

James Johnson

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Interviewers: Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Russell Gehrum
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Abstract: James Arthur Johnson (1917-2014), the son of Arthur Julius Johnson and Ida Emelia Johnson, was born in Brooklyn, New York and moved to Metuchen as a young boy. His father worked as a fireman for the Pennsylvania Railroad and the family rented a home at 43 William Street. They later moved to 19 Lincoln Avenue in 1931. Mr. Johnson graduated from Metuchen High School in 1936, and he served in the United State Armed Services during World War II. He would return to Metuchen in 1948 and worked as an engineer for the Pennsylvania Railroad for approximately forty years. Mr. Johnson married Mary Elizabeth Green in 1947 in Roanoke, Virginia and they had two children: James Jr. and Edna. The couple resided at 24 Sheridan Avenue.

Mr. Johnson was a member of the Centenary United Methodist Church and the Fugle-Hummer Post 65, American Legion. A member of Troop 14 since 1931, he became an Eagle Scout in 1934, a Silver Beaver Award recipient, and became a Scoutmaster in 1939. Mr. Johnson would later serve as the chairman of the Troop 14 Committee. He is buried at Hillside Cemetery in Metuchen.

In this interview, Mr. Johnson discusses family, schooling, his early childhood in Metuchen, military service, marriage, and his career on the Pennsylvania Railroad. He also mentions his recollections of the Boy Scouts, the American Legion, Woodwild Park, baseball, the trolley, the Metuchen Golf and Country Club, Hillside Cemetery, the Centenary United Methodist Church, Gort Bone China, as well as local families and local businesses.

Interview note: The last part of the interview was difficult to transcribe due to the quality of the recording.

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P. Boeddinghaus: This is an oral history done under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. We are interviewing James Johnson, a long-time resident of Metuchen. The interviewers are Phyllis Boeddinghaus and Russell Gehrum. [recording paused]

The date of the interview is Monday, March 19, 2007 at Jim's residence at Whispering Knoll on James Street in Metuchen, which is an assisted living. [recording paused]

Jim has corrected me that his residence is in Edison, New Jersey and not Metuchen. Well, here we're on. We're on, Jim. We're going to start recording our chat and our conversation. And you started to say that you were not born in Metuchen.

J. Johnson: That is right. I was not born in Metuchen. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. But I can't remember New York at all because we left within a year to Jersey City. My dad [Arthur Julius Johnson] went to work on the Pennsylvania Railroad. The reason why he went on the railroad was because my mother [Ida Emelia Johnson] came from Kane, Pennsylvania and he could get passes for her to go home. And we did. We went up there almost every year, and the line is not even there anymore. It's not even the Pennsylvania Railroad; it's now the Allegheny [Railroad]. But anyway, he came to Jersey City because he was working on the railroad instead of Brooklyn, New York where I was born. My sister [Doris Johnson] was born in Jersey City and I went to schools in Jersey City. The Metuchen schools were so superior to the Jersey City schools that when we moved in March of 1924, when we came to Metuchen (I guess I was in the second grade then), by March, most of the curriculum was all over and they were testing. And what they were testing, we never had. [laughs] So both my sister and I didn't make it to first year.

P. Boeddinghaus: So that was the Franklin School?

J. Johnson: It was the Franklin. That was the only school I went to in Metuchen, the Franklin.

P. Boeddinghaus: I think I remember that you said you lived on William Street.

J. Johnson: I lived on 43 William Street. The house is still there. It's a real old one. I don't know exactly how old, but I do know that it was in the 1800s. The Gedneys lived next door to us [at 39 William Street]. In fact, they owned the house. There were two levels to the house; people lived upstairs and we lived down. In our back [yard], there was, not a farm, but a garden, a real big garden. The Owsiks [at 67 Durham Avenue] owned it. They were on Durham Avenue and good friends. And on the corner lot of William Street and Durham Avenue, was just a wooded area. There were no houses there. When I was quite young, we built a hut there. [laughs] And we had a treehouse there. There was a cherry tree in the yard, I remember falling out of it. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, those cherry tree limbs are very frail.

J. Johnson: It was a lot of fun there. We were close to the Campbell Field, which is now the Campbell School. And the [Ayers-]Allen house [at 16 Durham Avenue], it's one of the real old houses in Metuchen, was on the Main Street side, Durham Avenue towards Main Street. But I don't know if you are aware of it or not, the house on the other side [at 48 Durham Avenue], directly opposite, was half of the Allen house.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, was it? I mean they look like book ends.

