had a lot of close Republican friends. Ted Stevens of Alaska, John Warner of Virginia, they were very close. Did he talk about reaching across the aisle to solve problems?

Tabb: Oh, yes, and you could see that if you really watched him and what went on and how he voted and what he had to say about a certain thing that was going on. He knew that he had thought that through and that he was willing to, not just because he had Democrat on his name, he wanted to see what was best for the people, and not just West Virginia. Yes, he was very loyal to West Virginia, but he looked at it as a country. America was his.

Sturm: And he was one of the leaders.

Tabb: That's right. That's exactly right.

Sturm: How do you think he was elected to the Senate nine times? That's something that's never happened anywhere in the country before, and here he is, he was elected nine different times. That's a record.

Tabb: Where could we have found anybody as good?

Sturm: Okay. [laughter]

Tabb: I mean, West Virginia or not, I don't care. He was known over America. I know that when we traveled with the Maryland-Virginia Milk Producers, and, of course, we'd meet people from all over the United States, they would always ask, "Well, what's Byrd doing now?" if they hadn't heard, because they knew how powerful he was.

He certainly did work with the farmer and on the farm bills. That was a big thing, because there are very few that really know what a farmer goes through that are in the House or the Senate. That was the thing that we found when we went down there in '64 and knocked on doors and so forth, that they had no idea the pressure and the rules and regulations that were being put to the farmers.

It was like when they had that program about, well, they were going to buy out the milk companies so that it would make it scarcer and it would up the price. Somebody asked the question, "Well, then how are we going to get the milk back up when the population comes up?"

"Oh, well, just buy more cows."

"And where are you going to get them?" Oh, they hadn't thought about that.

Jenny Tabb: It takes years to build a herd back.

Sturm: Absolutely it would, and I'm sure it took you all, after the incident in '64, I'm sure it took you all several years to get back to—

Jenny Tabb: It probably took us seven, eight years to get the production back up, because you had to start with the breeding again, not only with the nutrition, but you had to start with the breeding and build back up to get the volume back up.

Sturm: Most people wouldn't realize that. They think you just go out and buy some more cattle.

Tabb: Yes.

Sturm: Let me ask you another question about your observations of the senator over the years. You knew him when he hadn't been there very long. I guess in '64 he had only been there six years, maybe, was running for a second term. Then you had a chance to see him at the peak of his power back in the seventies when he was Majority Leader and considered a candidate for President. Did you see personal changes in him in your relationship with him as he became more powerful?

Tabb: Not really. When he ran for President, his heart was not really in it. He did it because he was asked. But I wouldn't say, and I'm not saying, that he wouldn't be a wonderful President, but he felt like that on the grassroots end of it he could do more than he ever could do as President.

Sturm: But you didn't see, though, a change in his personality as he became more and more powerful?

Tabb: No. Oh, no.

Sturm: Because when he was Majority Leader, when he cracked his whip, everybody fell in line. [laughs]

Tabb: That's right. That's right, because they knew what he was capable of, which was a lot more than most of them were.

Sturm: There was a point in the seventies, I believe, when President [Richard M.] Nixon wanted to appoint him to the [U.S.] Supreme Court, and he refused that. Did he ever talk with you all about that?

Tabb: No. No.

Sturm: I wondered if you had any idea why he might have turned that down.

Tabb: I think the same reason. He knew he couldn't do as much for the people of America, and especially West Virginia, of being in that position. Where he was was exactly where he wanted to be.

Sturm: You have to admire a man who accomplishes what he set out to accomplish in his life.

Tabb: Yes.

Jenny Tabb: And he was content.

Sturm: I haven't used that word to describe him, but that was—

Tabb: He was content. Of my remembrance of him, he didn't do anything for a political reason. He helped people because that was the right thing to do, not to get another vote. That was just a consequence of him doing what was right.

Sturm: That's a very interesting perspective on the senator. Everybody who ever knew him has a favorite story. What's yours? Some of them are humorous, some of them are serious.

Tabb: Right offhand, I can't—all I can think is of all the help that he gave us when we were in dire need. We couldn't have had anybody that was, you know, more—not that he was so powerful but he knew the right thing to do. We always took his – if we thought differently on something than he did, he didn't mind you telling him what you thought, and he'd think about it and maybe it would change his idea and maybe it wouldn't. But everybody came out that they had had their say.

Sturm: This goes back to what we were talking about, about him changing his attitude and views on certain issues over the course of his life.

Tabb: Yes. Right.

Sturm: He wanted to continue to grow and understand things.

Tabb: And he had a good staff, there was no doubt about that, because it was very seldom that we didn't contact him for some reason, whether it was something that was going to be coming up in the Senate or maybe he had called Lyle and said, "How do you feel about this?" or something like that. We always got a letter, and, I mean, it was personally signed.

Jenny Tabb: Even after my dad passed, my oldest brother, Cam, would go to Washington from time to time depending on what the issues were, and Cam said that my mom was his secret bullet. [laughter]

Sturm: I can understand why.

Jenny Tabb: She would always, if it was in the spring, she would take him poke or she would take poke out of the freezer, and she made jellies and jams and homemade items, and she always had a box for him and his wife that they would take down to the senator, and he always appreciated it. So, I mean, he helped up to the end. It wasn't just after the episode with the milk. Even after my dad passed, he helped with farm issues again.

Sturm: Is there anything either one of you would like to add?

Tabb: I wish we still had him.

Sturm: I think lots of people do.

Jenny Tabb: I don't think you're going to get another one like him.

Sturm: I want to thank you both for taking time to talk with me this morning. As I told you, a complete transcript of this interview will be sent to you, may be six or eight weeks before you get it, and you'll have the opportunity to read through it, make any changes that you want to make, and then send it back to the Byrd Center. Then at that time, you'll be asked to sign what's called a Deed of Gift stating that they have your permission to make it part of the public record at the Byrd Center as part of the Oral History Program for Senator Byrd.

Tabb: Okay.

Sturm: Again, thank you all very much.

[End of interview]