

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Freda Johnson**

Interview Date: 06/29/2010

Interviewer: Diane L. Ware

Transcriber: Carlos Rubalcaba

Location: Ms Johnson's Store, Fort Bend County

29 Pages



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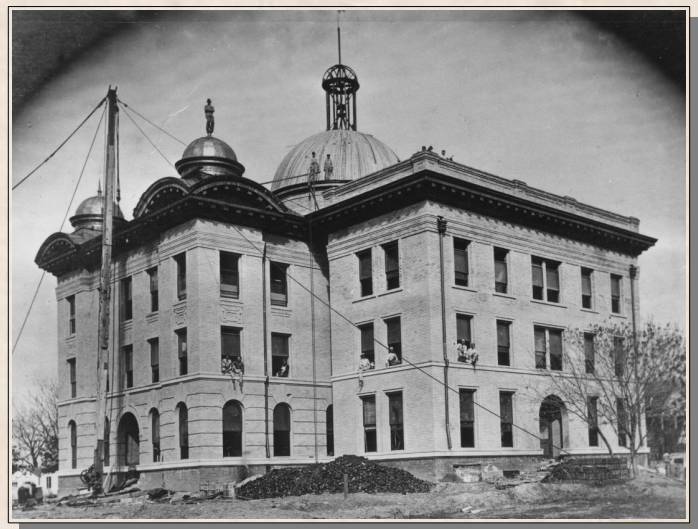
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Transcript

WARE: Let's start with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

JOHNSON: Sugar Land, Texas, on September 7, 1944 in the old hospital in Sugar Land.

WARE: What brought your grandparents to this area?

JOHNSON: I guess you would say...he wanted to open a business out here. Since there were no stores in Fort Bend County on this end we had the first store out here in the general area. Even the Renfrow store wasn't there.

WARE: You won't remember what year that was?

JOHNSON: No, ma'am. That's (chuckle).

WARE: Way before your time.

JOHNSON: Before I was even thought about.

WARE: Right (laughter). How long had your family lived in Houston?

JOHNSON: I guess they were original Houstonians, until grandpa moved out here, because my daddy's brother and him restored a school out here when the kids were seven or eight years old something like that. So they had to move from Houston out here when they were about eight years old. They attended school up there in Stafford or whatever you want to call it.

WARE: Do you know about what year your daddy was born?

JOHNSON: I'm not going to lie to you.

WARE: Okay (chuckle). You mentioned your grandfather was Frank Johnson.

JOHNSON: Yes, ma'am. We had our first store on the McKeever Road in the back, back there on the canal. He had a small store out there and I guess it was too far from everything else, so he came up here and bought this property. I think he gave seven dollars an acre for it. Can you believe that? So a total about fifty bucks for this strip of land.

WARE: When your grandfather moved out here did any of his brothers or sisters move out with him?

JOHNSON: Wanda's daddy always worked on the pipeline. That's what he did for a living and our house was their house. My grandpa lived here.

WARE: In the building next to the store?

JOHNSON: In here, and we lived in her house...well that was our original house, down there with the white fence around it. Then when my grandpa died I guess daddy decided to take over the store. My uncle had a little Air Stream and they parked it in our yard along side the fence. They stayed in that until we moved down here. Then they traded their interest in this for that interest in that. But now on the other side, my other uncle, daddy's twin brother, owned the place where all three houses are down there and his son owns it now. My uncle built the last house first and then the middle house was where our house is. My uncle lived down there, my daddy lived there and my grandma and grandpa lived here in the beginning. When they died we all shifted spots (chuckle). Of course, my other uncle stayed where he was at, he lived down there forever and ever until he died, my daddy's twin brother.

WARE: All the kids came out here with your grandparents and grew up here?

JOHNSON: All except my uncle Frank. He was a police officer in Houston. He stayed in town and lived over and worked downtown and stuff. He was a motorcycle policeman. He was murdered on the job or killed on the job what ever you want to call it. I do have a picture of that I might find one of these days to show you. He's standing by the old time motorcycle that they used to have for the police department. That's really neat looking.

WARE: He was named after your grandfather? He was Frank Junior?

JOHNSON: Yes. That was my Uncle Frank and Uncle Allen was next...well my Aunt Texie was next then Allen, then Forrest then daddy, That's how they went.

WARE: Forrest and your dad were twins, but Forrest was born first out of the twins, right? Tell me about your Aunt Texie and her full name.

JOHNSON: Well, I really don't know how she got it because my grandmothers name was Helen Marie and then when my Aunt Texie was born, I don't know if they just liked Texas or what. We've got a lot of people in our family that's named Louise. They just named her Texas Louise. We called her Aunt Texie all the time, but her name basically was Texas Louise.

My grandmother had hair down to her knees. I got to comb it at night for her, brush it. She'd sit in this special rocking chair that was over there and I'd get behind her because I was little and I'd just brush her hair. It was beautiful. I do have a picture of my grandmother with the hair. I'll show you that, too, eventually.

After grandpa died she stayed in the little apartment and she lived over there until she passed away. Now my sister lives over there and I live here, of course, but I was born here so my bed used to be over there; my baby bed was right over there by that wall.

WARE: In the store building?

JOHNSON: Yea, right here in this house. We always had black maids and one of them was named Roberta and she was a big heavyset lady. When I was little I had, I don't know if it was rheumatic fever or what. I was a baby and she had an ironing board and she'd take and do the ironing and she had the carriage and she would rock me. That's how she kept me quite.

WARE: Do you remember Roberta's last name?

JOHNSON: I don't remember none of them last names.

WARE: But they all lived here in the area?

JOHNSON: Back in these woods, back all in this general area, yea. Arcola, Fresno mostly here in the back like in the bottoms and back in DeWalt in the bottoms, most of all the black people lived back there. We had one maid and her name was Lizzy. That's when I got bigger two or three years old. In the back bedroom we had a bed that was for my oldest brother, but on that wall there was bunk beds for me and my other brother. He was three years older than me and Lizzy used to sit on the bed when it was nap time with a fan and fan me to sleep. With a fan, that's how much I loved her and she loved me. She was the sweetest little, bitty woman. She wasn't as big as a minute. I've got pictures of her, too.

WARE: You don't remember Lizzy's last name either, do you?

