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George Johnson

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Judith Dunning
in 2002

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Interview with George Johnson
Interviewed by: Judith Dunning, David Washburn (Technical)
[Interview #1: November, 15, 2002]

1-00:04:26

Dunning

What is your full name?

1-00:04:28

Johnson

George Henry Johnson.

1-00:04:31

Dunning

What year were you born?

1-00:04:33

Johnson

I was born on May the first, 1894.

1-00:04:38

Dunning

Where were you born?

1-00:04:37

Johnson

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Doctor Morris was my mother's doctor.

1-00:08:391-00:04:48

Dunning

Okay. Do you know where your parents were born?

1-00:04:50

Johnson

My parents were born, my father was born, I think, in Kentucky. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about that. That was way down during Abraham Lincoln's time.

1-00:05:03

Dunning

Right. And how about your mother?

1-00:05:04

Johnson

My mother was born, I think in—she was born—lets see—I think around Baltimore. No, she was taken to Baltimore. I think she was born in Sweden. I'm not sure. But anyway, they were married around—in Baltimore.

1-00:05:22

Dunning

And do you remember any stories that your parents or grandparents told you about their childhood, or what life was like for them when they were younger?

1-00:05:34

Johnson

None about my mother. About my father, my father claimed he was the offspring of an Indian lady by the name of Lomai in North Carolina. In those days the Indians had—well, of course, now they have what they call “tribes.” A lot of people think a tribe of Indians would be half of hundred but sometimes it would only be forty or fifty and they’d call themselves a tribe. And that was a tribe of Indians around North Carolina and my father was the offspring of one of these Indian ladies.

1-00:06:08

His father, as I always remember him saying it, was ex-president Andrew Johnson. But they called him “Jackson” in those days but his name was Johnson. That’s where we got the name Johnson. That was from—when he was ex-president. Not that he was elected, but he and Abraham Lincoln were boys together and they would go hunting and fishing like younger boys would, you know. And when he become president, Abraham Lincoln took Johnson in with him as his vice president, of course not realizing that Abraham Lincoln was going to be shot. And Abraham Lincoln was shot and that was how he became president, Andrew Johnson. Not elected, but appointed. See what I mean?

1-00:07:02

Dunning

Okay, well before I go any further tell me again how you are related to Andrew Johnson.

1-00:07:12

Johnson

The only way I’m related is through my father.

1-00:07:14

Dunning

Through your father’s side.

1-00:07:16

Johnson

My father’s side. My father said my mother was a Swede. She was from Baltimore, Maryland. That’s where my father and mother were married as I understand it. You’re asking me for a lot of stuff now that’s hard for me to remember at this age.

1-00:07:40

Dunning

I can see why. How many brothers and sisters in your family growing up?

1-00:07:45

Johnson

Well, my immediate family, there was Ed, Charles, Walter, Lavinia, Harry, me, and then Herbert, and then a little daughter by the name of—I can’t remember now my youngest sister. Anyway, there was two girls. Altogether it was eight children.

1-00:08:15

Dunning

Eight children. And it sounds like from your description you were sort of in the middle or down a little below the middle child?

1-00:08:23

Johnson

Well, yeah let's see there's Walter, Harry, Herbert—Walter, Harry, Lavinia, Herbert—Walter, Harry—Walter—Charles. Charles—wait. Ed, Charles, Walter, Lavinia, Harry, then me.

1-00:08:42

Dunning

Okay.

1-00:08:44

Johnson

Then Herbert and Corona. That was the little infant. I remember she passed away by choking to death on a fishbone.

1-00:08:54

Dunning

What do remember about your childhood home? Can describe it for me?

1-00:08:59

Johnson

Home? Very, very, very, comfortable. Very comfortable. We were brought up—all of us stayed home until we were well up in the marrying age. And I remember my father saying—sitting at dinner time one time—that he thought that he should be one of the happiest men in the world because with all of the boys and all the boys never give him any trouble, never had any police trouble, never did anything against the law—we always stayed home until we were well up in age and—very comfortable.

1-00:09:30

My father worked for the railroads—he was a, well, he became a superintendent of one of the division of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and our home was there in Philadelphia and we all lived together until—I remember at nighttime there would be nine of us all together sitting around the table eating dinner. My mother—I often wondered how she cooked dinner—In those days, you know, going back a hundred years or more they didn't have all the mechanical things they have now to use in the home. Everything had to be done by hand, you know.

1-00:10:13

Dunning

She had a big job.

1-00:10:10

Johnson

My mother had a lady by the name of Sukey that used to help her. We called her “Sukey,” to help her, but she did all the housework. Cooked all the meals and taking care of the house with all ten of us in there at one time. We lived right up until we were of marriageable age.

1-00:10:28

Dunning

Okay. Now she sounds like a very busy person—

1-00:10:32

Johnson

Oh my god! I remember sometimes she'd have five or six tubs washing the clothes for all of us, you know. I remember she had the soap water in one tub and bluing water in another tub, starch water in another one—all that sort of stuff. Now all that's done in one washing machine. [laughs]

1-00:10:51

Dunning

Now can you describe a typical day for your mother when all the children were living at home?

1-00:10:56

Johnson

Typical what?

1-00:10:57

Dunning

A typical day for your mother—things you remember her doing the most? You just mentioned the laundry—

1-00:11:05

Johnson

Just keeping the house—keeping the home and cooking. Cooking mostly. I remember we would have—I was complaining about baked beans. We had baked beans that was home cooked. When I say “home cooked,” it was cooked all day. My mother would soak those beans the night before and then the next morning she'd put them all out on a big pan and bake them. All day long with a wood fire. Of course, in those days that's all they had. They had no gas, no electricity.

1-00:11:37

And I remember her baking those beans all day. Turning them over and over and over at certain times until they got a beautiful brown. Then she would get the bacon. In those days, you could get a whole half of a bacon for a dollar or so. And she'd slice that bacon and put it on the beans and then brown those beans in the oven. And that's the way we ate. And she'd put them in a pan—the pan she had in—to cook those beans in, to serve them on the dining room table was a pan about two feet by two feet and it was three to four inches—

1-00:12:13

Dunning

Was it a cast iron pan?

1-00:12:16

Johnson

Oh, yes. Yes, it was cast iron. And she'd take that pan out and keep turning them, as I say, all day long. Even—I remember when she was washing the clothes she'd be cooking those beans and going in the oven and turning them over and over and over until they got a beautiful brown. And I used to tell my wife, “Now you buy these beans and they just have a reddish color and they just smell.” They're not cooked at all. Just terrible. Anyway—

1-00:12:41

Dunning

So you've never forgotten your mother's baked beans?

1-00:12:46

Johnson

Oh, no. Baked beans—and then she'd cook a whole ham and then slice that ham. In those days, as I see now—you could buy a whole ham for dollar and half, two dollars. And she would slice that ham and then we'd have ham and cabbage. She'd cook that cabbage in a great big pot. She had a great big cast iron pot. All the cooking was done on that stove—it was a wood stove. Wood and coal and no gas—nobody had gas. Wasn't a question of we didn't have the money. We didn't have any—there just wasn't any gas.

1-00:13:21

We had the very first telephone put in our house in the whole block. We had the whole block from one corner to the other. My father had that because at the railroad he used to do a lot of the office work at the railroad and they depended on him between—he ran a lot of the railroad between Philadelphia and Baltimore, all the way down to Wheeling, West Virginia. Out as far as Chicago, up to New York, North Carolina, South Carolina. And all through Pennsylvania: Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, and all through there. He had charge of all those trains. From the Philadelphia station in Philadelphia, on the sixth floor he had an office up there with five or six ladies helping him to do the office work.

1-00:14:12

Dunning

Well, tell me about your father. How would you describe him?

1-00:14:14

Johnson

My father was tall. Very well-built. Tall—he was like me—never had a complaint of sickness in his life that I can remember. Never was sick. Tall and walked very straight. And always sober.

1-00:14:27

You know, I remember him sitting down at the table at night time and he would sit down to eat his dinner and the telephone would ring and he'd have to get up and answer the telephone because he had to—telephone was—you had to get up and hold on to the thing at the side of the wall with a box to it and everything.

1-00:14:47

And he would say “Look,” he'd say, “boys, you're all struggling, you're going to school to try to do well in your work,” he said, “But remember this: if you ever get to—you don't have to get to the top but if you get near the top, it's going to take a lot of your work, a lot of your trouble, a lot of your time, a lot of your life.” And I remember him saying many times, “See: I can't sit down and eat my dinner but the telephone don't ring and they want me down at the station.”[laughs] And that stayed with me all my life.

1-00:15:15

Dunning

So he sounds like a hard working gentleman.

1-00:15:22

Johnson

Huh?

1- 00:15:20

Dunning

He sounds like a hard working man.

1- 00:15:19

Johnson

Well, he didn't do the pick and shovel type. He was what you might say the pen and pencil type. [laughs] He did a lot of that work that way.

1-00:15:42

And he called the trains, too, you see what I mean. That's how he first got into position: calling the trains. You know, now the railroads—you look up at a monitor there and the railroads have the reading there of when the trains are late or coming in, you know what I mean? They would call that train announcing. But he did that for twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight years before he was appointed where he become superintendent because he knew all about the railroad from Wheeling, West Virginia, to New York, and from Philadelphia to—all the way to Chicago. Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, Wheeling, West Virginia, all those things.

1-00:16:26

He knew all the—because every time he had any time at all he would go out on the railroad and see and study the railroad. Although he was just what they call an announcer—train announcer, train caller, they called it, you know. But he was so interested in the train that he wanted to see how the trains were run, where they run and all of the different...

1- 00:16:47

Dunning

Would you ever have an opportunity to go with him?

1- 00:16:49

Johnson

Oh, yes! And sometimes my youngest brother, we'd get on the train—we'd go down to—we never realized it at that time but sometimes we'd get on the train—my mother would put us on the train from Philadelphia to Baltimore—that's where the main office was in Baltimore, of the station, of the train, of the railroad. And my father would always say there'd be somebody down there—I remember we was five and seven years old at that time, I remember. My father would always tell us, "Boys, there'll be somebody down there to take care of you."

1-00:17:24

We'd get down to the station and there'd be a man there he was going, "George, Herbert! Come on." We didn't know he was—we knew he was the man to take care of us, but he was the stationmaster of the station in Baltimore. He would take us and show us around. I remember one time he took us on the train down to Washington and he took us all the way up into the tower of the dome and I often think about that when presidents—.

1-00:17:53

The last president who was assassinated and had his casket laying there in the dome, you know, in the floor of the dome, and you can go all the way up in that dome—everybody can't do it, but we had the privilege, being with the stationmaster from the station in Baltimore. He took us up, and we went all the way up to the top and you could look down right from the center. And when you looked down on the people walking it looks like their legs are going around the side instead

of going forward. It makes the legs look like they're going around this way. [laughs] And that was right up at the top of the dome—there's a little balcony up there. I don't know if anybody goes up there now or not but that was—that's been over maybe a hundred years ago.

1- 00:18:35

Dunning

Would your father sometimes be gone for several days?

1- 00:18:36

Johnson

No, no, no he never was gone for any length of time. He'd always do down—see they had the main station, main office, in Baltimore. But he would go to Baltimore and come back to Philadelphia. That is, I never remember him going away for any length of time. He was always home every night. And I can remember. I never remember him going away, staying any length, any days at a time.

1-00:19:05

Because he had his office there in Philadelphia. Sixth floor of the Baltimore and Ohio station, and my brother and I—my brother Herbert, my youngest brother. We used to ask my mother if we could carry lunch to my father. My mother used to say, "You don't have to just carry lunch to your father. You can eat right there in the restaurant." We liked to go down to the station. That was our alibi to go take his lunch so we could go down there and see those great big engines or those great big steam engines in those days.

1- 00:19:34

Dunning

Well, it sounds like kind of a dream for kids.

1- 00:19:37

Johnson

Oh it was, it was. My youngest brother and I—Herbert, his name was Herbert. He finally—I got a picture over there now—he finally become superintendent in the post office in Philadelphia.

1- 00:19:47

Dunning

Oh that's great. Now you've described you father. How would you describe your mother? What did she look like?

1- 00:19:55

Johnson

My mother was, oh, I'd say she was about five foot seven and well built, well built. A lot of ability. She had—I remember—two or three different organizations that she belonged to that she used to go to meetings and those sorts of things.

1- 00:20:12

Dunning

Do you remember what the organizations were?

1- 00:20:14

Johnson

No. She used to say ladies' auxiliary of something. I can't remember. I only remember that.

1- 00:20:26

Dunning

Now, what were some of your mother's good qualities?

1- 00:20:31

Johnson

As I can think about it now, she was very, very wonderful. My mother—I never seen her drink, never smoked, none of that sort of thing. That's why I can't understand now so many of these people drinking and smoking and all that sort of stuff. Anyway, my mother never drank. She was taking care of us to the letter, as I would say. She was always on time. Always doing everything she could—even when we went to school. I remember she was fixing—always seeing that my clothes were straight, and my collar, and in the wintertime she'd see that my overcoat was buttoned around.

1-00:21:08

She'd take us to the school and just take us to the front door of the school. I went to the Southern High School and my brother went to primary school, my youngest brother. But she'd take us to school and leave us at the front door in front. Each school seemed to have a rail around them. Take us to the rail, she'd let us go into the school and that was it. She always seen that we had clothes on and well-dressed and—especially in the wintertime because they have some kind of long winters, cold weather sometimes back there. Five, six days at a time, you know? She would always see that we'd—well dressed and, you know, dressed in the wintertime to go to school.

1- 00:21:46

Dunning

Do you think there are important things your mother tried to hand down to you, to teach you? You mention it seems like she wanted you all to be well groomed and punctual.

1- 00:22:07

Johnson

Yeah. She wanted us to be well groomed and comfortable. And then of course she took us to Sunday school, too. Every Sunday we went to Sunday school with the kids, you know. In the Episcopal seminary we went to.

1- 00:22:17

Dunning

You went to—you were Episcopalians?

1- 00:22:19

Johnson

Episcopalian, yes. She brought us up in the Episcopalians. Reverend Tompkins was Episcopal, the minister.

1- 00:22:28

Dunning

And was the church—

1- 00:22:29

Johnson

Church is at Nineteenth and Wallace. Right on the corner there at Rittenhouse Square, was there. Went all around the front of the church. You know, city park, they call it. Rittenhouse Square

took up the whole block. And the church was right on the corner and that was the Episcopal church. They had the Sunday school there, also the church, you know. They had the Sunday school meetings down in the basement of the church.

1-00:16:07

It was a great big brownstone church. Two stories high. I remember at Christmastime, oh, they'd have Christmas tree there all the way up—in the altar—all the way to the ceiling. All the kids from the different sections of the city, we'd all be there and have a Christmas party there at the church.

1- 00:23:16

Dunning

Now was your father Episcopalian as well?

1- 00:23:15

Johnson

Oh, yes, he was Episcopalian. He was a deacon of the Episcopal church there in Philadelphia as I remember it. As my wife and I came to California, he became the deacon of the church there in Philadelphia. I forget the name of it. I think it was on Wallace Street or somewhere. I can't remember now. I remember him saying that he would have to leave sometime and go to the church. And when he died they had him—buried him, had the funeral from the church. From the Episcopal church.

1- 00:23:58

Dunning

Was the church an important part of your growing up?

1- 00:24:00

Johnson

No it wasn't an important part of ours. After we grew up, my—the church part of it—although, we stayed with the denomination, you know.