J. Johnson: They were, they were! They looked like they sawed it right down the middle. And the Rasmussens lived there. Talking about the Rasmussens, he [Soren M.

Rasmussen] was in the moving [hauling] business. He had horses; they were moved with horses. And he had a contract with the borough, and he did all the sidewalks in the borough. [chuckles] He had a little plow, that was just sidewalk-wide, and he'd take those horses and they'd go. And we didn't get a lot of snow.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, Mr. Dinwiddie used to tell us about how they used to plow on the sidewalks pulled by the horses. He used to talk about that. Let's get back to that house now. So those houses were attached?

J. Johnson: Yeah. You look at them, you can see that they were. I don't know if it's recorded anywhere or not.

P. Boeddinghaus: I wonder if the present owners know that because we are very friendly with the present owners. They're active in the historical society.

J. Johnson: I don't know. The Walshes¹ were there when I lived on William Street. The Murphys lived across the street [at 48 William Street] and the Morrisises [at 44 William Street]. And Elizabeth Morris was one of my schoolteachers, third grade, I think. [chuckles]

P. Boeddinghaus: So that was convenient. Your sister went off to Franklin School from where you lived?

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah. And we lived on William Street till 1931, and we moved up into the south end of town on [19] Lincoln Avenue. I think the Boeddinghauses lived down the same street at one time.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, they did, they did. Closer to the cemetery [Hillside Cemetery].

J. Johnson: Yes, yes. I don't know if it was the same house that the [Deal] Fosters lived in or not [at 47 Lincoln Avenue]. But the Fosters had two children that are state wardens. One of them, Joe Balcius² got hurt badly in World War II and I don't know if he—I thought he's still living, but he was really banged up. And the other one was Donnie Biern [Donald Biern] and I don't know what happened to him either. But Metuchen was always a great town for me. I loved it. And the school, I think, I know Carl Roos was the principal.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now that would have been Edgar School then or did you just go to Franklin?

J. Johnson: No, no, no. The Franklin School and the Edgar School, he was principal of both. He was principal of the elementary school. I guess I went all the way up to seventh grade, kindergarten to—I never went to the kindergarten [unclear].

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, you said you started in third grade when you moved into town?

¹ He may be referring to the Wales family, who lived at 16 Durham Avenue during the late 1920s and 1930s.

² Lt. Joseph J. Balcius was born in Bayonne in 1919 and was placed in a foster home in Metuchen at the age of three. He attended St. Francis Parochial School and graduated from Metuchen High School in 1938. Lt. Balcius enlisted in the New Jersey National Guard in 1940 and served until 1945, where he received a battlefield commission of second lieutenant and became a regular army infantry serving in France and Germany. On March 28, 1945, he was seriously wounded in combat in Peddeihin, Germany. Lt. Balcius was flown to the United States where he spent time in several hospitals until 1947, when he was discharged on disability as a retired first lieutenant.

J. Johnson: Yeah, I know, but there was no kindergarten. That's another thing about Jersey City. And you know they're still having trouble with their system. [chuckles] But I think the state put up [unclear]. When we were in Jersey City, we attended the [Claremont-Lafayette United] Presbyterian Church on Claremont Avenue. But when we came to Metuchen, the [Centenary United] Methodist Church was closer to [us], so we went there. And that was in 1924. And I've been with the Methodist Church since 1924.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's when it was on Main [Street] and Middlesex [Avenue].

J. Johnson: Exactly.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you lived on William Street.

J. Johnson: Yes. My sister got hit on [Route] 27 and wound up in the hospital with a broken hip or pelvis and broken leg, and I can remember that now. Well, I guess that was in the twenties because they took her to Dr. [Clarence] Hofer on [463] Main Street, three steps up. You know where that was?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that used to be a dress shop.

J. Johnson: That used to be his office and I remember sitting there in the waiting room and hearing them chop wood to use for a splint for her leg. That's the truth! [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that's what it would take.

J. Johnson: Yeah. It worked, it worked.

P. Boeddinghaus: Let's backtrack a little bit. So are you Norwegian? Swedish?

J. Johnson: I'm a full-blooded Swede. My grandparents all came from Sweden. My grandmother [Carolina Larson] came over in 1890. I'm trying to figure out which ship she came on. I just started fooling around with this. I'm not very good at it on the computer.