JOHNSON: No, but she lived off of School Road out there in Fresno. I know where she lived, but I don't remember her last name. I'm not good on names, really.

WARE: Kids don't know people's last name.

JOHNSON: No, and I was little then. When I got bigger then that was different. They had all died and gone.

WARE: Were you the youngest child?

JOHNSON: Yes. When daddy had the store where the trailer house sat there used to be two houses that the black people lived in. There was Marian Wright who was daddy's helper. When they go buy groceries he would go with him and help him unload the truck. I have pictures of them outside the store sitting. His wife helped around the house at times and cooked. They must have had a lot of business back then in the old days for everybody to have all that help. We had a lot of customers.

WARE: Or they worked really cheap (chuckling).

JOHNSON: Yea, well that probably, too. You know how that was in the old days. Black people were not treated like, you know, like whatever. God made us all the same so I think.

WARE: Amen.

JOHNSON: Some of us just have a darker tan than others.

WARE: (chuckling) You're right (chuckling). Do you know what your grandfather did before he moved out here?

JOHNSON: I don't know if he had a store in Houston or what. I have to ask my cousin Helen and she's at work, she works for Prudential. I'm going to call her tonight and ask her if some other questions that you were asking me and see if I can see about those pictures.

WARE: Did your grandmother ever work?

JOHNSON: No, I never remember my grandmother doing nothing, because I guess before I came she might of helped grandpa when they were here. When I was born, grandpa was already dead. I don't remember if she did or if she didn't. As far as I know I never saw her pick up hardly a broom. She sent her laundry to Houston to have her sheets starched and ironed (chuckle). You asked me if she worked, well there you go right there. She sent them out once a week. All her linens and all her dresses were done and then they came back. They delivered them back out here to the house and that's it. I guess the maid put them on the bed, I don't know. (chuckle).

WARE: What about your mama?

JOHNSON: My mama worked for the man. She had to do everything helping my daddy. She'd get in and unloaded the truck, she waited on the customers, she did everything. She worked hard, she really did. I had a hard working mama.

WARE: Was your mother from this area?

JOHNSON: Yea, she went to school with all of the Cangelosis and the Scanlans. They all went to school.... Buster Court. They were all at school from the first grade on up together. She lived on Hamburger Lake. Do you know where Hamburger Lake is?

WARE: No, I don't.

JOHNSON: I am not exactly... they changed a lot of stuff around and made water different things. It was up on your way to Stafford on the left hand side where those apartments are in there. If you go back to the left, there is a big old pond or lake back in that general area. It was somewhere in that area. She grew up right there. It's on FM 1092 like you are going to Stafford. If you pass that set of apartments that they first built there on the left hand side. There is a road that goes down there. There is a new service station on the corner that's got the Burger King in it. If you take a left right there and go down there, there is another left and there's a lake back behind there. That's supposed to be where Hamburger Lake used to be.

That's where she was born and raised, or grew up anyhow, I guess I'll say. She was born back there. I'm not sure but I know she was raised back there.

WARE: What was your mother's name?

JOHNSON: Billie Louise Night

WARE: Night was her maiden name? Did she have brothers and sisters?

JOHNSON: She had Ruby, Hazel, Geneva, and one brother who passed away when he was thirty something years old. There was four of them. My aunt Geneva is not a Night she's a Johnson. My grandfather passed away and my grandmother married a Johnson so Johnson and Johnson. If this road right here goes out it would hit Highway 6. If you were to go right across the road my grandmother had one of the first beer joints in Fort Bend County.

WARE: (amazed) She did?

JOHNSON: Yea, her and my grandpa. There would be a driveway that went off like this and it made a circle drive way and it came back out on Highway 6. The beer joint was right there and if you went back behind it there used to be a dairy in the back that was Senior's Dairy Farm. The beer joint was right there in the front and then my grandmother had an old house that had dirt floors in it. I can remember sweeping the dirt floors and they finally got a regular house after awhile. Bill Senior, I think, had a house down here that he sold them and they put it up there. They did originally have a house that had dirt floors.

WARE: What were your grandparent's names?

JOHNSON: My mother's father?

WARE: Did he have the beer joint or was that the Johnson's when she remarried?

JOHNSON: My grandmother remarried, the name was Johnson. I cant remember, we always called him Daddy Johnson so I don't know.

WARE: What was her first name?

JOHNSON: Well, we always called them Daddy Johnson and Mama Johnson. That's how I called them, I mean I know what it is but it's stuck in there somewhere.

WARE: So I guess your real grandfather Night died and she remarried?

JOHNSON: And had my Aunt Geneva.

WARE: Then they set up a beer joint over here. Did the beer joint have a name?

JOHNSON: Johnson's. Oh, it was beautiful! You would go in the front door and there was the bar and then the beer cases were back behind the bar. That's where my grandmother and them would serve the customers. Then you had another little door that went into this huge area that had the tables. Then if you went back out the front door we had out houses in the old days and then at the back of the building we had a Bar-B-Q pit that grandpa use to cook Bar-B-Q on weekends and holidays. Right of the building was a 40-foot of picnic table that was all joined together. It had a top over it and it was made out of the straw looking stuff, you know where you criss-cross it to keep from getting wet?

WARE: Right.

JOHNSON: As a little kid I can remember running up and down on top of the tables being chased by my cousins and my brother.

WARE: So it was like maybe palms above?

JOHNSON: Yea, palms, some kind of palm that they crisscrossed so it wouldn't rain on you if you happened to be out there eating lunch. It was something! I mean I can close my eyes and I can see it. We had a jukebox, too. That's what the kids liked. Then we had the tables in the back. They had dominoes set up for the old people who would come and play dominoes with each other. My cousin she'd want to go up to the beer joint and so I would go with her up there.

WARE: And you would cross Highway 6?

JOHNSON: Yea, well that's when I was seven, I'm sixty-six almost. I was just a kid but she held my hand. Wasn't that much traffic and it was a little ole, two lane road up there then. It was a gravel road back in there. I'm telling my age. I would walk up there with my aunt and would visit with my grandmother; she'd have a cold one. Then we'd walk back home.

WARE: So, after your grandparents died, then they closed it down?