1-00:24:19

My oldest brother, Ed, he played the piano. I don't mean rock and that sort of thing. [laughs] He was a concert piano player. My brother Ed, he studied—oh, I remember looking at the music sometimes and I couldn't understand how he could tell the music with all them little dots on the paper, and he used to ask me sometimes to turn the pages. When he would come to the house sometimes after we got older, he'd ask me to turn the pages and I couldn't understand how he could take music out of just those round dots on that piece of paper.

1-00:24:51

But he was with—I remember he used to travel with a theatrical—I mean a musical—company by the name of—and the head name was Damrosch. But he played—they were all in those days what they call horn instruments. Horn bands, you know. Brass bands, they called them. He played the piano during the intermission at times, you know. During intermissions he would play the piano or play the piano before the bands started.

1-00:25:241-00:25:37

And then another bandmaster he played with: a man by the name of John Philip Sousa. He played with John Philip Sousa they would go around to the different towns and all—I remember he'd even go to Italy sometimes and all that sort of thing. That was my oldest brother, Ed.

1-00:25:48

And then my younger—my other brother, Harry—uh, Charles—he ran a—in those days, they didn't have shirts with collars on them like they have now. They used to have shirts that they had to detach the collar. Collars were made of celluloid and my brother, Charles, he had this factory where they made these celluloid collars. And he would sell those. Can you imagine? All the shirts had to have the hole in the back where they could put the collar button, you know? And all of the collars had to have the hole and you had to buy them separate, of course, but they would last because you could take them off and iron them. I mean wash them and iron them. I mean wash them, not iron them because they were celluloid.

1-00:26:31

But anyway—and then Walter. There was Ed, Charles, and Walter. Walter, he was my third oldest brother. He went to college in Philadelphia Central. I remember it was Central High School College and I remember him studying surveying or something like that. He became a surveyor. He surveyed. I remember him saying a lot of times that the railroad out here used his surveying marks where he would survey for electric lines. And the railroad would use his surveying and run their train line fifty or a hundred feet from his poles that they would put up with his electric line on it. It looked like he was surveying for the railroad instead of surveying for the electricity. [laughs]

1- 00:27:19

Dunning

Well, it sounded like your parents must have really encouraged your getting into trades and professions.

1- 00:27:26

Johnson

Oh, yeah. My brother Herbert— That was Walter, Harold. Now Lavinia, she was a great seamstress. Making clothes, you know? She made clothes for—there was a big department store there by the name of John Wanamaker, and then there was Gilmore Brothers, Litt Brothers, and she made clothing for all those stores. Dresses, you know. High-class dresses. High-price dresses, my sister. And then she got—had my mother into it, because my mother had nothing else to do after we got grown up.

1- 00:28:00

Dunning

Well, I was going to ask you that. Did your mother ever work outside the home when the kids were little?

1- 00:28:04

Johnson

Oh, no she never. No, no she never worked outside. But she help my—. We had a big home there in Philadelphia: 923 S. Fifteenth Street it was. A three-story house, and I often think about that house. We had four bedrooms on the top floor and four bedrooms on the middle floor. Then of

course, the down floor was the recreation—where the kitchen, dining room and the front room. Anyway...

1- 00:28:37

Dunning

Did your parents ever take in boarders?

1- 00:28:37

Johnson

Boarders? Oh no! We never had enough room.

1- 00:28:40

Dunning

It seemed like you had enough people as it was, but—

1- 00:28:45

Johnson

I was going to say. I can't believe it—this house on Fifteenth Street now had eight bedrooms. Had four bedrooms on the top floor and four bedrooms on the middle floor. But now, my God, a house with eight bedrooms would cost you a million dollars.

1- 00:29:00

Dunning

Oh! That would be the down payment in California.

1- 00:29:02

Johnson

Yeah, yeah. It's a lot. Like people tell me about this place—I can't believe it.

1- 00:29:09

Dunning

Do you remember having household chores when you were little? Did you have to work inside the house?

1- 00:29:15

Johnson

Me? Oh, yeah. My youngest brother and I, we used to get up early in the morning and make up the fire because they had all wood and coal fires. You know, they didn't have any gas and electricity. Not only us, but nobody. They just didn't exist in those days. It existed but on a very, very, very scarce principle. And my youngest brother and I, we used to get up early before we went to school and go down in the cellar. They call them cellars, they're basements, but they call them cellars there, you know. It was all built-in, beautiful cellars and they had the furnace down there and we'd make up the fire, get a good hot fire going. Of course, we had wood and then what they call soft coal. Soft coal because Pennsylvania is a great mining area, you know. That is out around Wilkes-Barre and western Pennsylvania they still have a lot of coal and iron out that way, and oil.

1- 00:30:09

Dunning

Was keeping the fire going one of your major chores?

1- 00:30:17

Johnson

Well, we'd always—we'd make the fire up around 6 o'clock in the morning and get it good and hot, and then we'd kind of what they call bank it, you know: we'd but some more coal and wood on it. And that would last until we came home at noon. Then, yes, my youngest brother and I we'd take care of the fire, you know. Because the house being a large house and well insulated—it was all made of brick—it would keep nice and warm during the real cold weather. And they didn't have steam heat, they had what they call hot air heat. Had the big pipes running all up through the house from the basement. Up through the walls to the rooms. That sent the air up from the furnace.

1- 00:30:59

Dunning

Now what chores did you sisters do?

1- 00:31:03

Johnson

My sister helped my mother sewing. She did a lot of, she did all the sewing.

1- 00:31:08

Dunning

Sewing for the family, or outside the family?

1- 00:31:11

Johnson

Yeah she did. As she grew up, my mother taught how to sew and they had the—. After they started selling so many clothes, my sister took over as she grew up. Around from seven on up, she would make beautiful, beautiful dresses, you know? And I remember in those days they would have—my sister would say, “Mr. So-and-So is coming, Mrs. Robinson is coming, Mr. Morgan is coming, or Mrs. Ford.”

1-00:31:45

Henry Ford and Morgan and all those fellows were very well known around there, and they would come in what we called an open barouche, you know. They use them sometimes now in funerals, with flowers, you know. And the king and queen of England used to usually sit in them when they were on parade, you know? And they sit facing each other. And sometimes the men would—a coachman and a footman would drive up to the house with these ladies to come in to get their dresses made. My mother and sister—

1- 00:32:12

Dunning

From your mother and sister.

1- 00:32:14

Johnson

My mother and sister, yeah, were making them. My mother and sister, upstairs they had this middle room, a great big room and they would come up. I remember sometimes I'd go in there to get something for my lunch and my mother would have them standing up on the floor measuring their clothes. And how they'd be standing up there for a half-hour. I couldn't understand how those women could stand up there that long and have my mother and sister be measuring their

clothes from the store and all those kind of places. But that's what my mother and sister did as we grew up to the age where we were, you know, young men and young women. But those people would drive up in automobiles and open barouches with coachmen and footmen to come in and have those dresses made by my mother and sister.

1- 00:32:53

Dunning

Well, they must have had quite a reputation.

1- 00:32:56

Johnson

Oh, they did. But you don't—that's what I tell people—you don't see any of that now. All of that was old stuff. Of course there was no automobiles, you understand. There were no automobiles, and I'm talking about the days before automobiles.

1-00:33:10

I remember the first automobiles that come out. Kids—if we saw one in the neighborhood any way, trying to crank it to start it, you know. They didn't have the starters on them like they have now. We didn't have automobiles, and all the railroad stations had cabs with horses. They didn't have automobiles to take people to the hotel. They had horse cabs, horse and cabs they called them. It's unbelievable to me to even think that in those days, in my life, they didn't have the automobiles.

1-00:33:42

And I even think now, coming to California, when we came here there was only five million people in California. You didn't see them. Now they claim there's thirty-five million and still you don't see them when you get out in the country. See what I mean? And that's what I can't understand. And they were giving land away when we came, when my wife and I came. They were giving land away. In California, see? [laughs] But we didn't get any of the gifts. We was able to buy this because it was very cheap at that time. But I told the fellow right next door, he wanted a thousand dollars for seventy-five feet of land there. I said, "A thousand dollars? You never will get that kind of money for that land." Never will get it! Can you imagine that seventy-five foot front that was going for less than a thousand dollars?

1- 00:34:28

Dunning

Well, I'd like to hear more about your coming to California but I have a few more questions about—

1- 00:34:35

Johnson

Yeah. Sorry, I veer often.

1- 00:34:36

Dunning

No, that's fine you're doing great. I'd like to ask you about your schooling. Do you remember your first school you went to?

1- 00:34:44

Johnson

Oh! I went to—I can't remember the teachers. It was just a primary school, but grammar—I went to primary school, grammar school, and then to high school and then I went to—oh, where I studied engineering—it was a subsidiary of the University of Pennsylvania.

1- 00:35:08

Dunning

Was it the Drexel Institute [of Art, Science, and Industry]?

1- 00:35:08

Johnson

Drex—huh?

1- 00:35:11

Dunning

Drexel Institute?

1- 00:35:11

Johnson

There you go! Drexel Institute. You see, that's it. In those days—now like here, if you get to California with a million dollars they want, they can build a building on the land that they have already, you know. But back there, University of Pennsylvania was built right in the middle of Philadelphia almost. You know: the city was built up all around. And if they built the—if they give the University of Pennsylvania a million dollars and they wanted the building, they'd go up and get some building that was vacant, you know, and remodel it, and refurbish it, and call it an institute from the University of Pennsylvania. And that's where I went—this building was given to them and they made a mechanical subsidiary of it. And they called it, "Drexel Institute."

1-00:35:52

John Philip Sousa—I mean [Anthony Joseph] Drexel, Ford—there was three men. Three—two millionaires; I can't remember their names but I do remember Henry Ford. Henry Ford. Henry Ford sat at my father's office one day just about as far as you from me and said, "Henry," he said, "This is my son George." And Henry said, "George, if you save ten cents out of every dollar you'll be a millionaire someday." I've often wondered where that million dollars went. But anyway—it was a circumstance, I think now, that we went through that was far different from what they go through now. The young kids and young boys get into such certain—get into this thing that they call dope and it seems so easy and it'll get a hold of all of them, but we never—. You could buy a loaf of bread then for five cents. I don't know why the people think they needed so much money. Now the same loaf of bread costs a dollar and forty cents, you know what I mean? And you could buy hamburger—they had a great big butcher shop there. Five or six butchers in it. My mother bought a pound of lamb hamburger for ten cents. I remember it was a great big market and one side that had three or four cutting blocks and on the other side it would have five or six halves of cows hanging there. You know, just fresh killed, hanging. That was a butcher shop and you'd bring it over and cut the meat off—cut a great big steak. My mother would get two or three steaks for all of us for {_____?} cents. Oh boy! It was unbelievable.

1- 00:37:33

Dunning

When you were in school, when you started school, did you have favorite subjects?

1- 00:37:39

Johnson

Favorite subject? No, no. But we went to grammar school, you see, it was just the ordinary—we studied mathematics up to trigonometry and physics. Algebra, trigonometry, and physics, then we stopped there. We stopped there, then we went to high school. But that was in grammar school.

1- 00:37:59

Dunning

And who did you go to school with in grammar school? What did your class look like?

1- 00:38:03

Johnson

Oh, my classmates. I couldn't tell you a single one. We would all—it looked like—I don't understand it. We're all of a different racial, different ethnic background, you know what I mean? And we would go to school—we'd all be in the class together, studying together, but the minute the school let out each one of the different classes, different races would all go to their own home. You never saw them overnight, you know what I mean? We never socialized together outside of school. You know what I mean? And I don't remember any of the boys—I can't remember any of their names.

1- 00:38:45

Dunning

Well, that's okay. And which group would you hang out with?

1- 00:38:49

Johnson

Which group? Well, we never hung out. We never hung out with any particular names group. But there was a—we had a class that we played football with called the [Stentenworth?] that was called the [Stentenworth?] and we used to always play another group from another section of the city called the [Aurion?] and ours was the [Stentenworth?], but that's the only two groups that I knew. As far as hanging out with a bunch of boys in the school—after school, no. We all looked like—as I can remember—at the school all of the children would just separate and go to their own homes. We never saw any of the different kids hanging around the school in groups. You know, as gangs or anything like that. Never—

1- 00:39:43

Dunning

Now, you mentioned that you were part Indian and part Swedish.

1- 00:39:50

Johnson

Part Swedish, yes.

1- 00:39:53

Dunning

Now how was it to be sort of mixed race at that time?

1- 00:39:53

Johnson

How were the mixed races?

1- 00:39:55

Dunning

Yes, how did people get along?

1- 00:39:56

Johnson

Wonderful. Never had any—never heard of anything like, we never heard. In our school there we had mostly what we call “Caucasian” teachers, know what I mean? But all the students were of—it was Jews, what you call Jews and gentiles— Jews and gentiles and Africans, and Mexicans, Indians. All come to school and get along in the class no trouble at all. Never had any of that kind of what they call “racial trouble” like they have now in places. Never had any—we never knew—we never heard of that sort of thing in those days. As I say, this country was— when I think about it now, I can see this country was very young. Very young in those days. And everybody was out to try to get along, it looked like.

1- 00:40:49

Dunning

Well, we’re talking about the turn of the century, now when you started school.

1- 00:40:56

Johnson

Absolutely. Now, it’s a different turn all together. But I never heard of any of those conditions at all until—that is racial, you know what I mean, struggles and that sort of thing. They just didn’t exist. They had different races of people lived in different sections. Now in Philadelphia there was a lot of Jews and I remember there was a lot of Jews in the school: Einstein, Weinstein, Feinstein. All of those names I remember the teachers would call when the class would start. But they never had any racial trouble amongst them. There was Irish—it was Kane and Kats next door, next to me. Johnson, Kane, and Kats. We three always sat together among—with the Jews and all the other—but we never heard any talk about a different race. Never under any circumstances. We were all together in school.

1- 00:41:53

Dunning

Now, did you ever start noticing a difference in the way—. When did you first start noticing prejudice? Did you notice at Drexel Institute?

1- 00:42:05

Johnson

I have never noticed it in any place that I can remember. I had a lot of jobs, you know, but I can’t remember of any job that I had where I was considered different racial prejudice—a different racial strata, you know what I mean? I never remembered. When I came to California—wife and I came here—.

1-00:42:33

See now I was in the post office at first. That was my first job after I got out of the army. I was in the First World War, you know. And I didn’t know it—I was anxious to get out of it, because I

wasn't a soldier, but I was drafted. See what I mean? And then after the war—they looked it up here a while back and saw that I was discharged from the army in 1919. Well, my wife and I came to California and—we came to California right after I got out of the army and that was in 1919. I had my mechanical experience, and I remember going in a barbershop in San Francisco to get a haircut and a fellow came in there—and in those days, each barber had five or six barbers and you could get a haircut and a shave for seventy-five cents. A haircut fifty cents, a shave for twenty-five cents. Now, it costs five dollars almost. No, I paid ten dollars for a haircut right over here. Anyway—I was sitting there and a fellow came in and he said they're having a strike. The mechanics down on the ferries—they were running a ferry between here and San Francisco, you know? No bridges, nothing at that time. Everybody went on the ferry. Trains—Interurban [Electric Railway] trains ran down Seventh Street down to what we call the mole down at the end of Seventh Street and everybody had to get on the ferry and go across to San Francisco. And I went down and got a job on the ferry.

1- 00:44:16

Dunning

Seventh Street in Oakland?

