

PERSONAL DATA

Mary Johnson

Interviewed at: Bethune Center, Bridgeport, Ct.

Born:

Spouse:

Children:

Education: Warren Harding High School

Employment: St. Vincent's Hospital

Travel:

Church: Walter's Memorial AME Zion

Organization:

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Spence: May I ask you your name?

Johnson: Mary Louise Johnson.

CS: How old are you?

MJ: I'm seventy-one.

DS: Tell a little about your childhood, your family,  
number of children in the family...

MJ: Well, there was six children: four brothers  
and a sister.

CS: Are your parents originally from Bridgeport?

MJ: No, my father was born in Stratford and my  
mother was born in Washington, D.C.

CS: Types of jobs your parents had?

MJ: Well, my mother didn't work; she stayed home  
and kept the children, and my father worked  
for the freight office - the railroad freight  
office, and he started out as a ...but he  
got to be chief car clerk. And that was the  
highest job there was, but he started out from  
high school, after graduating from high  
school he went there and he worked his way up  
to chief car clerk.

CS: O.K. Level of education completed?

MJ: ...Me? I graduated from Warren Harding  
High School.



CS: Did you go to college?

MJ: No, I did not.

CS: What type of grammar school did you go to?

MJ: I went to Newfield School and then I went to Lincoln School that burned down. Then I went to Harding

CS: Do you remember anything about World War I?

MJ: No.

CS: The Depression?

MJ: Well, I don't remember too much about it; but they did have Depression, but I, you know...but my brothers, I had two brothers that were in World War II, and they were over - one was over in France.

CS: Do you remember anything about the Korean, Vietnam War?

MJ: Well, I wasn't really into that, you know. I just know different ones that were, you know, ones who were in that, but I didn't have any connection with the war itself, you know.

CS: O.K. What about the neighborhood you grew up in; how was it?

MJ: Oh, it was nice - in the East End I lived. And it was really a nice neighborhood - nothing like it is now. And we didn't have any problems, and we never had to lock our doors or anything when we went out. We could just, you know, leave the windows open, doors open, and Stratford Avenue had all kinds of



stores. Every store you'd need - you didn't even have to go downtown unless you wanted to. But now there's nothing up there, you know, it's all different. Nobody'd ever believe, you know, that didn't see it, wouldn't believe it. Yeah, they had every kind of store, every kind of store. Like food stores, clothing stores, you know - shoe stores; every kind of store was there. And it was really nice, really beautiful.

CS: O.K. What was the relationship between you and your neighbors?

MJ: White or black, we were all friendly; you know, everybody was friendly and didn't have, you know, no problems...no problems. It was nice and quiet around; no real problems, you know. Well, we didn't - you know, you didn't have any high positions or anything like that, but everybody, you know, was just friendly neighbors like, you know, and people around us were very nice and helpful if you needed help or anything...no matter white or black, whatever.

CS: OK, what is your religion?

MJ: I'm Methodist, and I've been in that church ever



MJ: since I was twelve years old, I joined the church and I've been in it ever since.

CS: What's the name of your church?

MJ: Walters Memorial AME Zion church down Broad and Gregory Street, yeah.

CS: As a teenager, what were some of the things you did for fun?

MJ: "Well, I used to like to roller skate and I used to go to the YW - we had a YW - the Phyllis Wheatley branch on Beech Street, that's on the East Side. And we'd go there, you know, a few times a week. And we used to have dances there, you know, and do all kinds of things. And we always had to behave, you know, behave ourselves. Children were very well behaved children. Everybody was well-behaved, you know. They didn't have problems like they have now, but, you know, everything was really nice.

CS: What were some places of entertainment then?

MJ: "Well, we had the Hippodrome. The Hippodrome was up on Stratford Avenue and they also had the Park City theater, too, was on Stratford Avenue. And we used to go there, you know, for movies and things and all. And as I got older, we used to go out to the - out Fairfield Avenue, to dances out



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MJ: ...my memory - forget it!