JOHNSON: No, my grandfather was still alive. Missouri City or the state wanted to make the road bigger. So they bought the property from my grandparents and they moved to the north side of Houston. I can't tell you where, but they lived there until my grandfather died of a heart attack. Then my grandmother had to go in an assisted living place. She had her own apartment and she lived there. When I got out of school I'd pick her up on weekends and we'd go visit my mother up at Horseshoe Lake.

WARE: About how old were you when they widened the road and closed down the beer joint?

JOHNSON: Well, when I was in the third grade I moved up on South Main. Daddy went into the oil field business with my mother's sister's husband. So we moved and my daddy's brother, his twin, started running the store with his wife, Hattie. They lived in the house three down on the end with my cousin Helen and my cousin Bubba. I was maybe 10 years old.

WARE: So it was in the mid 1950s?

JOHNSON: Yes.

WARE: I didn't realize that your father moved away. I thought he just automatically took over running the store.

JOHNSON: We did until I was about ten. Then we moved, like I said, to South Main and he went into business. It was called Albrights Casing Tools or something like that. It was over off McCarty. We lived in Denver Harbor. They were making nice money so they bought a nice big house and we lived there for a few years then we all came back. Me and daddy and his new wife. My mother had already left and got married.

WARE: Why did he decide to come back?

JOHNSON: The tool business went out of business and my uncle didn't want to run the store anymore. He was retired. Him and his wife opened a beer joint out in Fresno-Arcola, so he was helping her with that.

WARE: That was Forrest and Hattie, right?

JOHNSON: Yes, the beer joint was right dead in the middle between Fresno and Arcola. They tore the building down many, many years ago.

WARE: Did they ever have live music at that beer joint?

JOHNSON: I am sure they did. When I was eighteen I used to go out there when they had a dance and a band. We'd party. Of course, I didn't have to worry because my aunt had a Buntline Special and you don't mess with her niece.

WARE: (laughing)

JOHNSON: That's something you didn't do let me tell you.

WARE: I have heard tell of a place and at first I thought maybe it was your grandparent's beer joint over toward Arcola and Fresno. They'd had a lot of singers that became famous singers later on.

JOHNSON: I don't know about that part. Like I said she did have a beer joint after her and my uncle got a divorce. He still lived here and she built a little apartment on the beer joint. They had the kitchen because they served food. It wasn't just strictly a beer joint, it was a restaurant-type thing. Her and my cousin lived in the little apartment until my cousin got married.

Business-wise, all of our family had businesses. My aunt's husband and my daddy were in business together. Her husband and my aunt had the first restaurant and cafe out in Arcola. Their name was Tolly. Her name was Jewel and his name was Manual and they had a daughter and they used to go out there all the time. It was a cafe. It was the BIGGEST thing you wanted to see inside and she had a parrot. I mean a real parrot and I'd go out and spend the night and this was when I was ten, eleven, twelve years old with her daughter, Darlene. We were supposed to go to bed at ten o'clock and so she would say, "You girls go to bed and don't you all get up and Darlene don't you go in that restaurant and get nothing." "Okay." We'd go in there after they went to sleep and that bird would holler, "Mama! Mama! Darlene's getting a Coke, Darlene's getting a Coke." Oh, my God. I was running to get back to the room! That bird was something else. A pretty girl would come through the door and he'd whistle and tell her how cute she was. It had a vocabulary out of this world. "Mama! Mama! Darlene's getting a sodie water!" Or Coke, what ever it would say. It was so funny.

WARE: Somebody told me that there used to be a parrot at the Dew house.

JOHNSON: Yes, there was a parrot there. That sucker was something else, too. He must have been a hundred years old. I used to have to take care of it when she went up to Virginia to stay. I'd take care of it over there. That's when we seen all the commotion with people that were living there that wasn't living there.

WARE: Tell me about that.

JOHNSON: Okay, The first time we heard it was when Muffie was still here but was gone to Houston and my daughter was baby-sitting the kids. She puts Justin to bed upstairs and her and Robert was downstairs playing and watching TV. I was sitting downstairs with them and we heard footsteps.



The Dew House in its original setting. It was moved and restored as a museum in Missouri City.

I thought, "Now that baby can't walk because he has things on his feet to straighten his legs out." I thought maybe he was holding on to something and making racket. I said to my daughter, "Why don't you go see? You are babysitting not me." "Oh I don't want to." Upstairs I went and Justin is sound asleep in the bed. So I come down stairs and said, "Well I guess it's nothing, I don't know."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Linda "Muffie" Moroney's interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=42954>

One time Muffie was at home and she calls me. I was living on the river and she says she heard somebody flushing the toilet under the staircase. I said, "Alright, I'll come see." So I brought the 410 shotgun and I walked the perimeter of the house and checked all the doors. She was sitting at the top of the stairs and I knocked on the door and said it was me. "There is nothing out here and there's nothing unlocked so I don't know who it was but they are not here now." So that was that time, she called me to check on it.

Then one time I was watching the house when she was in Virginia and the Mexican was with me because we were feeding the parrot. My grandmother and grandfather were both alive...I think my grandfather slept in the front half of the house and my grandmother slept in the back half of the house. This THING came in the house and was in the apartment over there or in the house. They fought for six months over whose room it was in.

JOHNSON: After that, well everyone in the family had saw it. There is not nobody in my family that hasn't saw it. My uncle Forrest and my aunt Hattie, when they were living here at the store and the railroad track, he used to drink. I mean you know if you have a couple of drinks that's not a problem. Anyways IT showed up back there on the railroad track. Sometime over the years there was a story going around that it could lead you to a treasure chest. So my aunt and uncle decide, "Well, we are going to follow it." So here they go down the railroad track and it's bouncing right along. It's about the size of the blade on that ceiling fan. They get about half way down the middle of that pasture out there, almost to that other road, and it stopped. They stopped; it turned around and started bouncing in the other direction.

WARE: Towards them?

JOHNSON: Ah-ha and they turned around and ran back to the house. I hate to say it but my uncle beat my aunt home (whistling sound). That was the story anyhow and when I was a kid we used to see it bouncing across the fence line out there. Then one year my daughter was playing outside in the yard over here. Daddy had an old truck with sides on it for when we delivered groceries and stuff. Kids use to play in it and IT came up out there in front of them and it showed itself to them one time.