1- 00:44:20

Johnson

Seventh Street in Oakland. All the way down to Seventh Street in Oakland, all the way down. And there was a ferry down there. There was trains, Interurban trains, all the way—coming all over the state, you know. All over I mean all over this—they called it the Key System then, see? Most of the BART trains run on the same route that the Key System ran on, only the Key System ran on the ground. But now BART, see they have the elevated roads, most places. But anyway, that's where everybody had to go to get on the ferry to go to San Francisco. And I got a job on the ferry—running on the ferry.

1- 00:45:00

Dunning

And what was your first job on the ferry?

1- 00:45:01fff

Johnson

My first job—trying to help in the power, in the steam room. I worked there for seven years, and they started building the bridge. The bridge wasn't built then; they started building the bridge. I remember them saying a lot of times when they were building the bridge—

1- 00:45:19

Dunning

The Bay Bridge.

1- 00:45:17

Johnson

That's the Bay Bridge. You can see the wheels up there turning but you never saw a single person on that bridge. Anyway, they went around and conscripted to try to get—and which they did—residents, landowners, on this side to donate a certain amount of their taxes to the purpose of building the bridge. And the bridge was to cost seventy million dollars, which was a lot of money in those days. Seventy million dollars was a lot of money. Seventy million dollars would

hardly buy you a cup of coffee now. [laughs] But anyway, we never did get that money back that we contributed, but the bridge had been paid for along by, over fifty years. We were supposed to get that back after the bridge was paid for in fifty years. Well, the bridge has been paid for and instead of us getting it back, they've raised it—and the price of the bridge [toll] when it was built was fifty cents. Now, it's—what is it? Five dollars.

1-00:46:22

Dunning

I think the Golden Gate Bridge is five dollars and the Bay Bridge is two dollars.

1-00:46:30

Johnson

I'm talking about the Bay Bridge. All this I'm talking about is the Bay Bridge. I remember they said it would cost seventy million, and we had a friend who came all the way out from Pennsylvania to work on the bridge and he thought it was a wonderful thing that they brought him all the way out here to work on the bridge at seventy million dollars! Oh, back there they thought that seventy million was enough to buy the world. [laughs] At that time. You know.

1-00:46:59

Dunning

And were you afraid that you would lose your job on the ferry with the bridge being—

1-00:47:02

Johnson

Oh no! Oh no! I quit that job long before that. Long before the bridge was built. I quit and went to work for a while on the Baltimore and Ohio, I mean on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Wait a minute. I had several jobs in through there. I worked on the Southern Pacific, went from here to—I can't remember the exact dates, you know.

1-00:47:37

Dunning

That's okay. You have a lot of dates!

1-00:47:38

Johnson

It was running from here to Seattle. Running from here to Seattle and I remember I went to see the superintendent. Oh, that was during the Depression! You've heard of the Depression in '29?

1-00:47:49

Dunning

Oh, yes!

1-00:47:49

Johnson

The manager—I forget his name—[Klink?], I think, I'm not sure. “Oh no!” he says, “We're not hiring anybody.” This is during the Depression. He says, “We haven't hired anybody in two years.” So I was sitting there. I just casually said, “Oh, I understand that, but” I said, “my father was a railroad man and I'm not a railroad person, but” I said, “I thought—I'm out of work and I thought I could get a job on the railroad.” “Well, what does your father do?” He said, “Is Johnson your father's name?” I said, “Yeah, I'm a Johnson.” And I said, “My father was for

years, he was kind of a like superintendent on the Baltimore and Ohio.” This was George [Klink?] he said, “Your father was Johnson—your father was a superintendent?” I said, “Well, he was superintendent of a division of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.” He said, “Jim? Jim?” Like that to me! You know? He said, “Jim’s your father?” I said, “Yeah.” “Jim is your father!” I said, “Yeah.” “What are you doing in California?” I said, “Well, I’m out here, just like everybody else, trying to make a living.” And finally, after we got through talking, he said: “Can you go on a train this afternoon?” I said, “I can go on a train anytime.” [laughs] After telling me he hadn’t hired anybody for two years! Then he asked me could I go on a train that afternoon. And, he said, “Jim? Jim Johnson is your father?” He just couldn’t believe it. He kept saying “Jim? Jim Johnson is your father.” He said, “Jim taught me railroading.” He says, “Your father taught me railroading. When do you want to go out?” I says, “I’ll go out anytime.” He said, “All right. Now there’ll be a car laying way over on the yard there.” He named the car. He says, “You get on that car and tell that fellow on there that you’re coming to work. And I got on that job. On that job, we went all the way to Seattle. Two or three trips to Seattle.

1-00:49:50

Dunning

And what was your job on the train?

1-00:49:52

Johnson

Just waiting—working— seeing that the kitchen, dining room was taken care of.

1-00:49:57

Dunning

Okay.

1-00:49:58

Johnson

Yup. I was kind of like a, you know, manager, superintendent in the dining room and kitchen.

1-00:50:03

Dunning

And how did you like that job?

1-00:50:03

Johnson

Oh I didn’t like it at all. I didn’t like it at all. I just didn’t like it. I told—I made two trips, went all the way up to Seattle and we had to stay up in Seattle all night. See what I mean? And I went there then coming back. Then I made another trip up to Denver and we stayed in Denver all night and come back. And I didn’t like that idea of staying away all night overnight! It was just unusual.

1-00:50:35

Dunning

Well, you were accustomed to your dad coming home—

1-00:50:38

Johnson

Yeah, that's it. But being a railroad family, you know, I understood how it could just take up a lot of your time.

1-00:50:48

Dunning

Tell me a little bit about you wife. You married her in Philadelphia?

1-00:50:52

Johnson

Wife and I, we lived in Philadelphia—

1-00:51:00

Dunning

And first, what is her name?

1-00:50:55

Johnson

—we lived on what we call Eighteenth and Montrose and she lived Fifteenth and Fitzwater which was three blocks away. It was two blocks—I lived three blocks away. City blocks, now, you know what I mean. We called it three blocks west and two blocks north of me. But I had to go by her house everyday to go to school. Now, we were about seven years old. Just, you know, just one year away from kindergarten, you know? And my mother would take me up past her house because I had to pass her house to get to the school and then we'd pick her up—my mother would take her and me to school, you know what I mean? Her mother would go to the school and get us and bring us back home. Now that's when we was around six, seven years old.

1-00:51:56

And then we lived in that neighborhood up until she went to high school and I went to—. School in those days, you see, they didn't have boys and girls going at the same school. Even to kindergarten, they didn't have boys and girls going to the same kindergarten. Boys and girls all went to separate schools. I went to Southern High School. She went to Northeast—Northwest School. Her school was almost a mile away from my school. But anyway, that's when we first started to—every day we'd go and come, go and come, go and come together. Finally, after we got older, for two or three years—then we got socialized with a bunch of girls, all in the same group. We socialized and socialized up until, oh, we were eighteen, nineteen years old. And then we—of course, I went to college, went to war, and I got out, and then finally when I came back we socialized and we were married. And I got my marriage license in that drawer, right in that cabinet right there.

1-00:53:02

Dunning

Well, we might take a look at that, there. It would be quite interesting.

1-00:53:07

Johnson

That's right there—see that little cabinet right there as you go inside of the dining room, there. In that top drawer, my marriage license right in there. I think we were married in 1917. Reverend Wallace, I think, was the minister at that time.

1-00:53:22

Dunning:

So you were about twenty—early—twenty-one?

1-00:53:24

Johnson

Just around in there.

1-00:53:27

Dunning

Right around twenty-one. And what is your wife's name?

1-00:53:30

Johnson

Huh? What? My wife was—she was always one year younger than me. Just one year. I used to like to kid her and tell her, “You’re always trying to catch up to me.” Because I was one year older. And she was like me, she was in good health, just wonderful health. No doctors, no all this foolishness. No taking no medicine, like me, she never took any periodic medicines or anything like that. That’s why I don’t take them. Don’t take nothing like that. I don’t want it. I might feel like I might have to take them, but I’m not going to take them yet unless I have to. Sometimes I feel like I should take them on account of a little pain or a little ache, but I just don’t do it and it all wears away. You know? Anyway—

1-00:54:18

Dunning

Have you been your own doctor? Have you doctored yourself?

1-00:54:22

Johnson

Well, you could say “doctoring it yourself” if you want to, but I don’t doctor at all. I don’t take anything! I don’t take anything whatsoever.

1-00:54:32

Dunning

Not an aspirin, not a—

1-00:54:34

Johnson

Not an aspirin, nothing. I don’t have—Angie always says that, “George you don’t have no medicines laying around.” That’s why I tell Angie, “Angie”—she wants to know what time that I want her to come—I say, “You come whenever you have the convenience to come and do what’s to be done. Straighten out the house, straighten out the kitchen, the bathroom, and the bedroom, and dust whatever you see on this floor. You don’t have to worry about the basement or the upper floor, because I don’t live on either one of them. And whenever you want to come and can do it, all right.” I said, “I don’t take any medicines at any particular time, so that leaves you out to come when you want to come.” Sometimes, she don’t come until six, seven o’clock in the evening. As long as she does whatever needs to be done, it’s all right with me. See what I mean? Because she don’t have to tend to me personally, you know what I mean? That sort of thing. When you have to minister—like she says, “When I have to administer medicines to some of the

patients, then that has to be there.” But with me she don’t have to be here at any particular time. She likes that, see?

1-00:55:37

Dunning

Have you been healthy your whole life?

1-00:55:39

Johnson

All my life. All my life I’ve never been—I can’t say I’ve been healthy in this sense: I’ve had two operations, but not anything that would render me being—oh what would you say? Lingered illness, you know what I mean? No lingering illness. When I was married about a year or so I had awful pains on my right side, see what I mean? Of course, in those days I was a young man that’s been over a hundred years ago, almost a hundred years ago. Went to university, they operated on me—appendicitis, you know?

1-00:56:30

Dunning

And what’s your diet?

1-00:56:31

Johnson

Huh?

1-00:56:31

Dunning

What has your diet been through life?

1-00:56:35

Johnson

Everything! Right now, my diet [laughs] my diet is getting to the point where it’s almost unbelievable. I just get the same thing over and over and over, which I understand.

1-00:56:48

Dunning

And what’s that?

1-00:56:50

Johnson

Just beef, roast beef, you know, and a couple of vegetables. And a little chicken. But there’s no—you know what I mean—. I guess—I say there’s no taste in it because it’s not flavored in any sense of the word, you know what I mean? The chicken, roast chicken, just don’t have any taste. The roast beef just don’t have any taste. No taste. And not only that, but it comes in a heavy cake, and when I cut it and I chew it, and if I chew it it’s dry, you know what I mean? It’s dry and I know why it’s dry because it’s meat that’s been cooked maybe a week ahead, they slice it down, put a little gravy, and heat it up, you know what I mean? Because —

1-00:57:32

Dunning

Do you get meals-on-wheels?

1-00:57:33

Johnson

Yes, that's meals-on-wheels, that's it, see? I can't complain about that. If they didn't bring that—do you understand?—I wouldn't have anything. There wouldn't be anybody giving me anything to eat! I can't even—you know what I mean? I have to go out in the kitchen and fix it myself, what I can. What little bit can do, I fix it myself, but I can't go out there and cook. I can't possibly cook, because I can't get to the stove, and I wouldn't get to the stove because an open stove has an open flame, you know? And I wouldn't want to get that. All I do is heat the food with the microwave and the electric oven.

1-00:58:14

Dunning

And does Angie help with your grocery shopping?

1-00:58:18

Johnson

No, no, Angie doesn't cook. Angie doesn't touch the food at all.

1-00:58:22

Dunning

Who does your grocery shopping?

1-00:58:23

Johnson

She does the grocery shopping.

1-00:58:24

Dunning

Oh, okay.

1-00:58:24

Johnson

She does the grocery shopping, and that's all, but she don't cook. She don't hand me a glass of water unless I ask her to hand me one. But I do that—I get up in the morning and I go out there and I cook myself a sausage, fix myself a sausage, a cup of coffee and a piece of toast. She gets waffles, you know? And I get waffles, and then the other day I told her to bring me some potatoes that I could cook them up and make like hash brown potatoes and she—I don't know where she got this, but she brought me this, she said, "This is hash brown potatoes." But it's in a carton, square carton, packaged up just like a package! I didn't know this—I had felt it in the refrigerator for a couple of days, but I didn't know it was the mashed potatoes! She told me yesterday, you know, it was mashed potatoes! It comes all packaged, you know what I mean? In a solid, sealed package! She said, "It's potatoes." That you can mash—you know, make hash browns! [laughs]

1-00:59:35

Dunning

Well, I'm sure you've seen a lot of different processing.

1-00:59:38

Johnson

Oh, yeah. Now the sausage, of course that comes in packages of six, you know, in a package.

1-00:59:45

Dunning

Now, we're going to pause right now. We're going to turn it off just for a moment because we're at the end of this tape.

1-00:59:59

Johnson

I can't hear what you're saying.

1-01:00:01

Dunning

Okay.

1-01:00:03

Johnson

I can't understand what you're saying.

1-01:00:03

Dunning

Can you pause it for one moment?

1-01:00:13

Johnson

I met an intelligent man, in a sense, with us. But he told us, he said, "Boys," he said, "Look up in the air. You see those birds flying around there?" And he said—I'll never forget it—he said, "Those are the freest things on the face of this earth. Nobody can tell them where to go, how to go, when to go, or what to go. But they all know what they're doing and what they're going! Believe it or not." So I thought to myself—he said, "If you boys all take care of yourself, stay within the law—. There's nothing outside the law that is worth anything to you. Stay within the la, and take care of yourself. When you get old—not within the next five or six years, but if you live to be old—and you can look back on your life and see that you're absolutely clear," he said, "you will be flying like that bird in your mind. In your mind you'll be just as free as that bird." He said, "Anybody can ask you anything in the world about your life and you'll be glad to tell them, because you'll be free." See what I mean? Your mind will be open. "Never have nothing to hide," he said. Now that's—it's hard to do that, but you can do it. And he says, "Now, I feel like I'm the freest and the happiest man in the world," he said, "because to have four boys like you boys and not a single one of you have caused me any trouble, all of you done right." He says, "It keeps my flying like that bird." [laughs] And you know what I mean? It means a whole lot! That means an awful lot! If you just keep flying like that bird, you have to keep right.

1-01:01:53

I've had a lot of jobs in my life—I can't go through—I can remember the jobs, but I can't remember the day and date—but not a single one of them have I ever been laid off, or had any trouble with it, or had any confusion whatsoever. I've never had any trouble with the police, under any—nothing at all. Like—I don't know why—my wife and I lived here—I came here on this lot in 1935. I've been here ever since, right on this lot. One person was telling me, he said—I said, "I don't know, outside of during the war, during World War, from the Japanese"—I used to go up to the shipyard, but I said, "The shipyard was on Macdonald Avenue." Above Macdonald Avenue, and since the war I have never been up there. I haven't up as far as Macdonald Avenue in the last ten years. But for what reason? You what I mean? I have no reason. When I used to

deliver—take care of myself from the stores right here, and I haven't got any—no reason in the world for me to go up there, I haven't got any job up there. All of my work and everything—my pay—. And I've been with the bank, Bank of America, been there—. My last VERSATEL card, the girl she couldn't believe it—Japanese girl—she wanted to tear it up! Been with the Bank of America since 1919.

1-01:03:24

Dunning

They should put you on a TV commercial!

1-01:03:28

Johnson

[Laughs] 1919 on my VERSATEL card on my—[laughs] Went back to—went with Mrs. Demerel, that was the lady that used to—. They wanted to take me back to a gambling joint back in Nevada. What's the name of it? Anyway, someplace that I have—I just don't want to visit because I know it's just a give away.

1-01:03:48

Dunning

The casinos?