MJ: The Majestic - well, that was downtown Main Street, and we'd go down there sometime. But the Hippodrome - Park City had them over here, and if we didn't want to go downtown we'd go there. And they had all kinds of nice movies and things. And the Hippodrome's still up there, but it's not being used - it's just a building up there now.

CS: About the Depression years, what was it like to live in the Depression?

MJ: Well, it wasn't really Depression for our family because my father worked, you know. As I told you, he was working all the time. And a lot of times people used to come and my father, you know, he'd have sugar and he would get fruit from the men that...from the freight, you know, as the freight come into town they'd bring fruit and vegetables and things and sometimes they would give him a box of it and he would distribute it with people, you know, friends and neighbors and things, and we didn't really have much problem with with Depression ourselves. You know, things were much cheaper than they are now...we could make it pretty good. Some people, you know, didn't have, but we were one of the fortunate ones that...we didn't have a lot now -don't think I mean



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MJ: we were rich or anything, but we were able to make it; we weren't hungry or anything like that. Skome people were hungry, but we were never hungry, because my father was very, you know. My father and mother, they tried to hold on to the little money they had and, you know, use it in the right way. And some of my brothers had odd little jobs - papers and like that, you know, that would help out. But we never were, what you'd call really poor, you know...

I had a very nice childhood...

CS: Right after the Depression, World War II came about  
How did it affect you and your family?

MJ: Well, War II ended in...

CS: 1945.

MJ: Oh, well, I was already married then, and I had three children: two boys and a girl. And my husband worked for Carpenter Steel down here. And he worked there for thirty-five years down there. And he was a very steady worker, you know. And I worked in private family, you know, for a little while. I didn't do much work. Then I was home, and I kept my children; I didn't go out to work until they were grown out of high school, and then one of my sons went to college and I went to work at St. Vincent's Hospital, you know, to help send him to college. And I worked there fourteen years afterwards, till I retired, you know.



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MMJ: you know.

CS: So World War II didn't really affect you and your family?

MJ: Well, my brothers - I had two brothers, as I said, they were in the service...and they were out of the country...My husband, he was a little older than me and he didn't, you know, have to go into the service. I really had a nice life, you know. It wasn't too complicated, you know.

CS: O.K. After World War II, what changes took place.. what changes took place here after World War II?

MJ: Well after that...some people you know, they began to move to different places; some bought homes in different places, but where I live now, I was born there, and my mother and father had a home, and my brothers, and they didn't want the home, so I got it now. It's a two-family home, so we just all lived there; one of my sons and I lived there, you know. And then a while after that, they wanted to build the Connecticut Turnpike, and that moved the whole East Side and, well, all of the city around, because they took the home...peoples' home - they bought them and, like that to build the Turnpike. And it came right through - I live on Beardsley Street - came right through and a lot of the neighbors and things moved and, you know, bought homes somewhere else or, you



you know, they rented somewhere else. But we stayed because it didn't take our home. And it, you know, it all changed because everybody...people from the South End came over this way, the North End - some came this way and the others went to the North End and it just changed the whole city around, you know. KAnd from that...on the East End it went down, you know because people came over and they - all the stores and things, they - you know, they kind of robbed the places and things and they moved out and so, it just left us with nothing over here, and it needs to be revitalized now.

CS: What was it like being black in Bridgeport; were you ever segregated against?

MJ: Well, we didn't, you know, you couldn't get any kind of jobs...you couldn't get good jobs. But you could get something to...you could get something to do, but it was mostly like women would have like in private families...you worked for somebody in private family And so you could...work in a hospital or something like that and the men didn't have very good jobs. ..you worked in private family, the women worked in private family, maybe in a factory, but you didn't have the high jobs, you know. And you could work like in a hospital or something like that...maids and things like that but you couldn't get really the big jobs



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MJ: that they have now, you know, you can really work yourself up...But when I did work, I didn't do much work, but when I did work I worked in private family...more like maid or house-person, you know, like that.

CS: How was it in school? What was it like?