WARE: It was just like a ball of flame?

JOHNSON: Yea, but it was like the moon or the sun, but it bounced just like a ball. It was yellow and it could be this size. When it bounced down the fence line it was small like this.

WARE: Like a four or five inch diameter.

JOHNSON: Yea, but then when it was on the track it could be as huge as it wanted to be.

WARE: As big as a train?

JOHNSON: Well, not as long as a train, but round, it was always circular. That thing has been around for years and years.

WARE: When was the last time you saw it?

JOHNSON: The last time we saw it was when my daughter was probably about twelve years old and she's forty something so it's been a long time. It's been forty years at least since anyone saw it. Of course I ain't been looking for it neither! (ha, ha, ha, ha)

I am not going to look for it. I 'm afraid anyhow. (both laughing) You think about it, you don't know anything about it. It could be a good entity or it could be a bad entity. If it started chasing my aunt and uncle I don't think it could be too good.

WARE: Unless it was doing it for the fun of it (laughing).

JOHNSON: Well, that's true it could have been. Hassle them.

WARE: It's a good entity with a sense of humor.

JOHNSON: That's probably it, I feel it, I got you.

WARE: Tell me what the store was like when you were a child.

JOHNSON: Up in front of the store we carried the hundred pound sacks of feed. We had the horse feed and corn for the pigs. We had three or four different kinds of feed that daddy carried for the farmers and the ranchers around here. Then on this wall over here there were shelves that were built all the way down the wall.

We had clothes for the wetbacks that worked on the ranches that would come up and shop because there was no Krogers or no outlets. We were the only store around there. Daddy sold socks, t-shirts, underwear. We had the sewing things; all the needles, the tread. We had materials, gosh, that whole wall was full of sundries, just name it, it was in there.

Then the wall that was over on this side was the wall that he kept alcohol, Band-Aids, hair soap, any kind of product that a black person would use on their hair. That kind of stuff was all on that wall in that corner. Starting from that door all the way back down to here, were the groceries. We had the tops about that wide [12 inches] and then the bottom was twice as wide. On this end of it we kept the washing powders, and bleach in the big boxes. All up there were all the canned goods that we sold. On the rail at the top we kept the cereal, the oatmeal and all that kind of stuff. That corner was the flour, the corn meal and dry goods in the big bags 20, 25, and 50 pound bags.

WARE: People bought them in 25 and 50 pounds?

JOHNSON: Oh, yea, yea. Like I said earlier, we had those baskets that hung down where they kept produce. They had the bean barrels, we had a big old shovel, he'd just dig some up and weigh it on the scale that's in there right now.

WARE: Like pinto beans and what other kind of beans...

JOHNSON: Ah-ha, yea. Baby beans, well, what ever Spanish people and black people ate is what he would carry.

WARE: Was your clientele primarily Spanish and black?

JOHNSON: Only black and Spanish except for the rich white people that would come buy something here and there like milk. There was no one here but the Seniors and the Andersons, the only two big ranches that were here. The Seniors controlled everything all the way to the canal. They had all the houses and all the people that lived in them worked for them, you know, the Spanish people.

The black people were out in Arcola and they came here because they worked on ranches and plantations nearby. There were nuns at the Scanlan place, where Sienna is. There wasn't even a store in Juliff, we had the only store. So they would have to catch rides. I can remember there being twelve black people in one car. Daddy had a ledger and they would buy their groceries and he'd write the amount down whatever it was and then when they got their government checks on the first of the month they would come in and pay the bill. Basically when they died they all owed my daddy money. They were all a check ahead; you know what I'm talking about? But he didn't care. Yea, I had the ledger for a long time and the critters ate it.

WARE: I sorry to hear that, because I would have loved to see that.

JOHNSON: It showed the peoples names, the first names and showed how much they owed when daddy died and they didn't pay it. My stepmother ran the store for a little while. They would come in like I said and that counter would be full of groceries, loaded up and they would pile them in the trunk of the car and all the people would get back in and away they'd go. Of course, we had the customers from DeWalt because the little DeWalt store wasn't there at that time. I remember once when the railroad track went all the way to town. On that side of the railroad track was the Robertsons place and the DeWalt store. They had the feed store, the grocery store and I don't know what else was there but the train track would drive up like this and when they opened the car it was level with the plantation. It was built higher for when you open the boxcar for them to unload it. They didn't have to lift from the ground up, you would just walk in it.

WARE: So back there like where the bus barn is and all that in that area.

JOHNSON: Yea, back in there... that's where it was. To me it was huge back then. I don't know really how big it was. I remember running up and down. I think daddy would go up...because the feed mill would sell them feed. Daddy would buy it and then he'd bring it back and sell it in the store.

WARE: Right, okay. But when you open the box car it was level? The ground was built up or they had a platform?

JOHNSON: Yea, a platform built out in front. It had to be built up because that land is not that high right there on the other side of the tracks. If I shut my eyes I can see the building and that old wooden thing where we use to run up and down and play when I was little. That was like being two or three years old when that thing was there.

WARE: Right! Do you remember the old bell hanging over there some where?

JOHNSON: No, I don't remember the bell. I just remember that they were used at the big house in the old days. They rang it to bring the slaves in from working in the old days, that's what Muffie told me.

WARE: Right, yea.

JOHNSON: And Nancy, you remember Nancy [Woods]. Nancy there ain't nothin' Nancy don't know.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Please read the Nancy Stephenson Woods interview on this website at <https://www.fortbendcountytexas.gov/home/showdocument?id=45528>

WARE: Nancy had to live it, that's why.

JOHNSON: I know poor thing. Now Muffie was good to Nancy. Nancy still works for her. She'll work for her until she's dead.

WARE: Nancy is a good person.

WARE: Yea, I think your right. Nancy's birthday is in July and I think she'll be seventy-seven.

JOHNSON: Geez, well I'm sixty something so I figured...

WARE: You told me once when I was here that somebody rode a horse over here from DeWalt. Tell me that story.

JOHNSON: It was Viola Davis.

JOHNSON: Yea, Viola, right. She would like when the lake was all... it was a lot bigger in the old days. If you go out here right after you pass the creek on your left there is a driveway. It goes back over to that little road by a nursery up there. You know where that little road is that goes back to the cemetery?