1-01:03:50

Johnson

Yeah, casinos, the gambling casino out the back of Nevada. What's the name of it?

1-01:03:54

Dunning

Well, like Harrah's or one of those?

1-01:03:58

Johnson

No, I forget the name of it. Anyway, we had a girl back there, Mrs. Demerel's daughter, she said, "George, do you want to spend any money?" I said, "I don't want to spend a plugged nickel, but I'll give you some money as a gift and I'll call it a Christmas present." So I said, "Well, here." I said—I give her—I had two cards. One I had gotten recently and one called a Mastercard. I got that back in 1919. It's got on it "Customer since 1919." And I give her the other card so—I forgot the—you know the code number on the other card and I didn't know it. And she said, "George," after she put it in the machine, "I can't get any money with this card." And I said, "Here, take this one." This is the one I got in 1919. That's ****. And she put that in the machine, she pressed down the ****, out come the dollars. [laughs] I can see—that card there is over a hundred years old.

1-01:04:56

Dunning

You must be the oldest Bank of America customer in the country!

1-01:05:03

Johnson

I don't know. But here's the thing about it: I tell everybody, they don't know that they are working in the Bank of America on the name, but they don't know they're working for the Bank

of Italy. The Bank of Italy. That's the—when I first went there in 1919, it was the Bank of Italy. They changed it to Bank of America. That's the Bank of America is the Bank of Italy. Under Italian rules and regulations.

1-01:05:31

Dunning

Now do you remember when that changed?

1-01:05:34

Johnson

Yes, that was changed—that was during the '29 Depression. It was Bank of Italy, and they were down on the corner of Market and Powell Street, great big building. And the banks—oh the banks! Banks were all closed up, during the depression. That was a terrible thing. I don't know whether you was around—you were around but whether you was around here. During the '29, during the World War. And if they don't look out, now, you know what I mean, the way prices are going—I may not live to see it, but the way they're going overboard with prices and the money, if they don't look out, they're subject to have another 1929 depression. Because it's got to stop somewhere, you know what I mean? It's got to stop. Over in San Francisco—I was just listening the other night on the radio—average home for pretty near four hundred thousand dollars! That don't make sense!

1-01:06:36

Dunning

That's a fixer-upper, too.

1-01:06:45

Johnson

But who's going to pay that—you know, and you never—the average—the thing of it is, it's getting beyond the average wage. There's nobody in the world can pay four hundred thousand, right now, pay four hundred thousand. They might have maybe a hundred thousand dollars or fifty thousand dollars to put on that house, having a three hundred thousand dollars mortgage, but they're not going to be able to pay that interest on that three hundred thousand with ordinary wages. You know what I mean. It's just—it's just—And then people get to be beyond them, they're going to start rebelling. And that's when you have your revolution and have your depression. But it's got to stop somewhere, this money. Just basing your whole living life on dollars, don't make sense. It doesn't make sense.

1-01:07:30

Dunning

You know what? I think we're going to stop for today and then we'll come back the next time.

1-01:07:37

Johnson

Well, I hope I haven't out-tired you with my talk.

1-01:07:43

Dunning

No, not at all.

1-01:07:44

Johnson

And I don't know whether you've gotten all you want.

1-01:07:46

Dunning

No, in fact we would really like to come back a second time.

1-01:07:49

End of Tape I

[Interview #2: November, 20, 2002]

2-00:00:00

Begin Tape II

2-00:00:07

Dunning

Today is November 20, 2002 and David Washburn is on the camera, and we're interviewing Mr. George Johnson, who is a hundred and eight years old. And we're doing this for the Rosie the Riveter Project and my name is Judith Dunning. Well, thank you Mr. Johnson for having us back the second time. And today, I thought we would fast forward to some of your recollections of Richmond. That last time we talked a lot about your family, your childhood and growing up in Philadelphia and then your move to California—

2-00:00:48

Johnson

You'll have to talk a little louder because my—I'm a little hard of hearing.

2-00:00:51

Dunning

Okay, let me move my chair up a little. Is that better?

2-00:00:55

Johnson

That's better.

2-00:00:54

Dunning

Okay, great. What brought you to the Richmond Annex?

2-00:01:03

Johnson

What brought us to the Richmond area?

2-00:01:02

Dunning

To the Richmond Annex.

2-00:01:05

Johnson

Right here, well, we were looking around for a house. We were living in Berkeley at that time, and we were looking around for a home and my wife did most of the—that was one thing about her, she did most of the business. She was very accurate, very wise. And we had a real estate agent, he took us over into the Orinda area, you know, thinking that—. Because there was a lot of land being sold there, you know for people to build homes on—and she thought that maybe if we could get some of the land we could get an agent to build us a house. After—but we—she showed us—he showed us a lot running down to a creek which was about an acre of land, a little over an acre of land altogether. And they wanted three hundred dollars for that acre of land in Orinda.

2-00:02:01

Dunning

Oh boy!

2-00:02:00

Johnson

We didn't have the money to do—we were—you know, I was working on a job. In those days, you know, fifty, seventy-five years ago, you could work all day for nothing, practically, anyway. But finally, the agent brought us to this place. The lady was here—she had this place with a little boy—she had a—she didn't have a—she just had the lot, and she had a little garage, I mean a little garage built on the property over towards the west side here. Nothing but open land. And she wanted to sell it because she needed money. She had a little boy, and so we decided to buy the lot from her. And this is oh—Hurse, her name was. His name was George Hurse, her son. She was living alone. We bought the land from her, and we've been here—that was in 1935—and I've been here even since, on this land.

2-00:03:02

Dunning

Do you recall what you paid for the lot?

2-00:03:05

Johnson

What I paid for the lot? [laughs] I hate to mention that. [laughs] It wasn't much, I'll tell you that.

2-00:03:14

Dunning

Okay. It was under three hundred dollars.

2-00:03:15

Johnson

Oh yes!

2-00:03:19

Dunning

[laughs] And how big a property was it?

2-00:03:21

Johnson

Well, was seventy-five foot front, which is {the same now?}. I didn't realize it, but it was practically equal to what they call three home building lots in Richmond. Three thirty-five foot lots. Seventy-five foot front, see? That's that they call it. Seventy-five foot and a hundred and fifty foot deep. And we bought the land from her with the title and everything—the title of the land. But the title of the land—I hate to say this—but the title—I don't know what the people can do with it—but I feel it was stolen, and I figure that I know the person who stole the title. The title had my wife and my name on the title and Mrs. Hurse's name on it, you know. Title to this particular property.

2-00:04:09

Dunning

Someone stole it before you bought it or after? When was the title stolen?

2-00:04:18

Johnson

Stolen? It was stolen—let's see now—three—oh, I can't go back, time passes so fast. I would say about four or five years ago.

2-00:04:28

Dunning

Oh recently!

2-00:04:29

Johnson

Recently, yes. I had some friends—I shouldn't say this—I won't mention their names—but anyway, they were so-called friends. I took them down to the Bank of America in Berkeley where I had the title and all my other papers stored, and I hadn't gone into that box in almost fifty years because I had no reason to go in it. Safe deposit box, you know? We took it down there and we were showing this lady, with her daughter, in the box and we saw the title there. Saw the title of the property, She took it up. She picked it out and looked at it. We put it back in the little box that goes into the vault, you know, and when we got up to go, her daughter says, “Oh, let mama”—we have—from the title room, in the desk where we was, it was a small partition. And the daughter said, “Oh, let mama go back there with— to help to put the box away. We'll wait for her out here, George.” See? To me, it was all right. Just absolutely ignorant of a thought of what terrible trouble had happened. So when they come back, we came out, we went to dinner, and then we went up—come up here to the cemetery, in El Cerrito, and made arrangements for my funeral up there in case anything happens to me.

2-00:06:01

Dunning

That's at Sunset?

2-00:06:04

Johnson

At Sunset, there's a vault up there. My wife is up there in the vault. And the vault is shown with my wife's name on it with the date of her birth and death. It's the third tier up.

2-00:06:15

Dunning

Oh, okay.

2-00:06:16

Johnson

And that's where I will go. It's all paid for. And so the very next day, Mrs. Demerel—she's the lady who's been looking out after me for a long time—they were from the Asian islands somewhere—and a friend of mine. A little boy—he was a little boy when we first knew him, but he's a young man now. He's a full-grown man now, he lives in Los Angeles now. But anyway, I took this lady and this man down to the bank because I wanted to show him the title. The very next day. We wandered through the vault there, all through the vault. The title was gone. The title—the very next day. Not a week, not a month, but the very next day, the title was gone. Nobody had been to see that title in fifty years, as far as I was concerned, because—the girl there said, “You haven't been down here to open this drawer, Mr. Johnson, for over fifty years.”

2-00:07:22

Dunning

And did you notify the bank?

2-00:07:25

Johnson

No, I didn't notify—yeah—no—well, I went down to the bank and then I asked the girl, the clerk that was there—she's not there anymore—but she was there then. And I was explaining to her about this lady that was with me that had helped to put the box away, the drawer away. With the clerk. The clerk and my wife—I mean the clerk and this lady went back into the vault room to put the, you know, the drawer away. And I asked her about it. She's not—unfortunately, this girl's not there—but I asked her a little while later did she see anything happen when that lady helped to put the box away? She said, “Yes.” She said, “She picked something out of the box, out of the drawer, before we put it in”—you know—“in the vault” In the vault room. “She picked something out of the box and put it in her breast! And I said, “What did it look like?” She said, “It looked like a letter.” That's what the clerk told me this lady did. And I noticed—then we—as I say, we left the bank, we came down to the cemetery, made arrangements for my internment—whenever it might be—that day. Then we came home, here. And we went—sitting in the room here, dining room, and—she and her daughter. She was with her daughter, you know. Daughter's name is Adrienne. And she got up a half a dozen times and went back to the bathroom, the mother. Half a dozen times, all within five minutes. Now I—in my own mind—after what happened, you know when I reasoned what had happened—I figured that she had gone back there so many times to rearrange this thing. Because she had on a kind of a blouse jacket, you know. To arrange that thing in her blouse. But now, this girl lives in—not north here but—

2-00:09:36

Dunning

Vallejo?

2-00:09:36

Johnson

Up high, longer than that

2-00:09:37

Washburn
Vacaville?

2-00:09:38

Johnson

No further—a few hundred miles from here. Oh, what is it? Name of—we used to run up there. Chico. Chico.

2-00:09:53

Dunning

Oh, Chico.

2-00:09:55

Johnson

Chico, yeah. Now this—and her daughter works in the bank up at Chico. Her daughter works in the bank at Chico. Which, I don't know what she's doing, but she and her husband—he was working down in San Jose, down in the Santa Clara Valley there, but he's retired now—he's up and he's pushing seventy. And she is, too, of course. But that's what happened on that particular occasion. The very next day—wasn't next week or next month—but the very next day when I go down to the bank the title was gone.

2-00:10:22

Dunning

Did you notify the title company?

2-00:10:25

Johnson

No, I didn't. I told my cousin in Chicago about it. He said that they would see about it.

2-00:10:32

Dunning

Oh, okay.

2-00:10:32

Johnson

But anyway this—

2-00:10:34

Dunning

And have you seen that woman and her daughter since?

2-00:10:37

Johnson

Oh, yes! She was down here on my hundred and seventh birthday. That's been over a year ago, you know. Last—the birthday before this. My last birthday before this. I was a hundred and eight, this one. She was down here, I'm a hundred and six. She and her whole family were down here from Chico. Acting very social, but—

2-00:10:59

Dunning

Did you ask her about it?

2-00:11:00

Johnson

No, no. I asked her a long time ago about it, but she denied she knew anything about it. And I know from the way she spoke to me that she was very—you know—you know how a person can act when they're trying to deny something?

2-00:11:14

Dunning

Wow. That's a story.

2-00:11:18

Johnson

But I asked my cousin about it, my brother's boy in Chicago—he's the one who—he said, well they could straighten that out. They could straighten—

2-00:11:25

Dunning

Oh, okay.

2-00:11:28

Johnson

—they could straighten it out, but she says—he says, he says, my cousin—just the other day, he said, well, you pay the taxes on the property ever since you bought it? I said, “Absolutely.” “Oh,” he says, “well”—

2-00:11:38

Dunning

Right. So everything is in your name.

2-00:11:41

Johnson

Everything is in my name. Everything's in my name and nothing else—nobody—I've never had—never borrowed money on the property or nothing. The property right today is mine, solely.

2-00:11:52

Dunning

Well, when you first moved here, what else was around?

2-00:11:55

Johnson

Nothing.

2-00:11:57

Dunning

Nothing?

2-00:11:57

Johnson

Just the lot. See, she had this garage, you know, with a little—like one room upstairs, you know? The garage was downstairs. So what I did—I had the garage walls lifted up and put in a little flat place under, in the basement part of it, and that's where we lived. We lived in that garage after

we had lifted it up. We had a company to do that, you know. They lifted it up and underneath there, now I have my furnace and a I had a carpenter's shop and all that stuff under there. But anyway, we lived up top there for the whole time I built this property. I didn't start building this property here until about 1940, this house.

2-00:12:48

Dunning

And did you build it in stages?

2-00:12:49

Johnson

I built it in stages—you know—well, I kept building it all—buying material, going, hauling material to this place, and cutting the material by hand. I didn't have a carpenter's, you know, regular automatic saw, and I cut and fit the lumber and nailed the lumber. Every nail in this house I nailed myself. Never had a single person to help me in that respect. And I cut the boards and all the boards, the flooring, and—now that's another thing—the outside walls are one-by-six inch boards on a forty-five degree angle. That was put there before I put the paper and the wire and the stucco on. Not just plywood. See, now they build a house with just plywood on the outside and plywood on the floors. It's one-by-six inch boards on a forty-five degree angle on all of these floors, and then the hardwood is put on top of that.

2-00:13:51

Dunning

And where did you buy your materials?

2-00:13:54

Johnson

Different places. Different places. The fellows—two men that lived across the street at that time—Al and Joe, I think their name was—but anyway, they was interested in seeing me build this house by myself. This Al, he said—and I told him, I said, “Well, I don't know what I'm going to put on the floors, but,” I said, “I'd like to put something nice on the floors.” After he saw the boards on the floors, he says, “Those boards,” he said, “would stand hardwood floors on there, George.” He says, “Let me get you some hardwood.” I said, “Well, where you going to get it at?” “Oh,” he says, “I can get—you can't get hardwood around here now, but I can get you some from North Carolina.” So he sent all the way to North Carolina and got enough wood to put on this floor and upstairs floor from North Carolina. Tongue and groove. Hardwood oak. Turn this carpet up and you can see that. Look at it.

2-00:14:50

Dunning

I can see it—it's beautiful.

2-00:14:51

Johnson

And that's—and he nailed it. They were very, very friendly. He nailed it, and then he said—I said, “Well”—before he nailed it, I said to him, “Let me nail it.” “Oh no,” he says, “George. I'll nail it because I want to hide the nails.” I said, “Where you going to hide the nails? What do you mean?” “Well,” he says, “you'll see.” So after he nailed down, two or three days later he come and he puttied up all of the nail heads. You know: sank the nails in about an eight of an inch, and

then he got some putty and turned the putty so that it would match the color or the wood. And he put that putty over the holes where the nails was, then he varnished over the whole thing. And you can't tell today where those nails are.

2-00:15:50

Dunning

Well, that's amazing!

2-00:15:54

Johnson

Oh! They were wonderful. There was two of them, you know, two friends. They lived over there across the street to the right.

2-00:16:00

Dunning

Who else lived in the neighborhood?

