David Murphy

A Texas Bluebonnet
Lady Bird Johnson

A Volume in the Presidential Wives Series

NBP

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PRESIDENTIAL WIVES

A TEXAS BLUEBONNET: LADY BIRD JOHNSON

DAVID MURPHY

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Dedicated in loving memory of my late grandfathers,
Marshall T. Presley and Elmer Murphy,
as well as President and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson

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David Murphy
Flatwoods, Kentucky
January 2009

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Chapter 1

THE BRICK HOUSE

CHILDHOOD

Lady Bird is certainly her mother's child. Minnie Taylor was well known around Karnack as an avid reader and a friend of the environment. Her friends remember her returning from seeing her future husband, Thomas Jeffers "TJ" Taylor with a bunch of wildflowers in her hand. Lady Bird was only five when her mother passed away and she said years later, "I wish I knew more about her." She did say, "My memory of her is being tall and moving around very fast and dressing a lot in white and yes, there is something on her head." Indeed, everyone in town noticed Minnie was always wearing a large hat and a veil. Mrs. Taylor suffered migraines and used the veil to keep out the sun light, which she said made it worse.

Lady Bird can even trace her social activism and political interest to her mother. She had a bird bath built in the front yard of the Brick House so she could feed and watch the birds throughout the year. Hunters were threatening the local quail population in 1910, so Minnie started a Save the Quail Society. Hunting was banned on thousands of acres of Taylor property but she allowed hunting at the end of the season to help control the quail population [1].

Minnie Taylor was an early advocate for women to have the right to vote and was active in local campaigns. One of her granddaughters, Susan Taylor, said, "My grandmother loved politics and wanted nothing more than for women to be able to vote. Here Aunt Lady Bird came along and campaigned in every state of the union and wound up living in the White House. She fulfilled my grandmother's wildest dreams." Mrs. Taylor was no doubt smiling

down on her daughter from heaven as she planted wildflowers across the nation and spoke out on the important issues of the day.

At the same time, her father was making a fortune from shrewd business deals. The sign on his store read, "Dealer in Everything." And that he was, he sold food, school supplies, thread, clothes, medicine, and farm tools. Most of the money was made by what was then known as advancing. He would lend land, farm equipment, and seeds to tenant farmers in the spring, then make a profit the following autumn when the cotton crop came in.

Taylor was also known for lending black families money, then taking their land as payment for the debt. One such family, the Haggertys, gave half of their one-hundred acre farm to Taylor to pay off some debts. However, Taylor took sixty acres and Haggerty said "When you deal to Boss Taylor, he takes a bit."

In 1914, Taylor bought the Haggerty family's original five thousand acre homestead. Records show that by 1918, he had made $43,387.50 from cotton and corn grown on seven hundred acres of the Haggerty land. The sell of hogs, horses, and left over cotton seeds also made Taylor a profit [2].

Mr. Taylor was a well know ladies man, and he and Minnie had separated for some time, but reconciled by 1910. He purchased his wife the Brick House as part of the reconciliation and Minnie loved the large dining room with a stone fire place. After two miscarriages, Minnie became in pregnant in March 1912 at the age of thirty-eight. A healthy baby girl was born in an upstairs bedroom in the early morning of December 22. The baby was named Claudia Alta Taylor, after Minnie's brother, Claud.

TJ was excited and wrote and told Minnie's sister Effie in Billings, Alabama, "She really is very pretty, and Minnie is very proud of her. She had a remarkably easy time. We had, though, the best doctor in Marshall and a trained nurse. The nurse is still with us, though Minnie is up, and I believe and hope that she is going to be better than she ever was [3]."

There are two conflicting reports as to how Claudia received the nickname, "Lady Bird." Claudia always said herself that she got the name when her black nurse, Alice Tittle said she was as "purty as a lady bird," referring to a popular beetle of the Karnack region. But, James Cato Pattillo, an Alabama cousin, recalled that Claudia's father repeated a famous nursery rhyme when he heard of her birth, "Lady-bird, Lady-bird, fly away home, your house is on fire and your children will burn." Pattillo noted that refrain was often used "at times of outstanding events." At any rate, the nickname stuck and years later her brother, Antonio Taylor said, "the poor gal tried to shake it but in vain."

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