MJ: The school was nice; the kids were all friendly, you know, black or white, they were all friendly. But, as I say, you didn't get too far...you'd do your lesson, it's all right...you got ...your marks were good if ...you studied and all that, but there really wasn't too much for you to do. And a lot of the girls and boys, when they finished, they would go down south to, like college or something, cause they didn't go up here too much; they would go down south. And my mother used to think that I would make a good nurse, but I said, no, I didn't like bothering with sick people. And she was going to send me down in North Carolina to college for nursing. And I had a friend that went down there and took up nursing, and she wanted me to go, but I never was interested in, you know, taking care of sick people. That wasn't one thing I wanted...so I didn't go.

CS: So, how many blacks were in school when you went there - black friends in school when you went there?

MJ: In the classes?



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CS: In the whole school altogether.

MJ: Not many. You know, it was mostly white, let's say that. I don't know, like figures or anything, but it was mostly the white; well, blacks, they would quit, like, and go to work, you know. But my father was one that...he wanted us to get an education and I kept on; I went to high school and I finished high school. But there really wasn't any kind of good job for you to do, but he still thought it was good to get the education...and so, when I graduated in nineteen thirty-two from Harding High School...then when I went to get a job I had to work in private family, which anybody could do it, you know, you didn't have to have a high school education, but there wasn't that much around ...for black people to do.

CS: How many black graduated with you in nineteen thirty-two?

MJ: Just three, and I think there was about three hundred or three hundred fifty or more in the class. But I was the only black girl, and two boys that graduated out of the whole class. See, some of them used to drop out of school because there wasn't anything to make them want to go, to continue, because whatever jobs there were you could get anyway.



MJ: Blacken shoes and, like...shoe cleaners like that.

And you didn't need an education for that. And that kind of thing...I went on and finished...I worked a while and then I got married and I had my children and my husband had a job, and he worked about thirty-four, thirty-five years at Carpenter's and I stayed home with my children. And after they got out of high school, then I went to work, and I worked at St. Vincent's for fourteen years. And I first started out in the dietary department, and I worked there six years. And I got tired of that and then I went in to the supply department, where you sterilized instruments and things like that.

CS: Were churches segregated?

MJ: Oh, no, no, not really. You could go to a white church if you wanted to.

CS: Any complications in going?

MJ: No, I don't think so. But I always went to...well, my grandmother was in, and my mother and father belonged to the Methodist church, so I grew up there and I went to Sunday school there and then I joined the church and I've been in it ever since.

CS: What about the neighborhoods, because, like, they have things like Father Panik, P.T...were they always



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CS: black, were they always segregated?

MJ: Well, they didn't have those kind of things early...e  
Father Panik Village was, you know, in later years,  
and a lot of them lived in the South End, black  
people lived in the South End, but I think that  
...kind of mixed together, because on the street  
where I lived there was both, you know. But there  
was a lot of white people on the street, but they  
were black and white, but now it's all mostly  
black; I think there's a couple of white families  
on the street now, that's all, but everything's  
black now. But...that was caused by the Turnpike  
uprooting the people. The whole city was interrupted  
because they took the houses and people had to move  
and they went where they could find a home, like that.  
It just didn't affect us. But it came right through  
our street -just divided the street in half. We  
could have moved, but we had a house and we just  
stayed there...some bought houses in the North  
End...but we just stayed there; that was our home.

CS: Were you ever discriminated against personally?

MJ: Myself? No, no, not really.

CS: How do you feel about the way the East End has  
deteriorated over the years?



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MJ: Oh, I don't like it at all. I think it's terrible.

This, now, is the worst part of town; I call it the worst part of town. And it really needs revitalizing. But they fixed up all parts of town, but they haven't come over here to do anything...it's really for the birds, because when you think about how it was before and you look at it now,, new people would never believe that we had the things we had over here, because they'd say: "oh, it couldn't have been". Because we had everything over here; everything was over here. East End was, I call it, the best part of the city, the East End, because we had everything over here - cleanest bakery, fish markets, chicken markets, clothing stores, shoe stores, food stores all kinds of markets; you didn't have to go out of the area to shop. You'd get anything you wanted over here; and now you can't find anything - a decent place to go, you know. Now you get on the bus to go and carry the stuff home. But you could just go up there...and I remember that when food rationing and things were on and they had certain days when you could get fresh-killed chickens,...and my children were small and I had one on each side of the carriage and one in the carriage - I had three