2-00:16:05

Johnson

Neighbors? Directly across the street was Kirby, a man by the name of Kirby. They came—they built that house over there, as I remember—now there was nothing there at all when I came here, nothing—anyway—and he built that house, and I remember he said, "Sears Roebuck built the house for me."

2-00:16:25

Dunning

Oh, the catalogue homes from Sears.

2-00:16:30

Johnson

I think it was. But he said, "Sears Roebuck built it," see. But—

2-00:16:36

Dunning

Those were excellent. Those were great homes.

2-00:16:36

Johnson

Oh, yes. And I think he sold it to the fellow that was in there, I think—I'm not sure, but I think he sold it for, he said, nine thousand dollars. Nine thousand. But I remember him saying Sears Roebuck charged him seven thousand dollars; can you imagine, a house like that for seven thousand?

2-00:16:55

Dunning

Right, well wouldn't Sears—

2-00:16:56

Johnson

Anyway, the people that are living in it now, as I understand it—I don't know: I don't—I haven't been able to see them, but I heard they paid ninety six thousand dollars for it. You know? And

the house was built for six thousand, six, seven thousand dollars. But that's the price, that's the change of the times. It's like me, here.

2-00:17:16

Dunning

Well, this is called the Richmond Annex, but this is a little extension of it.

2-00:17:20

Johnson

This is an extension. Now, this area in here, from Central Avenue all the way up, you know, up here and over to bay—it was all called “no-man’s-land.” It wasn’t in the city of Richmond at all. Wasn’t incorporated. And that’s another thing that—well, I can’t squabble about it because for some reason it hasn’t confronted me yet, but I cannot understand how and when and why this particular block of land in here became the city of Richmond. Because it was called “no-man’s-land”—it was county land when we moved here, you know what I mean? And I’m under the idea that when a strip of land is taken into the city it had to be voted in, see? I don’t remember ever voting this land into the city of Richmond.

2-00:18:20

Dunning

Well, is it a little like north Richmond isn’t a part of Richmond?

2-00:18:24

Johnson

No, this would be south Richmond. See, this is to the south. This is below the main road up here.

2-00:18:34

Dunning

Right, but north Richmond isn’t a part of the city, either. It’s—they have—they’re not under the government, same government as the city of Richmond.

2-00:18:46

Johnson

So, since it was such a small area—and then—I can’t remember just exactly when it was—but anyway, the neighbors that were here, they kicked about going into Richmond, for some reason, I don’t know. But anyway, it was voted on by the people who lived here at that time to have them pass a law whereby this area would be called—would come under a certain proposition. And it comes under Proposition 13, and that—see because—as the people—you see, when we moved here we were supposed to be more or less pick and shovel type, see what I mean? In a sense. We had more education than that, but anyway—as people was moving in, they was increasing the property and all so fast that we couldn’t see how we was going to be able to keep up with the taxes. So they had to pass this rule and regulation called Proposition 13 so that all the land that was here at that time could stay under—I think that was about 19— oh I don’t know—I just can’t remember how far it was back. It was way back. But anyway, all the land is under Proposition 13 until it is sold. See what I mean? And Proposition 13 was to protect the people who were living in it, because as people was moving in and building houses the property tax would go up more than the people could afford who were already living here, see what I mean? There were people who were just very poor. But anyway, Proposition 13 stays in existence to all houses until it’s sold. If the house is sold, naturally that eliminates Proposition 13 and it comes

up to the normal tax rate as the property next door. But now, this property on this house is still under Proposition 13, I'm still under the same proposition, way back to 1935, my property value stays back there. The property assessment, you know what I mean?

2-00:21:06

Dunning

Oh, okay. So that hasn't changed.

2-00:21:08

Johnson

That's hasn't changed. And I still pay the tax that I paid back when it was 193—probably when it was 1935.

2-00:21:20

Dunning

What are those taxes?

2-00:21:21

Johnson

Where are they?

2-00:21:20

Dunning

What are they? How much do you have to pay?

2-00:21:25

Johnson

Well, I don't want to say that.

2-00:21:25

Dunning

Okay. [laughing]

2-00:21:24

Johnson

It's not much, I'll tell you that. And if I had to pay them I wouldn't be able to stay here. You know, the natural taxes of today, that's what it would be today, know what I mean? But the only reason I stay here is because I'm on the Proposition 13. And see—and some of the neighbors when they moved in here a while back—I don't know whether you remember it or not, but you know they took—they tried to eliminate, have that Proposition 13 eliminated, see? Here, quite awhile back.

2-00:21:54

Dunning

Now, have many of your neighbors—

2-00:21:56

Johnson

And they took it, and the complaint went all the way to the Supreme Court. United States Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court issued a notice to this particular property—Proposition 13—that it is non-negotiable. Nobody, unless—the only way it becomes eliminated is when this

property is sold. If you sell your property, then that's the end of Proposition 13 on the property. This house still comes under Proposition 13. No way in the world can they dispute it, because the Supreme Court has said the issue itself is non-negotiable: don't try to argue it out, see what I mean?

2-00:22:41

Dunning

Now, your neighbors. Now—

2-00:22:43

Johnson

They pay a high price. They pay the tax on the, the regular tax rate!

2-00:22:50

Dunning

Have there been any neighbors that have—have most of your neighbors stayed, or have they left as—?

2-00:22:54

Johnson

No, they've all gone, they came—they stayed for eight, nine, ten, years but they finally—and their children grew up, you know. The fellow directly across the street, his name was Kirby, the next is [Rasson, they were roofers?]. I call her once in a while. She lives up—way up beyond Chico, and every once in a while I talk to her and I talk to Mrs. [Tula?] Kirby. But all the other neighbors, I don't know where they are. But the neighbor directly across the street, the two of them there, were Kirby and [Rasson?]. And the other boy—the next house—I forget his name, but he was a young boy, and I used to carry him around in my arms. He was, you know, seven, eight, nine in that sense—and I'd carry him sometimes. But he grew up and he got to running a great big dump truck of some kind. Not a dump truck but an excavation-type truck. And he was excavating some land for the company he was working for and dropped dead right on the property. Dropped dead while he was working. And I held him in my arms as a baby over here. But he grew up and, you know, young man—

2-00:24:07

Dunning

Now did you see a lot of changes in the neighborhood when the freeways came? It seems like it cut the Richmond Annex in half.

2-00:24:14

Johnson

Oh, yes. This road here was only a two-lane road when we came here: one up, one down. One east, one west. But then they widened it and put four lanes on there, since we've been here. And there was this bridge across the freeway here, that's—this is a new one they put in here several years ago—but the old one was in here fifty years ago when they widened the freeway. It was just an iron-type thing. My wife and I were down there one day when they were building the bridge, building the road, and—. The kids—to go to school over here—what few there were, had to go all the way down to Central Avenue and go across and up the other side to go to school. And my wife complained about it, said, "Why?" We had no children, but she thought that was terrible because the mothers would have to take them all the way down to Central Avenue, which

is four blocks down, and then back up on the other side to go to school. Why don't they put a bridge or a road across here, so they won't have to go so far? Which they did. But that road was fifty years ago, and it had rusted out. So here a few years ago when they re-widened this highway, they tore that bridge down and put this new one there and they got a new bridge across there now. But the original bridge, my wife had complained about the kids having to walk across—walk down to Central Avenue.

2-00:25:36

Dunning

Well, did you feel isolated when the road went through? Isolated from the rest of El Cerrito and Richmond?

2-00:25:43

Johnson

No, we never felt—I can't say we did because we'd always go down to Central Avenue and go across. We never had any desire to go right directly across because, see the stores were down off of Central Avenue in San Pablo, right in that area. You know, they were down—that's where all the stores—and that's—we had to go down, and go—. In those days, we had to go across the road, you had to press a button. That was before they built the—re-widened the freeway. And when they re-widened it, then they put the tunnel underneath and put the freeway over it. But as we went across, we had to press a button in order to stop the traffic so we could walk across it.

2-00:26:22

Dunning

And did you do most of your shopping in El Cerrito?

2-00:26:25

Johnson

Oh, yes. All of it. All of the shopping.

2-00:26:27

Dunning

Okay. And how about—would you go to Richmond very often?

2-00:26:31

Johnson

No, never went to Richmond. Never went to Richmond. I haven't been up to Richmond—I guess—I shouldn't say it, although I live here—I haven't been up in Richmond five times since the Japanese war. I haven't been up there. I've no reason to go there. I had—my wife and I had no reason. We had no business up there. In fact, in what little city—I mean street, or block—I forget where it was now, but we paid our insurance, we had insurance, you know—

2-00:26:57

Dunning

Macdonald Avenue?

2-00:26:57

Johnson

No, it wasn't Macdonald Avenue it was a street that runs north and south. Macdonald runs east and west. This street, as I remember, ran north and south. But anyway, it was for quite a number

of years that I went up there to pay the insurance and the very street that I paid insurance at for eight, nine years that was all Japanese. They didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. Can you imagine that? Now what street that was, I cannot—

2-00:27:25

Dunning

Twenty-third?

2-00:27:24

Johnson

I don't know—it was up in here somewhere. But I haven't been up in Richmond—for some unknown reason, I had no reason—. I didn't vote up there, you know? And my wife knew the mayor a long time ago. My wife said that—I forget her name, but it was a black mayor. Black mayor—do you remember the black mayor—first black mayor they had there? Oh I don't know it was twenty-five, thirty years ago, I guess. More than that, maybe more than that.

2-00:27:57

Dunning

Well, I remember George Livingston, but that was more recent.

2-00:27:59

Johnson

I don't know, but anyway—

2-00:28:02

Dunning

And what was your impression of Richmond? Did you have an image of what Richmond was like?

2-00:28:07

Johnson

No, no we didn't ever—. You see, as I was telling you, when the agent brought us here after looking at—we came here and looked at this property from—and we were living in Berkeley, and we came up and took the property and we were so involved in trying to make a living here. You know what I mean. Trying to establish a home, a house of some kind, that we never thought about Richmond. Never thought about Richmond. Because they called it “no-man's-land” then, see?

2-00:28:35

Dunning

The whole Richmond?

2-00:28:36

Johnson

And there was nobody here. We were the only ones here. It was all open, you know. I could have bought the whole thing for practically nothing.

2-00:28:43

Dunning

Well, do you have recollections of when—right at World War II—when the whole population changed in the Richmond and the Bay Area, and the population from Richmond went from 23,000 to 125,000?

2-00:28:59

Johnson

Well, up in the—it changed during the war, as I can remember it. I remember seeing—I worked up in the shipyard for a while, you know. Because I had done carpentry work before that. And I went up through there working as what they called a carpenter in metal—doing the same type of work in metal is called a flanging. See, I was a flanger. And I'd go to work and get on the bus and come on back home. Overnight, overnight, overnight, overnight, overnight. Never went anywheres in Richmond. And our voting precinct was right across the street here, see? When we'd vote, we'd go right across the street. That is a little to the right here. First houses down there and you come up the streets from the road on the other side.

2-00:29:52

Dunning

Now, you mentioned the last time, that you only worked in the shipyards for a few months. Can you tell me why you got the job there?

2-00:30:02

Johnson

Why I got the job there?

2-00:30:03

Dunning

And why you left.

2-00:30:05

Johnson

Well, I got the job there because they wanted help. At that time—now that's the Japanese war, you understand—they had about thirty-five thousand people working in these three ship ways—what they call ways. You know what I mean? They were building three ship ways—three ships at a time, you know? In three different docks, right there together. And they had thirty-five thousand people working there. And there was no trouble and anybody that come there looking for a job, got a job. And there were people from all over the country. And I often think of that now. If this country went to war—probably they would conscript the people in the same way that they did then when they were working up there in the shipyard. But those thirty-five thousand, you understand, when there was only maybe four or five thousand people around here—they came from all over the country. See what I mean? And they had a different—they had a place there where they would go, like the employment office, and in that employment office they had four or five booths. And over the booths they had the name written: German, French, Spanish—languages, you know. The people that come there to work—all nationalities come there to work in the shipyard—but they couldn't understand English and they had the English printed over the desk where they were. You know what I mean? That's the way they—and then they—I was working with a crew there, there were two Englishmen and a German and a Frenchman right in the nine crew, [laughs] you know, gang that we worked with. And that's the way they worked.

You didn't—there was no change, no difference in nationality—all they wanted was men to work and build ships.

2-00:32:00

And they launched—all we'd build was the hull, you know—they'd launch a hull there about every week, every two weeks we'd launch a ship. That's called the hull—that was just the bottom part, you know? Then they would float it out into the bay—they had a place there in the bay where they'd float it over to a dock and that's where they equipped it and finished up the inside, all the top. All they wanted—all we did was put the—build a hull, you know, so you could float it. And then as long as that thing could float everyone—about every week or two they'd—they had enough floating steps to float that ship on out and then they'd float it on down and put it on the dock—what they call the dry dock, and that's where they equipped it all down. We never saw any equipment or anything like that. All we built was the hull. And that's why I say—I worked as a flanger, because I was putting all of this sheet metal in the hull and everything in the inside.

2-00:32:52

Dunning

Now, I know the shipyard went twenty four hours a day.

2-00:32:55

Johnson

Oh my god, yes. Twenty-four hours, I should say so!

2-00:32:59

Dunning

Which shift were you on?

2-00:33:01

Johnson

Which ship?

2-00:33:01

Dunning

Shift. What was your schedule?

2-00:33:03

Johnson

Well, I was on the day shift. From eight o'clock in the morning to four thirty in the afternoon.

2-00:33:11

Dunning

And did you make any friends in the shipyard, of people that came to this area from—

2-00:33:18

Johnson

No, you worked in gangs and you—I remember when the whistle would blow at four thirty, you know, and they would change the crews there, it was thousands of people leaving the ships going out to get on the buses, you know? And so forth and so you didn't—you was just working and you didn't pay any attention to anybody else, see what I mean? I was unpeccular. You didn't form any friends; you didn't have time. Everybody was working, thinking, worrying about

building ships and thinking about the war. All the people that were working—never heard no, you know, like organizations of any kind amongst the crews, you know what I mean? All the crews—oh, they had about at least thirty-five thousand people working there. But no organizational crew. No union, nothing like that. Nobody said anything about a union. All you were doing was working for the government making ships, building ships, you know?

2-00:34:15

Dunning

Although, there were some unions then.

2-00:34:19

Johnson

Oh, there were unions: in town. But not unions on the ships. The ships—you see, that was all—that was all under the government. That was under the government, you know what I mean? The shipyard was controlled by the government. But in town, you know, private land in town, that was controlled by the union.

2-00:34:38

Dunning

Now, did you work with any women in your gang?

2-00:34:41

Johnson

No. Oh, no.

2-00:34:43

Dunning

Now you must have seen women working in the shipyards.

2-00:34:45

Johnson

Oh, yes. Had women doing everything, yes. I remember standing one day waiting for the bus and eight or ten women come up and they felt so happy because they were flangers—they were doing flanging—and welding and they were happy because they couldn't understand why men made so much fuss over their job when it was so easy to weld. [laughs] And they were happy. Oh they were so happy! Because they said, "We come to work, we go to work, and we go home!" [laughs]

2-00:35:17

Dunning

Now, which year did you start?

2-00:35:19

Johnson

What year? Oh my god! That's hard for me to say.

2-00:35:24

Dunning

Because it was really getting up and running in the—well, actually there was some ship building activities in the very early forties—

2-00:35:31

Johnson

That was in the fifties—I cannot tell—I cannot tell—

2-00:35:35

Dunning

Probably the forties.