WARE: Where Senior Road was originally?

JOHNSON: It might still be Senior Road. It goes back to the cemetery. Anyway her house was way in the back. She got on the horse and rode over here to get her groceries. If I was fortunate enough, I got to drive the truck home and take her and unload the groceries. We had a black man that used to ride from back out there. He pulled a sled behind his horse.

WARE: From over near Fresno?

JOHNSON: No, it was out back that direction towards...in between the canal and Highway 6. He'd come down the road and when the wooden bridge was there we were all playing and we'd hear that sleigh go over that bridge.

WARE: Right. ka thuka thuka

JOHNSON: So we'd run like the dickens to get on the sleigh to ride back. Then he'd buy his groceries then he'd get on the sleigh and we'd get off back at the bridge and he'd go on back to his house.

WARE: Do you remember what his name was?

JOHNSON: I am not sure. But I do remember ol' Henry that rode his horse up here. He lived down on the canal down there. You know, I never seen a man ... don't care if it was a 120 degrees outside he had an overcoat on, another coat long sleeves and long handled underwear year around. I think he never took it off. He used to ride his horse and he would tie it up out here and if we were lucky we got to ride it. He would lead it around when we were little and let us ride on it. The maid, Lizzy, would fix him some biscuits and coffee. He'd come in and sit at the table and have biscuits and coffee while mother and daddy was working. That's how I learned to dunk my biscuits in my coffee and my toast. He showed me how to do it while I was in a highchair.

WARE: (laughing) Do you remember old Henry's last name?

JOHNSON: No, last names I'm not good at, first names I pretty good at still but I never really... when you're a kid you don't know anybody by their last name.

WARE: You mentioned the Andersons.

JOHNSON: They had the property that was down here. One of the Andersons sons still lives down here. The old man doesn't live there though, he died. His son still lives down there in a house that's setting...like if you go here you go through the red light, that first little road where those apartments are.

WARE: Do you go up over a levy to go to his house?

JOHNSON: No, no. The levy is over there but the little road just kind of takes a turn and if you go all the way in and back in the back, that's where the Seniors used to live. They lived in a two story house over here and the Anderson's place was back here on the creek.

They had a swimming pool and all that kind of mess in there and then right over this away was a six car garage that that had apartments on the top that I guess the help lived in. When I was a kid. That was Bill Senior, his brother Robert I think it was his name. Robert and Doris lived down here and Bill lived with his mother until he got married and they had a house at the end of the road. Then he built this one back up here on the other side down there where Schindler's is at. That's who the other person was. Well, anyhow we won't go there.

WARE: Okay (chuckle). Your remembering we're taping don't you?

JOHNSON: Yea, oh, it's nothing really bad it's just that you know some people have money because they don't spend any of their own. He was one of those...if I can get it for what it cost then that's what I want it for. He used to come to the DeWalt store wanting me to get ice cream for him and sell it to him for what I paid for it.

WARE: You can't run a store that way.

JOHNSON: Well, no, but he didn't care. (chuckling). Anyways that's neither here nor there.

WARE: Okay, you were talking about different things that your daddy would pick up at the feed mill. Where did you get other things for the store?

JOHNSON: We bought our milk from the Borden Milk Company downtown. There was a packing plant right downtown on the bayou, Texas Packing House, that we used to buy all the meat. In the beginning daddy would bring it back...you know?

WARE: Like half a cow?

JOHNSON: Yea, and he would cut it himself, him and my mother. They would do it in there. I had the butcher block but I sold it to some lady one year. I still have the meat cleaver and the huge butcher knife that he used use to cut the meat with.

WARE: Did he ever teach you how to do that?

JOHNSON: Girl, I am too dangerous around knives. You should see all these cuts on me now. I'm just dangerous, period, around anything, but my mother was good at it, she really was. She did all that. C&A Tobacco was close to the packinghouse that he would go and buy all the cigarettes and cigars and stuff like that.

Over off Washington Navigation, somewhere in that general area, there was a warehouse that sold groceries that you bought instead of having the truck bring them. We didn't have a truck. Daddy would take the truck into town and he went to the place where he bought groceries first. He put them on the truck and then he went to the packinghouse and directly from there he'd go wherever he bought the milk. We used to have a case in there that was twice the size of that one, but it finally wore out and I had to get rid of it. We had the milk in the front of the truck, then we had the feed in the back of the truck when we used to go buy feed in town. This was when I was older and then we'd get everything in Houston, come back, and unload everything. That's how I got all these muscles up here, I used to unload the hundred pound sacks of feed off the truck every Friday.

We sometimes had ten bags that I would have to unload and stick in that corner over there. You know what? I'm thankful right now for it. If I didn't have this upper body strength with me not being able to walk I'd be in a heck of a mess. I didn't mind hard work in the old days. You could come in when we were children and the Spanish people that were working would come in. Daddy had a lot of food. He had summer sausage and moon cheese. You know what that is?

WARE: No, I don't.

JOHNSON: It's half the moon. They would get a chunk of cheese, summer sausage piece like this and some moon cookies. You know what moon cookies are?

WARE: Like moon pies

JOHNSON: No, these look like moons. They're circles and they have a moon on them. They're called moon cookies and they'd get five or six moon cookies, cheese that cost them fifty cents and they'd go out and sit under the tree and eat.

Back in the old days when I was just a little girl, we used to have people come out from Houston to buy our Texas hot dogs. A special company made these. They came and order them on the first. Mr. Fred is what they called my daddy. They'd say, "Mr. Fred I need a box of them sausages." So he had to get extra sausages because on a Friday we had, I'd say, a hundred loaves of bread that the bread man delivered. They were sitting on top of this huge meat case. We had a bread case that's still in there that we loaded up. And we had all the sweet cakes, you know cinnamon rolls, stuff like that, was on the bottom and then we had all the meat. He got round steak, pork chops, sirloin steaks and certain customers would get certain things. He just put it up or they came in and said, "Mr. Fred, do you have my order?"

WARE: They ordered the week before?

JOHNSON: Yea, right. It was just a standard thing they ordered to eat for the week. Gosh, we had some of the best sirloin steaks you ever had. He would get them at that packinghouse. He'd get T-bones every once in awhile, then he'd get the roast and certain customers, every once in awhile, he let them buy the roast because back in the old days those people didn't have money and couldn't buy a lot of fancy meats and stuff like that.