P. Boeddinghaus: What? The genealogy program?

J. Johnson: Yes, I've got the program. But I have her steamship ticket, or contract it is, really. She came from Sweden, but she got the ship—she took a ferry across to Copenhagen [Denmark] and got a ship from Copenhagen to East English port and it doesn't say which one. It says "A" for it, and took a train from there across to Liverpool [England], and [it was] the first White Star Liner leaving Liverpool for New York. I happen to know that she had her eighteenth birthday while on the ship. And her eighteenth birthday was on the third day of March, so I know that that ship had to come in in March of 1890, and I'm still searching for it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did she come alone or did she come with her family?

J. Johnson: She didn't speak any English and she came alone. She came over to an aunt that lived in Kane, her steamship ticket. Her route was by rail from New York to Kane, Pennsylvania. And she was only eighteen when she got there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did she meet someone in Kane that she married?

J. Johnson: Well, she got married in Jamestown, New York. Incidentally, my mother and father got married in Jamestown, New York.

P. Boeddinghaus: And which grandmother are you speaking about? Is it your mother's mother or your father's?

J. Johnson: This is my mother's mother up there. My father's mother and my father's family are from Brooklyn. That's how come we wound up in Brooklyn. Yeah, and I've been to Sweden, Mary [wife Mary Elizabeth (Green) Johnson] and I and my aunt. And it's a beautiful country. Although I don't know the language. I picked up a little of it, but not too much.

But getting back to Metuchen, my boyhood days were great. I could say I got into the Boy Scouts. I used to watch them. They had a [American Legion] Drum and Bugle Corps and the Franklin School had an annex. The annex [was] between the school and Center Street, not very far, but very wide there. But it was there, and it had two classrooms in there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Is that a wooden structure?

J. Johnson: Yes. Well, you know it now [as] the American Legion Hall [formerly along Lake Avenue near Holly Street]. I remember them. Carl Roos was responsible. Carl Roos was the commander of the [Fugle-Hummer] Post [65] at that time. But I can't remember whether they used horses to [unclear] across the field, the field where the bank is now and the Senior Citizen [Center at 12 Center Street]. All that, that was just all the field. And the circus came there every year, Hunt Brothers. And I remember I used to order ale with—that was a lot of rum. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, let's see, what was in the annex again? The wooden structure, the annex to the school?

J. Johnson: Became the American Legion Hall and still is. It still is. When I first joined the Troop [14], they were meeting in the school [Franklin School]. Downstairs they had a—it wasn't a gym. It wasn't big enough to be a gym, it wasn't high enough, but they met down there. The Scoutmaster was—trying to think—he wasn't there very long. West [phonetic], his name was. But he wasn't there—I was only in the troop about a year before he left. And Brinton Osborne—I don't know if you remember Brinton or not?—the Osborne family, his sister is still living in the Senior Citizen—

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, Blanche?

J. Johnson: Blanche.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, we stay very friendly with Harold [Osborne].

J. Johnson: Blanche, yeah, and Harold, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: I think the others are gone. [unclear] they had ten kids.

J. Johnson: I think they all are too. Yeah, I think they all are. They used to live down on [76] Myrtle Avenue, down in a little house down on the end of Myrtle Avenue.

P. Boeddinghaus: You were saying that Brint was in the troop with you?

J. Johnson: He was Scoutmaster.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, he was Scoutmaster.

J. Johnson: He was the assistant when I came there. And Ronald [Osborne] was also in the troop.

P. Boeddinghaus: What age group is that? Ten?

J. Johnson: The Boy Scouts then, you had to be twelve to be a Boy Scout. There was no coach. But I didn't go in until I was thirteen. I went in because my friend was an Eagle Scout, Charlie Owsik. I don't know if you remember Charles? I think he's dead too and so is his sister Jane. They're all gone, except Frank [Owsik]. Frank's still living. He's still living.

P. Boeddinghaus: I still see Frank. Yes.

J. Johnson: Yeah, but I remember so many games we played. We played stickball. We got a broomstick and cut them up, piece of wood about that long, sharpened the end to hit it, and bounced it up and then hit it. But they kicked the can, things like that. But there were three of us [unclear]: Frank, Charlie, Julius [Owsik], yeah. They're all gone.

P. Boeddinghaus: Except for Frank.

J. Johnson: Except for Frank.

P. Boeddinghaus: Frank has a lady friend now.

J. Johnson: Oh, he has?

P. Boeddinghaus: She takes him to church.

J. Johnson: His wife died?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Sue [Susan Owsik].

J. Johnson: Yeah, I remember her.

P. Boeddinghaus: She was a good golfer too.

J. Johnson: He was too.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that's right. They played golf together, that's right.