2-00:35:35

Johnson

Yeah, I remember that—I remember on a Sunday, it was on a Sunday morning my wife was back there asleep, and I hadn't built all the house—and she woke up and it was about oh six, seven o'clock, and she said, "George, we're at war." It was on a Sunday. I says, "War? What are you talking about, war?" She said, "I saw the bombs coming down, exploding." She says, "I don't know where they were, but I saw them." And I said, "You saw bombs in your sleep? You was asleep?" She says, "Yes, I was dreaming and I saw bombs coming down and there was ships of some kind. There was explosions and everything was flying up in the air." That was about six or seven o'clock in the morning. At nine o'clock, after we got up and was eating our breakfast and the telephone rang and the president was saying, "We're at war with Japan." Ships—Pearl—I said, "You saw it in your sleep."

2-00:36:33

Dunning

She was psychic!

2-00:36:37

Johnson

She saw that in her sleep. That Sunday morning when the Japanese sank those ships in Pearl Harbor. But she was very—

2-00:36:47

Dunning

Did your wife ever consider working in the shipyards?

2-00:36:50

Johnson

Oh, yes. No, she didn't work in the shipyard, but she worked over in Alameda where they had a lot of the ship work over there. In Alameda they had about oh, thirty-five, forty thousand people working over in Alameda navy shipyard [Naval Air Station]. And let me tell you about her! She went—now, she went—you know, when I think about it now, it makes me shiver to think how in the world could I allow her or seen her go all the way from here—she was—. I was growing—you know, in the yard I was growing all kinds of flowers and everything, just wild—and she was so amazed over the flowers that she would get a whole armful of flowers—six o'clock in the morning—and walk all the way; we had no car—walk all the way to San Pablo Avenue and get on the bus, and that bus would take her way down to Broadway and Fourteenth Street, City Hall in Oakland, and then take another bus to go all the way over to Alameda! With an armful of flowers, and she used to tell me a lot of time that the bus driver—bus by the crowd—the crowded—the bus would be loaded with ship workers, you know? Going to work. And she said, "Sometimes the driver would get out and help me up in the bus with all those flowers."

Sometimes roses, great big long-stem roses she would carry all the way to Alameda where she worked.

2-00:38:14

Well, let me tell you about her and her job. She was working in one of the distribution centers, they called them, where a plane would be shot down over there, you know, and they wouldn't just discard it. They would gather up all the wreckage, all the crap, of that particular plane and send it back to America on any plane that was coming this way from one of the islands, you know? And it all would finally wind up in Alameda there, at the various stations there. And at her particular station there was about, she said about ten or twelve girls all working there, checking on this stuff that came—as it would come into Alameda. And they had certain bins there for certain parts of certain—you know, the good parts. A plane would be shot down, but all the planes wouldn't be—all of the parts wouldn't be wrecked. Some of the parts, you know, very good. But they sent them back. They'd just, you know, strip it down over there and send it back here on whatever plane was coming back, and at Alameda there was a plane going out of there every day to one of the islands over there. There was—it's like they say—there was eight or ten different islands over there and some of—and there was more than—maybe say fifty, sixty miles apart.

2-00:39:22

But now the manager of the particular house that she was working in—it was a large shop, she says it was about a hundred by a hundred and fifty, a bin-type place where they had all these different parts in different groups, at certain places. And she said—my wife, every time a plane would come by—I mean, one of the drivers would come by and say, "I'm going to Guam, I'm going to this place, I'm going to that place." They'd name the little islands alongside of the place where they was going to go. And she would have a box ready and put the parts in a box that was in an island—she knew all the little islands over there that were, you know, in the war with Japan. And she'd put them in a box and put it there so that the driver could take it and put it on his plane if he was going within a hundred miles of the island, you know, where that box was supposed to go. But the superintendent of the shop, he wanted to wait until the plane was going to any particular island with nothing but just parts for that particular island. Well, it might be a week, two weeks, or three weeks before they'd have enough stuff to go to any certain island. But my wife would always sneak it off and put it to a plane—put it in a box, they'd put it on a plane that was going to any island close to the one where it was needed, you know? And, oh, of course that was against the organization rules of the guy that was running that particular shop.

2-00:41:06

Dunning

How long did she stay in her job?

2-00:41:09

Johnson

Oh she stayed in her job until pretty near after the war. But anyway—so he didn't like it, the manager of that particular shop didn't like it. He couldn't do nothing about it, but she'd put those things on the plane going near wherever it was supposed to go and the commander of the island, of the whole Alameda naval air base — thirty-five or forty thousand people working over there at the island, at the Alameda naval air base—and he'd come around about every month, just taking a business tour around, you know, and this particular time he came around. That gave the

boss of her shop a chance to give him a good idea of what Ida was doing disorganizing her routine. Taking stuff out and sending them over there to certain places when it was only two or three hundred miles from where it was supposed to go but there was a plane going in that direction and she'd put the stuff on the plane and he said he didn't know where the plane—whether the plane ever got there or not. Just disorganizing his whole routine and stuff.

2-00:42:12

Dunning

Did she get into trouble?

2-00:42:12

Johnson

Oh. Let me tell you the trouble! Yeah, she got into trouble all right. When she got through telling the commander what she was doing and what the boss of that shop wanted to do—he wanted to wait 'til a plane was going to a certain island and take certain things to that particular island rather than sending it someplace near where it could be gotten ahold of and shipped over to, you know, within fifty, a hundred miles of where it was. When he got through telling the commander—I forget his name—but he was commander of the whole Alameda naval air base; thousands of people under him—he got through and he said to her—.

2-00:42:56

I had a fellow, a very close friend, worked in the shop right across the road, right across the yard, right across the wall, the hall, you know, and he heard every word and he said, “I heard the commander ask the boss: ‘Did she do all of that? Did she do everything you’re saying she’s doin’?’” And he said, “Oh, he stomped his foot: ‘Oh! She’s disrupting this whole routine of mine. She’s disrupting everything! Sending stuff over there and I don’t know what’s going and what isn’t going. But she said, “We ought to get it over there, we’ve got to get it over there.” She has no right to do that.’”

2-00:43:25

The commander—when he got through, the commander said—before he left, he said, “Well look: If this lady is doing all that you said she’s doing, I want her in my office. I want her in my office. If she’s seeing that those things get over there like you say she’s seeing them get over, I want her in my office. Not somebody like you, wanting stuff to hang around here until you get a whole pile of it. Those men are over there are giving their life! They need this stuff! If she wants to—if it’s here, and it can go over there, and if there’s a plane going near the place where that part is wanted, send it near so it can be sent from that island over to where it is and get it. Get that list, keep that stuff moving! And if she thinks it’s wise to keep it moving, I want her in my office!” And she went up and worked for him. That put her over him! And in two weeks, he quit.

2-00:44:18

Dunning

Wow! That’s quite a story!

2-00:44:20

Johnson

Yeah! Yeah! He quit.

2-00:44:20

Dunning

And tell me why you left the Richmond shipyards.

2-00:44:25

Johnson

Why'd I go there?

2-00:44:25

Dunning

Why did—well, I know why you went there—why did you quit?

2-00:44:28

Johnson

I quit because it just wasn't my life. It wasn't my life.

2-00:44:34

Dunning

What about it you didn't like?

2-00:44:35

Johnson

I didn't like working in metal, that kind of metal, you know what I mean. I was used to working on finished product but not—and it was such a—I don't know. I just—I just somehow—I just didn't like the environment. I didn't like the atmosphere of the whole thing.

2-00:44:55

Dunning

What was the atmosphere?

2-00:44:55

Johnson

Atmosphere, just a rough—rough. The gangs that you had to work with were so rough. People from all over the country who knew nothing at all about the work but just stumbling around, stumbling around, and acting as though they knew what they were doing and didn't, and I told the boss there, I said, "I can't take it. I'm getting a job I'm getting' a"—. And I got out of there. You know what I did? I went down, I went back to the post office. Back down to the Oakland Post Office and told them, "I'm going to go back to the post office!" They sent me back to the post office—Twelfth and Alice, I think it was. I went back to the post office at Twelfth and Alice and I worked there, then I went up to the main post office at the—that one's at the Twelfth, now. The old one was way down in West Oakland. I don't know what it was: some street down there. But anyway, they discarded that office down there and that was when I moved up to the main office at Twelfth and Alice. And I worked there at the Twelfth and Alice office for a while, then I finally—still—I thought to myself: "I'm just not equipped for this. I'm a machinist. I'm a machinist. I've studied mechanics ever since—." And I went and I said—

2-00:46:08

I heard that they wanted an engineer out at the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. I went to the office there at Twelfth and Alice—the government had a big employment office there and I told them what I wanted, and how I wanted it, and my equipment, and they sent me out there. They put me to work that day! And I stayed there for past—I think I was there about nineteen years. That was

when I quit: up until I was seventy. You see, I was well up in age even in those days. Now they wouldn't [laughs]—Even if he's sixty—I don't know—people quitting work now forty, fifty-five, and sixty years old. My God! I worked until I was seventy! In the office—and they was laying me on the table the day I quit. First of May. They were laying me on the table there: five doctors. And examining me and all, and I couldn't understand what in the world they was talking about, what there were doing. And so I heard one—there was five of them in there—and one of them says, "I don't see how he's walking. I don't see how he walks." "Did you work today?" They kept asking me: "Did you work today?" Or: "When are you working last?" I said, "This is my last day. I'm seventy years old today. And I don't want to quit, but it's the law: I have to quit. The government don't want me to work over seventy." Now, you can work until you drop dead.

2-00:47:32

Dunning

And here, you've been retired for almost forty years!

2-00:47:35

Johnson

I've been retired over thirty-five years.

2-00:47:37

Dunning

Right, and what have you done in your retirement? How'd you keep yourself busy?

2-00:47:42

Johnson

How'd I keep myself busy? Just loafing along and growing things and growing things and helping other people. Just helping friends and so forth and so on. And then my—and my wife—see, I cooked for her for eight years, you know? And she didn't—I never let her cook—

2-00:47:58

Dunning

After she had her stroke.

2-00:48:00

Johnson

Yeah, after she had her stroke. But up—the first of that—. We would help out our friends, because we had a lot of friends that were up against it, you know. And she would help them, I would help them and that was what we did. But the whole time I was working for the—that was my last job—at the Oak Knoll navy hospital. That was the last job I worked up until I was seventy. What startled me so was why I was so excited and so concerned that I was working, you know, at seventy, and—.

2-00:48:44

So when they got through, they give me the folder with all of the data in it and told me to take it over to the archives building, you know, where they kept all the records. And that was—Oak Knoll Naval Hospital, you know, it takes up a lot of place: almost a hundred acres of land. And buildings all over the place. When I take it over to the archive building I just—naturally, being [laughs] worried and anxious about what in the world they were worried about—well, not worried but concerned—and I opened it in there to one article and you wouldn't believe what I saw! And I saw in that book how they thought that I was crippling and wasn't able to work.

That's been thirty five, almost forty years ago, and I'm still up. And they couldn't see how I was walking. And you know why? Because in the X-ray it showed that the fifth vertebra of my spine is completely out of place. The fifth vertebra of my spine. Now, look at me! I'm working every—I can't understand that. They can't understand it, either. How am I walking and working and not complaining under those conditions? I should have been retired five or six or ten years before I did, under the circumstances.

2-00:50:10

And that's why now—I hate to say this, I shouldn't say it I guess—but I don't have much faith in the medical profession. I don't have—I can't—I want to, but I can't. I had a fellow here—I told him I wanted a doctor, clean my ears out. Now I'd had my ears cleaned out many years ago when I first—oh—long time ago—fifty years ago, almost. Forty or fifty. And the doctors, they went into my ears, as I can remember, and treated me like I was a newborn baby. My ears, you know? Cleaning my ears. They put stuff in there and they squirmed around and everything—two nurses, along with the doctor, and they squirmed around as if I—made me feel as if I was a newborn baby. Now, here, this lady took me here—oh about a year or so—time goes so fast—and over here somewhere over here to a doctor to have my ears cleaned out.

2-00:51:16

Washburn
George?

2-00:51:15

Johnson
Yes.

2-00:51:15

Washburn
This is David.

2-00:51:18

Johnson
Hello?

2-00:51:18

Washburn
And I ask you a question?

2-00:51:20

Johnson
Sure!

2-00:51:22

Washburn
I've wanted to find out a little bit about how this neighborhood here changed during the war. Can I ask you—do you ever remember nightclubs?

2-00:51:37

Johnson
Nightclubs in the neighborhood?

2-00:51:36

Washburn

Yeah. Or bars popping up in the neighborhood? Maybe one called “The Wagon Wheel”?

2-00:51:42

Johnson

No. Wagon Wheel?

2-00:51:43

Washburn

The Wagon Wheel.

2-00:51:44

Johnson

I remember that name, but I can’t remember where it was. I can’t remember where it was.

2-00:51:49

Dunning

There were a lot of clubs on San Pablo Ave.

2-00:51:52

Johnson

There wasn’t—as I know, this neighborhood here—this side of the freeway, you know, just—I never paid much attention to it. My wife and I—when I think about it now, how close that my wife and I lived without worrying about what was going on around us, you know what I mean? You see, it’s hard for anybody to think about that. Because we never—and she was—and it was always a lot of people who wanted us to join this and join that and join the other thing. Oh no. My father told me that. My father told me that when I was a little boy: “Boys, stay away from joining this, joining that. Don’t join anything and you’ll stay—” Now—I remember when they—years ago, years ago there was a bunch of lawyers—young lawyers back East—and they were signing this and signing that. They were young lawyers. I don’t know whether you remember it or not, but it was all over the country. Come to find out when they were signing, they were signing up for the Communist Party. [laughs] But—

2-00:52:59

Washburn

Do you remember a man named Bones Remmer?

2-00:53:05

Johnson

Bones? No.

2-00:53:06

Washburn

Well, who were some of the more active people in this part of Richmond who you might recall?

2-00:53:13

Johnson

Nobody. Nobody. We never had anybody to represent us over here at all. No one. We’d go over across the street here and vote and that was all we ever did. The only communication we had

with this area was voting. But never—I don't know a single person in the political area in Richmond.

2-00:53:34

Dunning

And that's been the same since you arrived here? Has that been the case since you arrived here in the thirties?

2-00:53:43

Johnson

Since the time we were here. But I—all I've done—I get my tax papers every year and I send them up to Martinez. That's all. That's all. I don't know anything—I don't know anything about—Now, this is Columbia Avenue. I mean, Columbia Avenue runs to the west. This is Sacramento Street, but Columbia Avenue runs around, now. I don't know the people who live on the other side of Columbia Avenue. Although—oh it's been about a year—time goes so fast—but about a year or so ago I saw a lot of pornographic mail in my mailbox. And believe it or not—to show you how bold the people were who distributed that sort of thing, the name and the number of the house was on that mail. Now, if I had been that concerned and wanted to persecute and worried and wanted to spend time persecuting that type of a person I would have gone to call the police and had them taken care of.. But I simply put that junk in the garbage pail and forgot about it. And heard no more about it. I didn't figure it worth my time worrying about trying to prosecute somebody like that.

2-00:55:10

Dunning

Well, if you had a problem—like I know Richmond Annex has had a lot of flooding—who would you go to? Would you go to the City of Richmond?

2-00:55:20

Johnson

I don't know. I don't know—here's the thing about it—My cousin in Chicago, he was out here one time, and my furnace—I got regulators on the furnace down there. I put them on. But it has—the location, you know, on the furnace—I put the big gauges on there. It shows the height of the land and the pressure of the, you know, the various pressures that change everyday, you know, the pressure, atmosphere changes and pressure everyday. Every four years. And now this land here is higher than any flooding that would be possible. This land here is thirty-five or forty feet above the highest high that they've ever had. This particular street, I'm talking about. See what I mean?