We had pork chops and those two different kinds of sausages. We had pressed ham, which comes in a can. We had bologna, salami, the moon cheese, summer sausage and by Sunday it would be all gone.

WARE: Those Texas hot dogs, did he buy those at the packinghouse? Were they in the skins and they were connected?

JOHNSON: Ah-ha. And the other things that weren't like the hot dogs. The hot dogs were exactly that – hot. The others were short and fat. Other were long... like a J&B sausage, but it wasn't two of them connected. They were just one sausage but they were on a string and you just put on however many you needed. Then you'd weigh it and that's the way daddy did that.

On the bottom of the milk case we had all the milk. We'd have, I don't know, gosh, half gallons, gallons then he had the butter. He had everything you could want. By Sunday it was all gone and he ran out. Monday morning it's back to Houston and buy stuff to last through the week so he would go to town on Fridays, again and get the bulk of everything. Then when he started selling beer, oh, my God, we sold more beer and more bread! I never seen nothing like it. We had people lined up out by the railroad track all the way down to my cousin's house on both sides of the road from Friday till Sunday buying groceries. They had a gas pump. They would buy two or three dollars of gas to get them back.

WARE: Who did he get his gas from?

JOHNSON: Phillip 66, that's the pump. If you'll get up and walk over there on the wall is a certificate that they gave daddy for his service. They gave him a plaque for so many years of service. We also had kerosene. I still have the kerosene tank in the store.

WARE: Did people use it for heating or for cooking?

JOHNSON: They used it in the wood stove and outside for their lamps, oil to see with I guess. They would put the kerosene in them, kerosene lanterns. That's what they used that for.

WARE: Did a lot of people not have electricity when you were a kid?

JOHNSON: A lot of black people didn't have no electricity and Spanish people, too. I mean a lot of them. There was one lady that lived in the bottom back there. She must have had twenty kids. I never seen so many kids.

She would buy her groceries and go home with them. She did what she could to take care of them. You didn't have no choice, you did what you did and you had to do.

WARE: Did anyone locally ever grow anything that was sold in the store?

JOHNSON: Not locally here, we used to go to Rosenberg. There was an old man that came by the house here and he sold us bushels of okra. He used to come by on Friday and sell us a bushel of okra. For everything else we went to the farmers market off of Airline Drive to get vegetables. He would buy like a hundred pound sack of potatoes, fifty pounds of onions, and, I know this because I had to load and unload them. Then he would go and they had another little department where you could pick out lemons and another place in the market that had lettuce. Then we went to the tomato house, Murphy's Tomato House. He bought the culls which were what they didn't put in the boxes to sell to the restaurants and the stores. It was good and daddy could get it more reasonably.

Then we went to Murphy's and there was an old Spanish guy that we did business with. Then there was a place that had the eggs. You'd drive up and he'd bring a huge ole thing full of eggs and we would bring them back. We got our chickens from a chicken factory over off Navigation somewhere out there. They butchered the chickens in town. You'd go up to the thing and they'd load however many boxes of chickens you wanted. It was in those plastic coated boxes and the chickens would be iced down and then when we'd get back home we had to put all the chickens in the bags and stick that in the old deep freeze that's in there that was in the back room. It was a lot of chickens and hens got awful cold, too.

WARE: Chickens don't smell good either.

JOHNSON: No, but what are you going to do? It's part of your job, if you want to eat.

WARE: You mentioned that there was a slot machine in the store.

JOHNSON: Yea, I can't think of the people's name but they had all the concessions in Stafford, Sugar Land, and all the way up to South Main. They had a funny Italian name. They were related to the Cangelosi's and we had a slot machine that was up on that wall. We use to have a candy case and it set up on the end of the candy case, right there. I don't remember how long we had the thing but they put them in everything that was around here. Everywhere you went there were slot machines back in the old days. Of course, it was against the law but...

WARE: It was against the law then what, they would tolerate it?

JOHNSON: Oh, yea. Of course, everybody was related to everybody. If you wasn't married to them you were the sister of their brother or their aunt or their uncles. You know Stafford and Sugar Land were basically all Italian. That's just the way it was. My best friend that I went to school with, her daddy had a dry cleaners in Sugar Land. Then he left Sugar Land he put it in Stafford; Scanlon's Cleaners and it was there for 50 or 60 years.

The Cangelosi's had the grocery stores and the furniture store. The Laparouse's had the barber shop and then the little strip center. Everybody was related to one another. Like I said, if you wasn't married to one of them you was blood related to one of them, I guarantee ya. They said, now this is just hearsay. You know where they had that Chinese venture on Highway 90?

WARE: Tang City Mall?

JOHNSON: Yes. If you went down the road and went way back in the back there used to be an old big two story house. It was an A house, but in the basement there was a gambling casino!

WARE: What do you mean by "A house"?

JOHNSON: A house of ill repute.

WARE: Thank you (laughing). This is a tape. They can't see your face on this tape.

JOHNSON: In the basement was the gambling stuff ...roulette wheels, tables, everything just like a regular gambling house. I'm just hinting what I heard when I was growing up.

WARE: I've heard that one.

JOHNSON: I'm for sure there was a slot machine in there!

WARE: So people could actually win money playing the slot machine in your store?

JOHNSON: Lets just say they played the slot machine. I don't know how the thing was set up but you know how things are. You go to the slot machine, are you going to win a lot of money?

WARE: No.

JOHNSON: They had a lot of fun. (ha-ha)

WARE: There you go, it was entertainment right? We talked about that.

JOHNSON: Nobody had ever seen that before. Most black or Spanish people never saw a slot machine before.

WARE: So they just put their money in and played?

JOHNSON: Just to see what it was like. It was like the old time kind that just had the three slots in it; three cherries or tiny oranges.

WARE: Ah-ha, right.

JOHNSON: It wasn't the big one that has the four in it now. Those came around later. It was one of the old timers, just pull the handle and it had the three things across the thing that would come up. Of course, they would come up at the same time if you were lucky.

WARE: Did black families primarily live in the bottoms?