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MJ: children - they're close together. And my mother used to go with me and we'd go to the chicken market, and my mother would go with me because you had to get in line, and the line would be all the way down the street. And if the man would come out and he'd see a woman with children, he'd say: "you come up", and you'd get in because he didn't want you to be standing out there with the children. And he'd let me come in to the store. And my mother would go with me, cause she could get in because she was helping me with the children. So she'd get waited on early!...but they used to have long lines when food rationing was on, and you'd have to go, and you could only get certain things, you know, to eat...but we never was hungry or anything like that, but it was kind of a nuisance; you'd have to get on line and wait your turn, and you could only get so much food for the coupons - they had a little book with coupons, and so much on the meat coupons, and so much for the other things, and you could only buy what you had coupons for. And it was according to how many was in your family, you know.

CS: So, what advice would you give to young people grow-



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Spence: ing up in Bridgeport, especially blacks?

MJ:Well, I think that they should try to get a good education...think that's a good thing, because now there are better jobs and things that you can get, and you can get further advanced than you could before; the positions are better. But it seems like the children nowadays, they don't want to go to school too much, and they don't go to school; they start out for school, go somewhere else, but I think the first thing is they need to try to get an education, because you're handicapped if you don't have a good education, because these jobs that are offered now, you really have to know something, you know, to get a really good job. And those other jobs, anybody could get. But to really get anywhere in the world you really need a good education, I think, and they really should try to go to school and get all that they can. Sometimes they just hang around and leave those drugs and things alone, yeah...leave them alone! But we didn't have much problem with that - they might have had it, but it wasn't really a main concern. And the parents, they paid more attention and they made you go...you'd go to school, you know, even if they were working, you better go. And they didn't allow you - like the kids do now - their parents go to work, and they don't even know whether they went to



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MJ:school or not, a lot of them; not everybody, because some people are very...they really watch out for their children, but there's a lot of them that don't know what their children are doing; they don't keep track of what they're doing. But with us, we had to go to school. And I remember that if the teacher even said to us that she was going to tell...if I did something that wasn't quite right and she said "I'll tell your father", oh, I was so nervous! Don't tell my father, whatever you do, because...he wasn't sending you to school for that. You went to school to learn. And you didn't go to school to act up and do all kind of things. You went for the learning. And he followed on behind you, and he'd better not get any kind of a report that you did something that wasn't right. And I never in my life played hooky from school - never. Even if I didn't know my lessons and hadn't studied good, I still went to school; I never missed one day of school. If I missed a day of school, I was sick, and they knew that I stayed home...but I never did anything like that. Cause we weren't brought up that way. And if we did something like that and they found it out, you were in trouble. KAnd not many children did that - some of them did; course there's always some



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MJ: that did that, but the general run of kids went to school, even if they didn't study or didn't learn, they still went to school. So that's the way it was. But it's so much different now. I'm really glad that my children grew up in the earlier times than now. 'cause I don't know how I would manage now!

CS: O.K. Thank you very much.



Carlene Spence/Alice Farrar

Good lead-ins to questions, Carlene. Good rapport. Very clear on both sides (both of you). An excellent interview.

Carlene/Mary Johnson

Good interview. In case a phone rings during interview, turn off tape until interference is over. Good, clear lead-ins. You are a good listener.

Carlene/Brownie Johnson

Some static on tape. Excellent lead-ins. Good rapport with interviewee.

Alice Farrar, cont'd

Recording is on side without label,)  
Nice and informal: "Hi, how old are you" "Tell me a little about your childhood - good.

When your senior has trouble distinguishing between wars, give a few reminders to refresh her memory.

Quotes

"from the train, I could see the bread lines".  
"Bridgeport has been very prejudiced for schooling for black children...I had six of them."  
"It takes a lot of mone7y to live"  
"...not enough home pressure..."



Interview by: Carlene Spence  
Interview with: Mary Johnson

Date: June 19, 1984