2-00:56:26

Dunning

Sacramento.

2-00:56:24

Johnson

So we have never had to worry about anything like that. Not this street. Down here at Columbia they do. The lady—I remember we bought the property from—she had a house down there on Columbia right where it makes the turn and it was flooded out there for a while but then they put

a—I don't know—they filled it in though. Then it didn't flood anymore. But up here, never flooded up here.

2-00:56:43

Dunning

So you didn't have any problems up here.

2-00:56:44

Johnson

Oh, no we've never had no problems. The only thing we've had were earthquakes. Felt the earthquake, but the earthquake makes you feel dizzy, see what I mean? There's like builders, three of them—I think I told you the last time you were here—they went upstairs before I plastered it and he said, "The way you've got this house built and braced, it would take an awful powerful earthquake to bring it down." And that's—Angie was sitting right with me to prove what I'm sayin'—and she says, "What's that?" I said, "That's an earthquake." And the house was just shaking but it makes you have a kind of a dizzy feeling.

2-00:57:23

Dunning

This is the one in '89? Is this the big one in '89?

2-00:57:27

Johnson

No, no this was since then; we've had several. And they claim they've only affected this El Cerrito area here. This earthquake, last couple of earthquakes they had and it was pretty severe. But inspectors saw this house before I plastered it and said, "They don't build them like this anymore." They don't build them and I know—now, I was—I was going to have the house painted and one painter told me, he says, "Well," he said, "It would take a lot of work on this house because," he says, "the way the shingles—." He thought the house was shingled underneath of the plaster on the outside, see what I mean? And he told me the way the house is shingled, those shingles have caused this house to buckle up and have all those bumps, all those high areas in it all over—that was caused by the shingles underneath swelling.

2-00:58:43

Dunning

Mr. Johnson, we're going to change the tape now and just—I have just a few more questions. We're talking about your wife, Ida.

2-00:58:56

Johnson

Ida, yeah.

2-00:58:56

Dunning

And you were saying that she was quite a social person.

2-00:59:04

Johnson

She went to church, the Episcopal Church—I think it's Thirty-first and—down in—I think it's Oakland.

2-00:59:14

Dunning

Now, you were raised Episcopalian. Did you go to church with her?

2-00:59:17

Johnson

No. No. No—wife and I—. I never went to church but once in that whole sixty-eight years we were married. Never went to church.

2-00:59:31

Dunning

Did she try to convince you?

2-00:59:33

Johnson

No, she didn't have to try. She would ask me if I wanted to go: "No." She'd never say—. But she was very close, you know, with Father Wallace. He was the deacon at the Episcopal Church in Oakland and she would go to church down there sometimes but he'd come up and get her— Episcopal Church—and take her to church but he never—he never—. But somehow or another, I know—I don't know—I guess I'm radical, in a sense, in this way. But I thought, when I listen to the radio now and I think about people going to church because they want to have someone to ask God to forgive them for doing this and doing that, I don't feel as though I have to have a single soul in this world to ask them—they to ask God to give anything. I ask God myself if there's anything I think that I've done that's wrong. I think it's up to me to ask him, not ask—not get a minister or somebody to do it, or pray for me to do right or pray over my soul, over my body. No! I do that myself. See, it's up to me to do that. My father told me that, "Take care of yourself, boys. No one else is going to take care of you."

2-01:00:43

Dunning

Now will you do me a favor? The last time we were here, you told a very beautiful story about your father that said, "Keep flying like that bird."

2-01:00:52

Johnson

Yeah?

2-01:00:53

Dunning

Remember the story your father told you about flying like a bird? Would you repeat that for us, because it didn't make it on the tape, not the whole story.

2-01:01:06

Johnson

Repeat it? I don't know what was—I don't know what was being said before that, but my father was saying about the birds, he said—

2-01:01:14

Dunning

Well, you were talking about freedom and also nothing to hide.

2-01:01:19

Johnson

Nothing to fear—I was saying when you’ve got—if you—if you do things according to the rule and regulations, as you get older you never have to worry about anything. You feel free. “You don’t feel it now, boys, when you’re young, but,” he says, “you stay within the law, within the rules and regulations, you don’t have to worry any way at all about what is right or what is wrong. You don’t have to worry about that. The only way you can think about it is the things that are right or wrong or things that you wouldn’t want anybody to do to you. And naturally, don’t you do anything to them. The things you do to them that you don’t want done to you is wrong. That’s the only way you can think of it. And the freest thing on the face of this earth is a bird. You see them flying in the air. Flying around and around and around and around and zig-zagging and you figure you don’t know where they’re going. They know where they’re going, they know how to go, when to go, what to do when they get there.” And he said, “They are the freest things on the face of this earth: that bird.”

2-01:02:35

We had some down in the yard, you know, and I was telling you that we took them way down to Fremont and those birds flew back home when they’d never been out of their stall in their life. They’d never been out of the house in their life—up here in Berkeley. Down—we took them down there and that evening those birds flied around in a circle, around in a circle, and when we got home those birds were home back here in Berkeley. How did they get here? Who brought them here? Free. They were free. They could do things on their own and they did them on their own. You look, always—.

2-01:03:11

And don’t think from—. And I worked—. Back east there in those days sometimes, even I think of people—some of the men that worked in the place—you would think they were dumb. You’d think, you know, they act dumb and all. But some of those people could put a machine together, all that sort of thing. Put delicate instruments together but to watch them work, and what there actions are, you’d think they were dumb! They’d act as though they were dumb. Never consider what a man knows and what he don’t know. [phone rings] He might know more than you know, but he don’t have to express it.

2-01:03:47

Washburn

Would you like me to answer that, George?

2-01:03:50

Dunning

We’re going to put this on pause for a moment.

2-01:03:53

Johnson

Now. I don’t give away nothing. I don’t accept any and I don’t give away any. Like my nephew was here, you know, from back east in Chicago—my brothers boy, he’s the oldest boy—he came out here about two or three months ago. He told Angie, and Angie told me. He went up to—we took him up to Martinez, this, that, and the other thing, and he wanted Angie to take him all over the house to look at the house to see the house, to see the house. And Angie was telling me after he went. He told Angie, he said, “He’s got a very strong house.” And he works for an insurance

company—that is this boy, my cousin’s—my brother’s boy’s boy. He works for an insurance company. And he told Angie, he said, “He had a very strong house, there. Built very strong.” He went downstairs. I know this; he asked me. He said, “The way you’ve got this built—I was down in the basement, in the garage.” he said, “I was looking at it.” He says, “All the bracing in this house between the studs, all two-by-four, all on a forty-five degree angle. Every wall is braced on a forty-five degree angle from top to bottom. And all that foundation down,” he says, “Who put that concrete down?” He says, “Down in the garage, there? That foundation is three feet above the surface.” And he says, “And it’s a foot thick!” He says, “Six and eight inches thick is all they do now for concrete for a foundation of a home.” “But,” he says, “Some of that foundation down there is over a foot thick! How did you do that?” I said, “Well, I just did it. I had time to do it. I put in the forms and had a guy to come and put the soup in there, as we call it.”

2-01:05:47

Dunning

Now, you’ve lived longer than most people in the whole world.

2-01:05:52

Johnson

You think so?

2-01:05:52

Dunning

A hundred and eight years. Yes! [laughs] Now, one big accomplishment is this house that you built and then you had a very long and successful marriage with your wife. Are there other things you’re proud of?

2-01:06:10

Johnson

I think I had successful health! You know what I mean? I haven’t been sick or sickly and that sort of thing. You know? And I don’t know what impression that my cousin got from my house, but he told Angie, Angie told me that they told him that I was better off than they thought I was. Now, I don’t know what they thought I was! [laughs] Do you know what I mean? I don’t know how bad off they thought I was, but as I told Angie, I says, “Well, I’m as bad off in a way as anybody in the world could be.” I said, “Because I have lost my sight. That’s 99 percent of your life. You can’t see anybody, you can’t see anything, you can’t remember names, nothing in this world can you say, “I remember that because I saw it.” You don’t see nothing. All I see is this black, ignorant space. Nothing. Can’t—not even—and I don’t understand it. With all of my brothers and sisters, why did I get, you know, become blind? I don’t know. I never did anything—never drank, never smoked, never did anything extraordinary that would create a strain.

2-01:07:20

Dunning

You just lived a hundred and eight years. You just lived a very long time.

2-01:07:25

Johnson

I lived a hundred and eight years, and just kept quiet.

2-01:07:26

Dunning

I'm curious as to how old your siblings lived and your parents. Has anyone lived over a hundred besides you?

2-01:07:35

Johnson

No. My brothers? All of my brothers—there's Ed, Charles, Walter, Herbert, and Harry. All of them lived over ninety.

2-01:07:47

Dunning

That's really significant. For men, especially.

2-01:07:49

Johnson

My mother lived to be ninety-eight, ninety-four, and my father lived to be ninety-eight. My father was on that one job from the time he was a young man until he was—he quit at ninety-eight years old. See what I mean?

2-01:08:04

Dunning

And your sisters—

2-01:08:06

Johnson

Over ninety-eight years my father worked for that job. When people—see what I mean? Constant work, constant work. No—. I never saw my father take a drink, and he didn't smoke. Straight as a dime! You know, walked straight, fast. I remember him coming down the street, and the neighbors—in the summertime, some of the neighbors would be sitting out and he just—never stopped to say “hello.” He'd just shake his hand, “How do? How do? How do?” Because he was part Indian.

2-01:08:33

Dunning

And were you at all in touch with your Indian background? Your Native American background?

2-01:08:40

Johnson

No. No. We didn't know anything about them.

2-01:08:42

Dunning

How about your dad?

2-01:08:43

Johnson

You see, my Indian background people, they were all down below in Maryland. You know? In the Maryland area. In North Carolina. All my father's people were in Maryland, North—my father came—you see, my father said—. He had him to come north because, he said, for some unknown—he didn't know he was too young—but he said, “He didn't want him to be raised

below the Mason and Dixon Line.” Whatever that was at that time. And he said—because below that they had all slaves down there, but he says, “But they couldn’t make slaves out of the Indian people because they couldn’t control them.” You know what I mean? Control the people.

2-01:09:25

Those Indian peoples, they’d go out and try to work but they’d get tired and quit. They didn’t—they wasn’t under the American rules and regulations. They’d just get tired and quit and go to their wigwam or whatever it was they lived in. And sometimes—he said he remembers his mother carrying him on his back and she’d be out there trying to pick cotton, and he couldn’t keep quiet—and sit down and then just take the cotton bag off the back and sit down on the ground, and get up with him on—he’d be on her back—and go on to home to their little cabin. That’s they way they worked, and they couldn’t do nothing about it. But he said, “Well, all those other people, if they tried to stop,” he said, “They’d whip the life out of them” [chuckles] You know what I mean? And that was the way they lived. And he says—but then he says his father—

2-01:10:06

When he grew up, his father said, he didn’t want him because—“And I didn’t know it,” he says, “the southern boundary of Pennsylvania was what they called the Mason and Dixon Line.” And below that—and it was unbelievable because I remember you asking me the other day, “How did they treat the people? The various organizations there?” And I never noticed any different treatment, but I realized since you had told me—and here you’ve got—it’s hard to realize that you got just a ordinary boundary, not a wall, not anything. But here, over here, you’ve got what you might call say “slave people” and over here they’re treated like man and wife, man and human. Why? Why would that one line, why does that one line separate the mind of men? It’s hard for me to realize that! But it does! And I remember—oh I was thinking about you telling me about how did they treat the people? And I remember now—because I was very young, didn’t realize anything—I didn’t realize anything that they had them in such a thing as what they called as “slavery” in the world—.

2-01:11:09

But I remember my father and some other people was talking about they were going to employ—they were talking about not having any policemen. Any foreign policemen on the force. And this man, his name was Blankenberg, and he was campaigning for mayor of Philadelphia. And I remember as a young boy, and I was selling newspapers, and I was selling the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Philadelphia Telegraph*, and I was standing there outside of this big club called the Union League club. It had a great big stone porch in the front. This man was campaigning to be mayor of Philadelphia. And his campaign speech—I remember standing there with papers in my hand to sell and I remember him saying, “If I’m elected mayor, every man, woman, and child will have a square deal.” And I thought to myself, “What kind of a deal do you think they’re getting now?”

2-01:12:17

He was elected mayor and so I remember the Philadelphia papers said the first thing he did when he was elected mayor was to organize a new police regiment. See? In those—and that police regiment was all of colored people. All, the whole thing was made up of—which had never had any colored policemen in Philadelphia at that time. And when he organized this whole police battalion or regiment or whatever you want to call it, and the newspaper, the Philadelphia—I was just about, oh, five, six, seven years old. And I remember the Philadelphia newspaper called the

Philadelphia Bulletin and the *Philadelphia Telegraph*, they were against him hiring all these people to put on the force. These Asian—not Asian people, but black people. And every newspaper after he appointed this colored battalion—scattered them all over the city in places where they didn't want them. Oh, they'd fight them—the different people would fight them, you know. Wanted them out of there! For a while, until they got used to them being around. But the newspapers, they condemned it. They made a—and every newspaper, every newspaper that would come out would have it in title at the top: “We're against Blankenberg's”—they called them “Blankenberg's Brownies.” The police—he called them—they called them “Blankenberg's Brownie's” that's what they called them, these black people that the mayor had appointed in the police department. There was about twenty-five to thirty of them. And I remember you asking me the other time you was here if there was any prejudice. That's the only thing I remember them saying about those policemen.

2-01:14:15

Dunning

Did you ever feel prejudice yourself? Did you experience it?

2-01:14:19

Johnson

No. Oh, no. No I went all the way—primary school, all the way up to high school, right on through college. Now, in high school I went to was mostly in a Jewish neighborhood. But there were more—in the class, I remember—in the class—I was thinking about that the other day, you was asking me did I have any prejudice of that kind? No. We were all seated, as I remember, in alphabetical order. And all on the right there were Jews, mostly Jews. German. Goldstein, Goldberg, Ginberg, Gimble—all those were Jews. And on the right, when it got down to me, I was Johnson, all of those with G, H, J—and then I was Johnson—and then it got down to J, K and there was two Irish fellows on my right. They were seated alongside of me, there was Kane and Kats, but they spelt their name K-A-T-S and K-A-N-E—not C-A-T- S or C. Now, they were two Irish boys and we were all friendly. Noontime, we'd all go to lunch together.

2-01:15:25

Washburn

But George? David. You told me the first time we met. I asked you, I said that your name appeared in a book about the African-American community, the black community in Richmond and you told me that people have at times in your life thought that you were of some black blood. Some black ancestry. What can you tell me about that?

2-01:15:52

Johnson

Well, I don't know that I have—I don't remember telling him that I have any black blood, because I don't remember. I know I haven't got any black blood. My father was half-Indian. See? My father was half-Indian. His mother was a pure-blood Indian called—oh—the name of the tribe—in those—but they were from Kentucky. Down from Kentucky—Lomai, Loma tribe in Kentucky, see? And my father married this lady in Baltimore. She's a—my father's—my mother was a Swede. Her name was Corona. Corona—and her name was Corona Louise Burgess. She was a Swede. My father married this—he married her in Baltimore, Maryland.