JOHNSON: Down behind DeWalt it was primarily black people. Now Schindler, he had his ranch and Herron had his ranch back there. Of course, Muffie had all the property on the river back there. She had two to five hundred acres on the river that they owned. It was part of their plantation in the old days. I think she sold that long ago. She owned all of Dewalt, too, so there you go, all the way up to Lake Olympia. She owned all of that land. All the way there, all the way to the back where the black church is.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Muffie Moroney owned Dew House, which is one of the last remaining buildings of its kind in Fort Bend County. This plantation was one of the plantations central to the production of sugar cane in the region, helping the Imperial Sugar Company to become a thriving business. This house represents the last of a way of life that existed throughout the county over a century ago. Dr. Hugh Saunders Dew built the house "around 1900." The Dew House was moved and restored as a museum in Missouri City.
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She owned all of that. Then Herron owned what was on the left hand side and they owned what was on the right hand side. It was kind of this is your side this is my side. It was something else but that ranch; Herron had a beautiful, beautiful ranch and had cows. Oh he had some nice looking cows and bull and stuff. Muffie had a nice place back their, not a house but just land.

WARE: Do you remember the Brinkman Egg Farm at all?

JOHNSON: Yea, we use to get eggs up there, too. Friends of ours used to live back down here on Schindler's and work at the Brinkman Egg Farm. The Moeckels or something like that. They say Mackol I say Moeckel, whatever. Her and her daughters used to work up there at Brinkman's Egg farm. They'd bring home all the cracked eggs and that's what Mama made used for Kolaches and egg noodles.

WARE: I love it.

JOHNSON: They had a house that faced the golf course and she would make these egg noodles and she had wooden back chairs and she would hang these noodles over the chairs in the front so the sun would dry them so that she could cut them. And kolaches, girl, that women could make the best kolaches in this whole world.

WARE: Your making me hungry (laughing)

JOHNSON: I know. Mama Moeckel made prunes, cottage cheese, peaches, aah, it just melted in your mouth. Mama and Daddy were their names. See, they lived down here on this Schindler ranch and worked here. That's how we met them because they used to be customers in the store. When they left the ranch they moved up across from the golf course up there and that's when I was friends with their daughters and sons and stuff.

WARE: Now, did your dad ever got eggs for the store...

JOHNSON: Not from Brinkman's. We always bought them in Houston that I remember. Brinkman's was later I think.

WARE: You talked about working in the store. What kinds of things did you do for entertainment?

JOHNSON: We played volleyball and softball in the back pasture back there. We went down to the canal and went swimming all summer long. Daddy took us to the beach about once a month in the back of the truck.

He just loaded up all the kids and we'd go to the beach, basically playing with one another. My cousin, Wanda, lives right down there. We had this huge pecan tree across the street, which is older than these that are right here. It used to shade the whole road when the road was gravel. You know the pressed ham cans I was telling you about? Daddy made us two little chairs and then he made a table out of a spool like you get from the light company or phone company.

WARE: Like cable spool?

JOHNSON: Yea, we had a spool and daddy made us little chairs to sit on and we sold lemonade out in front on Fridays and Saturdays. We'd get a penny a cup. Mother would make a big pitcher and we sat out there under the tree and sell it to the people when they came to the store.

That's what we did for entertainment and when her mother and my mother was feuding we had to play through the fence. She had her doll on one side and my doll on the other. We had our dishes and we'd play back and fourth under there. Later they had a barn back there and she had a horse and we had a clubhouse in the middle. On this end was the chicken house that they had and on this side was the horse's pen and in the middle I guess you would call it was a tack room. Our mothers cleaned it out and my grandfather make me a dresser, a little bed and the kitchen thing that you would put your dishes in. I don't know what else he made me. We had a big sign on it, No Boys Allowed.

Of course you know they're going to throw sticks at the building at night and everything else. That's one of the places we played when we were little.

WARE: Do you still have any of that doll furniture, that small furniture?

JOHNSON: No. I gave it to my brothers first daughter, they live in Bay City, and she used it for awhile then they put it in a barn and the storm came through Bay City and it was all gone. My grandfather had made it all by hand, the one that had the beer joint. It was beautiful; I mean...it had the table, two little chairs for me and Wanda to sit in. It filled up that whole little thing.

WARE: He made you a little house?

JOHNSON: Yes, he did. He made me the furniture to go in the little house. He sure did. He was good like that. He was a good grandpa. I didn't know my mother's father because he died before she was born. My daddy Johnson, now he was a nice man, he really was.

WARE: Tell me what you remember about the people who lived in the big house over there even before Muffie, do you remember any of them?

JOHNSON: I remember the two sisters who lived there but that was just a vague memory of seeing them at the store one time.

WARE: Here at your store?

JOHNSON: No, their store.

WARE: At their store, okay.

JOHNSON: Yea, but otherwise I think those people were always gone somewhere. I don't think rich people stay at home much from what I heard. I just remember stories about how the lady died. I don't know is that true, did Muffie say how that really happened?

WARE: That did really happen. Jessie Agnew fell out the window. They think she had a heart attack. Nancy Wood was the last person who saw her. Nancy gave me that account.

JOHNSON: She might have fell out of that window but I think she had help.

WARE: Really? Why would you say that?

JOHNSON: Because I think she was one of the people that were walking around in the house. You know, I really do. Usually when somebody dies like that, there's always some type of attachment to that place that they died. That's like the people who died here, I think that's why they are here.

WARE: Oh, I think so, too. I agree.

JOHNSON: But anyhow that's otherwise...no I didn't know anybody but Muffie really.

WARE: Now you have lived in the house for a while.

JOHNSON: Yea, I lived up there with my son that's not my son. I adopted him when his mother passed away. I adopted him sort of...I took care of him raised him. Sent him to school, Troy. Yea, and we moved up there after I left and they stayed there and lived there for three or four years up there, him and his roommate. I just wish Muffie had given you that dining room table to put back in there. Because you know how big the dining room is? This table fit that dining room and you could seat like fifteen or twenty people around this thing.

WARE: That's amazing.

JOHNSON: Then that buffet that she had that was in there that they put the food on, oh, my God, that was the most beautiful thing! And the fireplace! Did y'all put the fireplace back in the dining room?

WARE: There are fire places but they are not the original fireplaces.

WARE: Tell me what Troy's last name is.