J. Johnson: Yeah, he was too.

P. Boeddinghaus: He has a lady friend now that takes him to church. They go out to eat.

J. Johnson: More power to him, more power to him.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, she brings him to the historical society meetings.

J. Johnson: Yeah, I miss those days. I don't drive anymore; I can't. I could, but I don't want to. I don't want to put anybody in jeopardy. And I know my reflexes aren't what they should be. But they're talking about some of the states now doing something about it. But there are several people here that are still driving. I don't know whether they should or not? [chuckles] I watched one, one day, go out of here. He went out of here about ninety miles an hour, I think! [laughs] And he can't walk. He can walk, but you know, he staggers.

P. Boeddinghaus: But he can drive?

J. Johnson: But yeah. Well, I was true too. I couldn't walk, but I could drive easily. And I have no trouble driving, but the medication I was taking, and still am taking, that could influence my driving. And I didn't want to put anybody in jeopardy so I stopped driving, I don't know, six months ago or so. Six months ago.

P. Boeddinghaus: Does someone pick you up and take you to church?

J. Johnson: Yeah, I have—sometimes I don't make it. [chuckles] And I was talking to the pastor just yesterday. He said, "Well, call us. We'll get you a ride." He's been with the church, I guess, maybe five years. I think the one that was ahead of him [was Rev.] Paul Maliel?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, I remember Paul.

J. Johnson: I think he is now superintendent of one of the districts [Cape Atlantic District of the United Methodist Church]. I think [unclear].

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, last I remembered, he was up in Chatham at the [United] Methodist Church in Chatham. And we happen to have relatives living in Chatham and the woman passed away. Her service was at that church. He was so glad to see us from Metuchen.

J. Johnson: Oh, yeah, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, very nice man. So then you were saying that—you started at the Methodist Church when you were [unclear] Metuchen and you continued in that church. You were living on Lincoln Avenue with your parents and your sister. You were in Franklin School and then went through to the high school at Franklin School?

J. Johnson: Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then went into the [military] service?

J. Johnson: I was also the class president of the [Metuchen High School] Class of 1936. And we had a lot of reunions. I only know the couple that are still living now. But we had a good class. Remember Blanche (Bates) Thornall?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

J. Johnson: She was in the class, and she did a lot of work on our reunion. I remember when we first came to Metuchen, there were no traffic lights at all. I think there's a postcard out with—shows us—I guess it had a lantern on it, a red lantern on it or something that had the middle of Main and Middlesex there. And they had a sign that was green on one side and red on the other side, and said "STOP" on one side and "GO" on the other. [laughs] And they came out, put that in the middle of the road, and that's how they directed the traffic. And that was the main road [Middlesex Avenue], the main road from New York and Newark to Philadelphia [Pennsylvania]. And it went right, not far from us on William Street. I remember when we lived there, walking up to the corner, and I guess this was 1928. Wasn't that when [President Herbert] Hoover got elected, I think? And Hoover passed by [Metuchen]. That's the only time I saw him, standing on the corner there watching him. So that was 1928, but I was eleven. Yeah, eleven.

P. Boeddinghaus: Other people that I have interviewed have mentioned that that is the main road.

J. Johnson: But I'll tell you that the sleigh ride was great in Metuchen. [chuckles] We had a lot of hills. You know that these hills—oh, and there was no Memorial Park in Metuchen. They had Woodwild Park?

P. Boeddinghaus: Woodwild Park, yes.

J. Johnson: And did you know that Woodwild Park was the terminus of the glacier?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, there's something on the glacial pond up there.

J. Johnson: I was the charter member of the Environmental Committee³ and we gathered information from it. Arline Owen was on it, where, I guess, Arline is gone? I think she had Alzheimer's. She was a smart individual.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, she did a lot. Starting up the recycling in Metuchen.

J. Johnson: Yeah, I remember Arline going out in the middle of Tommy's Park with boots on up to her hips and getting the weeds out of the pond. I offered to help her, but I wasn't going in the pond. And I didn't. She pushed this up over and I put it in a

³ The Metuchen Environmental Commission was established in 1973. The commission has seven members, one who is also a member of the Planning Board, that makes recommendations to the Borough Council and Planning Board regarding the preservation and use of parks and other open spaces in the borough. Since completing its first project, the Environmental Resources Inventory, the commission has taken on a variety of projects. The main undertakings have involved work on the Middlesex Greenway, Tommy's Pond, and Centennial Park.

pile. I cleaned up around there. And Sam [Samuel Owen], her husband, he was Santa Claus many times.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah. He was on—was he Planning, Zoning and Planning Board? My husband Jack [Boeddinghaus] was on [Metuchen Borough] Council in the seventies.

