Lyndon's Favorite Cousin

By NAN ROBERTSON
The New York Times

STONEWALL, Texas — "Restricted area: Authorized personnel only," warns the sign at the opening of the barbed wire fence.

But there is no man there to say "keep out," and so the visitor drives over the rattling metal bars of the cattle guard and up the dusty road to the house of the woman whom President Johnson calls "my favorite cos" — Cousin Oriole Bailey.

The LBJ Ranch is dead ahead, about a mile and a half away. That ranch has men on its perimeter to shake their heads and say "sorry."

Cousin Oriole's little red house with a tin roof is nestled in the heavy shade of live oaks and a hackberry tree. A widow who lives all alone, she finally responds to the rain of knocks on the front door. She is in her 70's and hard of hearing, a big, rough-cut woman, independent and sometimes unpredictable like her famous cousin, with keen brown eyes that can be both sharp and kind, often sparkling with mischief.

She sits on an old horsehair loveseat on the spotless front porch and looks over the pasture that dips to the Pedernales. She, and all those raised in the area call the little stream "Purr-de-nalls." She begins to talk of the President:

"I don't love him for the office he holds, I love him because he's Lyndon. Of course Lyndon gets a little temperamental at times. I've asked Dale Malachek (the Johnsons' foreman) to get some of his farm machinery junk out of my yard. Dale wouldn't dare touch it until he got orders from the boss. 'I'll tell him then,' I said. 'I'm not frightened of Lyndon.'"

She talks of the Baines, the President's mother's family, and the Johnsons, his father's family, to which Cousin Oriole belongs:

"The Baines have the brains and the Johnsons have the guts."

She recalls the night several years back, when the Pedernales flooded its banks and stole over the pasture until it was right up against her front porch:

"It washed away all the pecan trees in the river bottom, and took 30 pullets with it. I got on Mr. Bailey's boots and went over to Lyndon's. Neither me nor Bird (Mrs. Johnson is called "Bird" by those close to her) could sleep that night. I went out on the porch and looked at the moon shining over the water.

"'My house is gone, Bird,' I told her. 'Now don't be grieving, Cousin Oriole,' she said. 'You have plenty of kinfolks you can live with.'

"'I don't want to live with any kinfolks,' I said. 'I'm one my own.' Well, I'm still here, and so's the house.

"I get lonesome sometimes, and a little jumpy. There's just a latch on the door. So I get to reading detective stories in bed and it gets your mind off yourself and everything else. Well, one night I was reading and the radio was going pretty low. The door was on the latch and Lyndon must have been hanging on it a long time. He almost tore the house down before I heard him."

Lyndon asked me why I latched the door. 'Why do you come to call so late, when I'm in bed?' I asked him. He was kind of sheepish. The next time he came earlier."

She talked of her religion:

"I'm a Christadelphian. A Christadelphian believes that when you die, you're as dead as this chair," tapping a little kitchen chair beside her, "until the Resurrection Day, when all shall rise and be judged."

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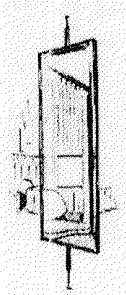

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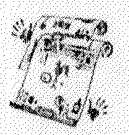

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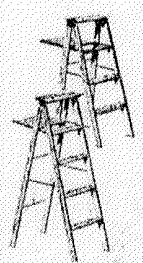

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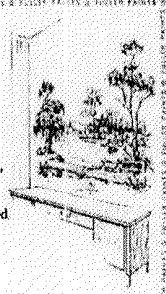

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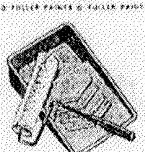

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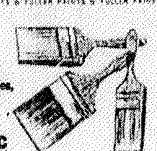

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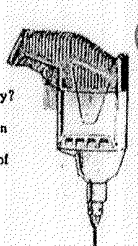

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