2-01:16:57

But my father was the offspring of president—he wasn't president when he was born, you understand—he became president—and he wasn't voted president, either. He was president because he was—became president on account of Lincoln being shot—but my father, I remember my father saying—when Abraham Lincoln gave his address, “Four score and seven years.” I remember my father saying, “Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent.” And he said that was in Pennsylvania on a platform during the Civil War, and he said his father was on one side of the platform and he was on the other side before Abraham Lincoln. See what I mean? A lot of people don't know. You see, there wasn't photography and all those people in those days to take pictures and all that stuff down. And all that kind of stuff has died off with history and everything else and there's nobody to record it.

2-01:17:43

Dunning

Well, since you're one of the oldest people in the country—are there stories that you would like recorded? Really important events or experiences you've had in your life that you would like to have remembered?

2-01:17:59

Johnson

No, I don't think of anything very important.

2-01:18:03

Dunning

Is there any advice you would like to give to the younger generation?

2-01:18:08

Johnson

Oh, I would like just the younger generation to don't get any prejudice in their mind, heart, and soul. Go along and look at everybody as human beings. They all have to—we all come in this world in the same manner and we all leave in the same manner: we die. But while we're here, for God's sake, try to make it comfortable, because we don't believe it will ever be back. That's all.

2-01:18:37

Washburn

George, I'm looking at this picture here of you and your wife. And—what can you tell me about your wife's ancestry?

2-01:18:47

Johnson

My wife? My wife's ancestry I couldn't tell you a thing. I couldn't tell you a thing about—my wife never said any thing at all about her ancestry, although we lived in Philadelphia in the same neighborhood. That's where I accumulated—that's where I become acquainted with my wife—going to school together as—you know, in the kindergarten right on up. But so far as—and I never—and her father never mentioned anything about her ancestry. Her mother and her father, you know what I mean? She was—I think they were from one of the islands somewhere. I don't know which one. I'm not sure. But her father—and that was another thing about her father. Her father and I never sat down and talked in mutual conversation together. For some reason. Not that we despised or hated each other, but we never had any reasons to. He had his own organization and club and one thing or another and I had mine and we just all knew that way. We

never associated with one another. Her mother and I, you know, we were more social than her father. But her father, he never—I don't know—he associated here in California. As I can remember, he associated—he lived more down around, oh—I don't know how to explain it—but he associated more with the Chinese. He associated more with those Chinese more than he did anybody else! Because he, you know, he had his business and everything right in Chinatown there. He associated with Chinese. A lot of them. But my wife—boy, she was something.

2-01:20:39

Dunning

Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

2-01:20:41

Johnson

There's nothing that I can think about right now. If I think about it I'll call you.

2-01:20:48

Dunning

That would be terrific. It seems like you worked your whole life. You're a real hard-working person.

2-01:20:55

Johnson

I have. I never was—I hear people—like I say these people here out of work—I was never out of work. Any length of time, you know. It looked like—well, as I can remember, honest to God, as far back as I can remember, I would go from one job to another. Never was out two or three months or a year, that kind of thing. Oh no! Nothing like that!

2-01:21:19

Dunning

Well, it seemed like it really helped you that you had that good education and graduated from Drexel.

2-01:21:25

Johnson

You see, if—when I was doing like carpentry work, and I was doing carpentry work for a while—and I finished one job, and I wouldn't bring my carpentry tools home and sit down and wait for somebody and go to the—never went to an employment office in my life to get a job. Never! But I was working all the time. But what I would do, I'd take my box, my box, and put it on my shoulder and put it in my car and go all through the hills. Drive, ride around. And wherever I saw them building, go in and ask them if they needed any help. And never have I been disappointed. Every time: "Yes, yes, sure!" There's a lot of people, you know, builders, they want help but they just don't take the time to call the employment office for them, you know what I mean. They just don't do that. And I—you go in and: "Yes, we want somebody." And you work, maybe work there for two or three months, finish the job up, finish the whole job up, go to another job. Never. I don't know—and I can't—my brother Herbert, he was—my brother now he has a very peculiar life. [laughs] My youngest brother, Herbert.

2-01:22:43

Dunning

Do you have any brothers? Is Herbert still living?

2-01:22:47

Johnson

Living? Oh no. He died.

2-01:22:50

Dunning

Okay, so are you the surviving sibling?

2-01:22:51

Johnson

Now, he was in the navy. He quit—he joined—when I went in, the time I went in the army, during the First World War, he went in the navy, see? Now, here—maybe this will interest you, I don't know. But when he went in the navy, see now he was very light. He looked like he was Caucasian. All my—all of my—my mother and father couldn't understand how it was that I took so much brown as my father. My father was brown; he took the brown Indian. But anyway—alright. Now my brother goes to enlist in the navy. Now, here's what he said. He got down to nationality, he said he was part Indian. Alright. Now here he is, he looked like he was a Caucasian. See what I mean? Now, he's part Indian. Now here was the dilemma that they went under and I—you wouldn't dream that they went under this kind of position. This thought. Now, here's an Indian; he looks like he's white. We can't put him down on the deck, because down there there's all Caucasian fellows, you know, sailors, scrubbing the deck. All of them. They didn't have no blacks on the deck at that time. They can't put him with them because he's Indian. They can't put him in the galley, now the galley is where they had most of the black people. You know what I mean? Now, here he is: he looks white, he says he's Indian, you can't put him in the galley. Where can we put his fellow? He—now he's joining the armed forces to fight in the war, but here they are arguing about his nationality and where they can put him to work in there. Alright. So finally they decided since they can't put him on the deck, they can't put him in a galley, what do they do with him? They said that—and he said he's Indian—what they would do was use him as a valet for the high officers on the ship. See what I mean? And that's like he said, "George," he said, I remember him saying, "Many a day I'd look down on the ship, on the deck and see all those men down there working and thought, wished I could get down and work with them. Here I am, up here, just like in a cabin." He had to live up there amongst the four officers and a captain. Five, altogether. That's where he spent his years—four years in the navy. Four years on the ship up in the officers quarters, living—had his own room and everything up there. Took care of them as valet, see what I mean? Keep their clothes and their rooms and everything cleaned up, and he was there valet. Now, they put him there because he didn't seem to—they didn't seem to want to mix him in with the other two races of people on the ship. Now, that was during the First World War.

2-01:25:46

Dunning

Well, thanks—that was a great story thank you. That story told quite a bit.

2-01:25:52

Johnson

At one time, as I say, they stopped where they could—you could get off—. And it's like he said, he had all the freedom in the world that you'd want, as long as he kept their rooms cleaned and everything. When they stopped at different places he'd get in one of the tugboats and go to shore and visit the little towns in France—I remember him saying in France—and he had—I was

telling you—he had these two bottles of wine this guy gave him and said he had them fifty years. My wife and I, we had it almost fifty years and it was stolen from us. The cork was put in and the lid covering over the top and then wrapped with wire—copper wire all around. Two great big bottles. About a quart, fifth in size, you know. And I had it in this kitchen down in the closet there. Brought them all the way to California. I'd had them at least—oh, it would be at least almost fifty years at that time. And he—the fellow—that Frenchman that gave them to him said he'd had them fifty years. So those two bottles of wine were almost a hundred years old, at least. Ninety, a hundred. Stolen! Stolen by people that we thought had come here to take care of the house for us.

2-01:27:02

Dunning

Now, Mr. Johnson—I would think being a hundred and eight you'd be kind of famous. I would think you'd be a kind of a famous person, you know, being a hundred and eight years old.

2-01:27:13

Johnson

Famous in what way?

2-01:27:14

Dunning

Well, people wanting to interview you on TV, and radio.

2-01:27:20

Johnson

Yeah, but—

2-01:27:20

Dunning

Did you want that, ever?

2-01:27:22

Johnson

Oh, I wouldn't want that, no. I don't know what I would say, talk about. You know what I mean? I had—you know what I mean? I just don't know what I would have—what I could tell them that would be interesting to the average person.

2-01:27:37

Dunning

Well, do you mind of if we show your tape to other people?

2-01:27:41

Johnson

No, of course not.

2-01:27:42

Dunning

And let them listen to your story?

2-01:27:44

Johnson

If you think they'd be interested in it.

2-01:27:44

Dunning

Oh, absolutely.

2-01:27:46

Johnson

I'm wondering whether I would be interested in listening to it.

2-01:27:50

Dunning

Well, I think what we're going to try to do is to—do you have a cassette recorder? A tape recorder? That maybe we can make you some tapes, so you can listen to it.

2-01:28:03

Johnson

Okay.

2-01:28:04

Dunning

Now, is there anything else you'd like to add?

2-01:28:07

Johnson

I don't know there's anything right now. The only thing—the newspaper man from one of the—*Oakland Tribune*, I think it was, was here quite a while ago. And he was asking me do I remember where I was born, what city. I said, "Yeah. I was born in Philadelphia." He said, "Do you know the place where you lived?" I said, "Yeah, I live"—I have three places in Philadelphia that I lived in.

2-01:28:34

Dunning

Right, you described them to me.

2-01:28:39

Johnson

1511 Kater Street.

2-01:28:43

Dunning

Fifteenth Street, also.

2-01:28:43

Johnson

1511 Kater, and then—. 1511 Kater was the house I was born in. Then we moved to 1815 Montrose Street. Then we moved from there to 923 S. Fifteenth Street. Then we moved from there to 1336 S. Forty-sixth Street. And that's where I was—when I went to war, that's where I went to war from: 1336 S. Forty-sixth. And all those houses from childhood. And my mother had Dr. Morris—he was the doctor for my mother—and I was born in Philadelphia, there. And Dr.

Morris, he stayed with the family, oh, up until I was seven, eight years old. But my father: never, never heard of him being sick. Never saw him—you know, complain—never complain! Never saw where him wearing any bandages or anything like plasters or anything and always straight and coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. He never—you see, in those days—. He wore—and he rode a bicycle, too. And he'd ride a bicycle to work and back from work, and here he was up in his eighties and he was riding a bicycle.

2-01:30:04

Dunning

I think this proves that you have really good genes! It's amazing. Well, we want to thank you very much for taking this time

2-01:30:13

Johnson

Yeah, well I thank you. Well, I'm going to tell you: you're not taking my time. My time is my own, you know what I mean? I appreciate somebody coming, at least talking to me.

2-01:30:23

Dunning

Well, we've really enjoyed it.

2-01:30:24

Johnson

Because it's a very lonesome thing sitting here, not—like I say, I often tell Angie, my cousin here said—I told her I wasn't as bad off as he thought I was. I tell her: "How bad off did he think I was? What did he think I was?" [laughing] You know what I mean? I say, "Outside of me living, if I was in prison now." I guess I shouldn't say this, "If I was in prison, what would I be—what would be—what would be—I can't understand what I would be denied of." I'm denied of everything in the world sitting right here. See what I mean? When you have to feel your way when you get up. Just to go from one room to the other. What kind of freedom have you got? It's a terrible thing. You don't think about it until it happens. But it's there. And I used to tell Angie and Ida, many times and all the different people and different complaints that she would have. I didn't realize it until. And I didn't realize that she was as sick as she was, not being able to talk. But I remember many, many times she would get so despondent and so terrible. I could see she was just worried—she'd try to explain, try to say something to me. I remember: [laughs] Oh, I remember one time, she was lying in the bed and she was there just complaining about—and pointing down to her feet, you know? And I couldn't—all I thought was her feet—that she wanted her feet covered up, you know? Most people that go to bed, they want their feet covered. But no: I put the cover up over her feet and she tried to say what was wrong and she finally couldn't say it and she just reached and pulled the covers off of her feet and pointed down to her feet, where she had a little callus on her foot that she wanted taken off. [laughs]

2-01:32:27

Dunning

So she communicated—

2-01:32:29

Johnson

I thought to myself, there she was trying her best to tell me what and couldn't do it and finally she had to just point to it and show me. She tried her best to do it, but she couldn't. Oh boy, I tell you. My God, I think to myself, all the different places—.

2-01:32:48

Dunning

Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?

2-01:32:50

Johnson

No! Anything you ask me is—

2-01:32:52

Dunning

Okay. Now this is a question I'm just kind of interested in. Do you believe in an afterlife?

2-01:32:58

Johnson

Do I believe in what?

2-01:32:58

Dunning

In an afterlife.

2-01:33:00

Johnson

Afterlife? I can't say that I do. I often think about that. You know what I mean? If we have an afterlife—think of the—where would we be? Where would we go? What would we do? When we think of it this way: think of all the—now, here we are: millions of people in the world today. They won't be here a hundred years ago. Now, where's all the millions and millions and millions of people who have been here before us? Where are they? Where are they if they have an afterlife? In another world? I don't know. But I—here's one thing I do believe, though. I can't—I believe this: that—now I was on—I was telling, I think, on the ship at nighttime. And—on the ocean. Quiet, everything just was quiet and the ship was going along slowly. Nobody there but you and the ship and all the lights—. You had to put all the lights out because we were afraid the Germans would see us and attack us, you know? And to look up and see all of the stars. All of the stars! Thousands! And all lit up! Lit up! You know, you wouldn't be able to see them if they wasn't lit up. And the one sun that we have, is lighting those stars. What are they?

1-01:34:32

And I believe this: there's people—there's something—living on some of those stars. We're not the only one. We are not the only one in the universe that has life. Of course, we went to the moon, there was no life on the moon. But still, look at the—honest to God! When I looked up and saw all those—as far as you could see and as close together as you could see them without bumping into one another—. It didn't look like they were more than two or three inches apart—all lit up! Made me—it makes you feel—it makes you feel afraid. Scared. And there was so much light in them that they were lighting the—you could walk around on the deck of the ship by the light of the stars. Not the light of the moon, but the light of those stars. Now, you say, "Is

there life after? Where do we go?” You know what I mean? Where are we going to go? And how many is going to be there? Millions! Something to think about, you know? I can’t see it. But now and then—

2-01:35:44

Dunning

Well, I appreciate your answering, because it’s a question many of us think about.

2-01:35:57

Johnson

Well, why do most people go to church? They go to church praying that they will be taken care of. Ninety-nine percent of them. After this life, you know? Don’t you think that?

2-01:36:07

Dunning

I think you’re right.

2-01:36:11

Johnson

And then when they stop to think: where are we going to go? Where are we going to go? Where are we going to go? I can’t—if we go somewhere—. And right now, of course, what parts of this earth is inhabited? Most of it is almost overpopulated now. See what I mean? With life, and if most of them are overpopulated, they’re not—most of them are overpopulated in those who have living conditions. Now, if all of the people on this Earth go somewhere after they’re gone, how about all of those that’s been here before us and all that will come along after we’re gone? It’s hard to realize. Hard to think—it’s something to think about!

2-01:37:04

Dunning

[laughs] Well, I’d like to thank you. I think maybe David had—did you have a couple things or are you all set?

2-01:37:12

Washburn

No.

2-01:37:11

Dunning

It was a great ending, I think.

2-01:37:17

Johnson

The most thing I think about is like my father said: “Don’t worry about what is wrong. Everything is wrong that you wouldn’t want the other fellow to do to you. Don’t do it to him. That’s all. If you do that, you’ll be doing the right thing.” [laughs]

2-01:37:33

Dunning

Well, it’s been a real pleasure meeting you.

2-01:37:37

Johnson

Well, I'm glad you came and I appreciate you coming once in a while and having a little talk with me.

2-01:37:43

Dunning

That would be great.

2-01:37:42

Johnson

Because I'm—you see me. I'm here alone in my own environment and I can't understand why I was put into this position. And of course I can't say that my oldest—the rest of my family didn't go blind but none of them have lived this long.

2-01:38:04

Dunning

Right. Well, I think that's it.

2-01:38:06

Johnson

So that's—I can't condemn that. But why, why—

[End of interview]