J. Johnson: Sam, yeah. Well, Sam was too on the Council.

P. Boeddinghaus: Getting back to Woodwild Park, I'm a member of that [Woodwild Park] Association. We're still trying to keep it as pristine as we can, and had cleanups up there. I like to walk up that way with my grandchildren.

J. Johnson: I know. It's close to where you are.

P. Boeddinghaus: And they think they're in a big forest when we walk up there. And the Association, every once in a while, would get an email, they'd see the red foxes and the red [unclear], they see a deer off in the park, other wildlife.

J. Johnson: You know, before Memorial Park, that the [Memorial Day] Parade ended up in Woodwild Park?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, no. I never heard that.

J. Johnson: Yes. There was a natural arena-like, you could sit on the side, on the bank there and watch the proceeding. And at first, the first parade that I went to, there were two Civil War veterans⁴, still there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Do you remember their names?

J. Johnson: I remember one of them: [James Smith] Oliver. And Oliver had, I know, two sons: Jimmy Oliver / James Oliver (Jimmy Oliver [Jr.], the dentist, his father) and Harry Oliver⁵. And they went to the [Centenary] Methodist Church too, I think.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, they did, yeah. Because Jack went to—Jack and his family went to the Methodist Church.

J. Johnson: I know Jack's father [Charles Boeddinghaus] died in a sea raft beside me, or behind me, behind me. I remember, yeah. It's not a bad way to go. [laughs] Have a heart attack.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, the Olivers were active in the Methodist Church. Jack is friendly with Leon [Oliver] who ate all the [unclear].

J. Johnson: Yeah, Leon too, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then Jack [unclear] young Jim Oliver to sepsis.

⁴ The last remaining Civil War veterans in Metuchen were James Oliver and Dr. James Mason

⁵ According to census records, James Smith Oliver was an ice dealer and Civil War veteran that had one son: Harry Dew Oliver. Harry Dew Oliver married Frederica Knutsen and had three sons: James Dewitt Oliver, Leon Marcell Oliver, and Harry K. Oliver.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Jim Oliver's mother was—she didn't do anything. And she was in my Sunday school. The Sunday school class I was in was all girls except me. [laughs] I was the only one! And I think that Georgette Johnson, who used to live on, right on the south side by the shop [Jack's Flower Shop at 184 Main Street] there.

P. Boeddinghaus: On Charles Street?

J. Johnson: Yeah, [29] Charles Street. Georgette, she had two boys [George Johnson and Clinton Johnson]. She was a Sunday school teacher. And Angie, yeah, Angie Perry—Angie Perry [Angeline Perry] was superintendent of the [Centenary Methodist Church] Sunday School. We had some great times there. They were great. When we lived on William Street, of course, we got to a lot of ball games. They had semi-pro ball there, ball games there. The [Israelite] House of David [Baseball Team], I remember them coming. And the Black Yankees. There were no blacks in the Major Leagues then. I think [Jackie] Robinson was the first one. But I remember “Bud” Humphries [Bertram Humphries] was a pitcher. He was kind of wild. And [Jack] Danford was on the team. [Ed] “Blackie” Regan, I think, was on the team.

P. Boeddinghaus: How about some of the Osborne boys? Did they play baseball?

J. Johnson: I don't remember that. Maybe, but I don't remember that.

P. Boeddinghaus: Because I interviewed Greg Costa [Gregory Costa Jr.] before December of last year and he recalls that he used to round up a bunch of kids to go play baseball over at the Campbell Field. Just round the kids up and they used each other's equipment.

J. Johnson: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, we did a lot of that!

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, like one kid would have to borrow another's glove and another would have to bat. You'd make up games and they'd make up their own rules. They had a great time. You remember Greg Costa from the [Costa] Ice Cream Plant [at 16 Pearl Street]?

J. Johnson: Hey, that was a great [*Nannygoats*] article, yeah. You sent it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I sent that to you. Yeah, I'm glad you enjoyed it.

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah. I don't know about Gregory, but I knew Joe⁶.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was his brother.