JOHNSON: Thompson

WARE: Did he grow up in the Dewalt area?

JOHNSON: He grew up here with me. They moved here from Wisconsin when he was seven. They moved into the trailer that you could see over that away, kind of gold looking, the bigger one. Not this big white one but the other one was his mother's and daddy's trailer but it was way back in the back it wasn't up here when they lived. There used to be twelve trailers out here at one time. He lived in the trailer park but everywhere my daughter went, he went with her. Basically his mother and daddy was really his grandfather and grandmother, they raised him.

The grandfather got tired of living here so he moved up north where he came from and the wife stayed here. She lived in the apartment with Troy for a long time and then she decided to go back up north and then she died. He just stayed with me and I sent him to school. He finished school in Sugar Land at Clements. He's back up north now.

WARE: He's about your daughter's age?

JOHNSON: No, he's a lot littler than her. My daughter was born in 1965; he's 5-10 years younger than her. But they were inseparable, he slept here, he ate here. They were just like twins and she never had a brother. He never had a sister so it just worked out and every time we went on vacation we took him with us. Whether his mother was here or not, he was here. I didn't have any kids for her to play with so if he didn't go we had other kids that I knew or that she knew and we always took somebody with us to entertain her.

WARE: What is Bridget's last name?

JOHNSON: Temple, Bridget Marie Temple.

WARE: Okay, how did she get to Nashville?

JOHNSON: She worked three jobs here, she worked at the Burger King up there in Stafford, she worked at Gerland's and she worked at Sound Warehouse. She lived at home but she lived in the apartment. She worked three jobs, she went to work... well, she went to school, she went to work she got off, she went to work, she got off, she went to work. The last job stayed open until midnight.

She saved everything dime she made and when she had enough money she moved to Nashville. We were always following Tanya Tucker around. She's been there almost twelve years now.

WARE: Wow! That's neat. Tell me about the history of that chest Muffie gave you.

JOHNSON: She said it belonged to her aunts and that they had taken it on ships around the world when they went traveling. It used to be really nice. You know you got to figure you haul something around for twenty or thirty years it's going to get kind of beat up a little bit.

WARE: Right.

JOHNSON: When I lived on the river I didn't have a place in the house for it so I had to keep it out in the garage...not a garage but metal building and you know the moisture from that is not good.

WARE: You told me a couple of times when you lived on the river. Where was that?

JOHNSON: It's on Hagerson Road. I bought some property from this black lady that lived down there and I can't think of her name right now either. We had a trailer house that I put in there... well Nevada and I, had this trailer that we put down there and we lived down there maybe 5-6 years. Then Mr. Ellis' sister who had the Ellis Water Works...water well drilling company in Stafford, bought the property and the trailer from us. If you go down Hagerson you know where the old church is right? If you take that left and go down there it's all changed now because of the house.

WARE: I know the Hagersons are still around.

JOHNSON: You go across the creek, take the right and go back around like that and all the land on the left hand side is the land that was sold. The land that was over here belonged to a lady. She bought it. I don't know her name either; she had a horse ranch in there. This lady was a rich, white lady from Houston. I can't think of her name but anyway she owned I don't know how many acres.

Do you remember Johnny Davis, the County Commissioner? He lived at the end of Hagerson. He had his house down there. After him and his wife divorced she kept the house in Stafford. He moved down here on the river. Then there was nobody else but there was one black lady and then there was the other black lady that I told you I bought the land from.

Then there in the bottom back in the back there was two houses that had black people, they were all related to one another. Then in the front of the house was that black guy. His grandmother had the house in the front and she owned about fifty acres, which she sold off or got cheated out of by different people. She still had some acreage left before she died, but she had about fifty acres back there on the bottom and on the river back in there.

WARE: Wow!

JOHNSON: All the people that lived there sold the land to these certain people I won't mention. They moved to Sunnyside, they took their money and bought little houses over on Sunnyside. There was no black people left down there, it was just my friends that live on the river.

WARE: What's Robert's last name?

JOHNSON: Allen.

WARE: Allen, okay.

JOHNSON: His grandmother, who owns the land, is named Mary Lou Glover. You can ask Nancy, she knows Mary Lou. The only other people that were there were Ike Tacker. The Foyt's lived in the two story house that's on Hagerson on the left. There's the Foyt's, then there was the Tackers, then Mary Lou, then there was us, then the black people in the back, and the black people at the other end of the road, and then Johnny Davis at the very end of the road, and Molina, George Molina, the son of the man who started Molina restaurants. He has a place down there on the river, too, before you get to Johnny Davis' house. He still lives down there...I used to see him. He's a judge now or was a judge.

WARE: When you were a kid did you ever go down that road and see where the ferry used to be?

JOHNSON: No, I never saw the ferry but I went to the road. The ferry is at Herron. If you go all the way to the very end now they have a sand pit back where they haul sand out of the river my friend's son, Timothy, is married to a Spanish girl. He's married to her and her daddy runs that sand pit down there at the end of the road for them.

WARE: Where that sand pit is, is probably where the old ferry was.

JOHNSON: Yea, that's where it was. Used to go over to Thompson. I never saw the ferry but I know that's what they said it was. I remember them talking about it when we were kids.

WARE: One thing we haven't talked about today is the Sugar Land railroad. The old tracks are right here next to your store where the levy is. Do you remember riding on the train?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't personally get to ride on the train. My daughter rode on the last train that went to the feed mill before it closed down. I was always young and I was scared of the trains. He would pull up and he would blow the horn and us kids would go out and we'd look at it. We never got on the train. We used to get on the boxcars, used to be a thing like a side track. It was out here that they unloaded feed and stuff that people would order from Schindlers and Seniors. They would order stuff and they would put the car over to the side. When we were kids we use to play on the empty boxcars after they got all of the food out of them. My cousins were conductors on the train. This what what the front of the store used to look like. My aunt, Mary Johnson, painted this.

WARE: That is beautiful.

JOHNSON: We used to have one of those gas pumps out front. You had to pump it.

WARE: Your daughter got to ride on the last run of the railroad? Do you remember about how old she was?

JOHNSON: I am not really sure... maybe 7, 8, or 9. She was still in elementary school, I think.

WARE: I want to thank you, Freda, and end this interview for now.

Interview ends