J. Johnson: And I knew the father [Gregory Costa Sr.] too. The ice cream store [at 416 Main Street], of course, I knew that. Then later, Costa's Cottage. Yeah. And there was, talking about Main Street, a streetcar ran right down the middle. I think it went down there till 1930s, I think. It started down off Spring Street to Christol Street, and wound up [in] Bonhamtown?

P. Boeddinghaus: I always heard. That was before my time.

⁶ Joseph Costa was the younger brother of Gregory Costa Jr. and he served as mayor of Metuchen during the 1950s.

- J. Johnson:** At Bonhamtown, and it crossed over the Fast Line from Trenton to Newark. Some of the transportation was better then than it is now. [laughs] And not as congested. In fact, where the high-tension wires are out there, that was the right-of-way. That was the streetcar right-of-way, and other than that, I think they have two tracks too.
- P. Boeddinghaus: I know anyone I talk to about the trolley, they speak so highly of the conductor Mr. [Eugene] O'Hare.
- J. Johnson:** Oh yeah? Yeah, I remember. Oh, then in the summertime, they had an open trolley. I remember that.
- P. Boeddinghaus: The housewives were asking the trolley operator to stop and get them bread or butter or milk or something. And he would do so and deliver it to the house. He's very accommodating.
- J. Johnson:** Yeah, that's probably true. There were no refrigerators then, we had iceboxes. Talking about the Civil War veteran Oliver, he had the icehouse in the back of his house [formerly located at 542 Middlesex Avenue], which is now—a real estate agency [Robert Nann Agency at 540 Middlesex Avenue] is down there. He used to be—
- R. Gehrum: Nanny [phonetic]?
- J. Johnson:** Yeah, Nann.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, uh-huh.
- J. Johnson:** Yeah. Well, that was Oliver. That was Oliver. A blacksmith shop was back there too.
- P. Boeddinghaus: And the needle factory [The Loyal T. Ives Company at 544 Middlesex Avenue]. Is that where the needle factory was?
- J. Johnson:** The needle factory was there. What was there? I don't know, potatoes and needle factory. And a Chrysler agency, Birdsall Agency [Birdsall-Barwell Motor Company at 550 Middlesex Avenue] was there. Yeah, I remember all of those. And on Main Street—you're talking about—there was a bus that ran from Metuchen to Rahway. And it was Pete's Taxi [Pete's Taxi Service Corporation at 3 Pennsylvania Avenue] had the bus. And Angie Perry, the one I was talking about, she—I don't think it was her parents, it might have been—owned a candy store there.
- P. Boeddinghaus: I always heard that, yeah.
- J. Johnson:** It was the old building. What was the name of the old building? That used to be Borough Hall anyhow at one time.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Robins. Robins Hall [at 401 Main Street].

J. Johnson: **Robins. Robins Hall. Yeah, between Robins Hall and the Commonwealth Bank [at 407 Main Street], was this candy store and that was [Jesse] Perry [at 405 Main Street]. Real old-fashioned store. The movies [Metuchen Theatre at 460 Main Street] was on the corner of Highland Avenue and Main Street. For a dime, you could go to the movie. They had a piano player or an organ. [laughs] I don't know. Anyhow, for a dime, you could go there and spend the day.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did Mr. [Ralph] Gunst play the piano or the organ at the theater? Remember Mr. Gunst [music teacher]?

J. Johnson: **Oh, I remember him. But I don't even—he might have! He might have. I never paid that much attention.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Were you allowed to go to the movies?

J. Johnson: **Oh sure.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you have to earn the money to go?

J. Johnson: **Oh yeah, I always did that. I used to caddy all the time. And I set up [unclear] at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association].**

P. Boeddinghaus: And did you caddy at Metuchen Golf Course [Metuchen Golf and Country Club at 224 Plainfield Road, Edison]?

J. Johnson: **Yes, I did for several years. I used to walk there; I walked through the woods. And we called that "Little Africa," those woods.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Really?

J. Johnson: **And there was a pond. There were a lot of ponds in Metuchen.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, a lot of water in Metuchen.

J. Johnson: **Yeah, I don't know. And I think they were all—had to do with the glacier.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So then, let's see, you'd walk up the end of Main Street up the end of Clive Street.

J. Johnson: **Yeah, kept right on going until you came out on the fairway. What's the name of the streets up there? Anyhow, the area, back of the pond there, that was the Riding Club.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, the [Metuchen] Riding and Hunt Club had a—

J. Johnson: **Yeah, it was a Riding Club and then the [Metuchen Golf and] Country Club took it over and they had some holes back there, which then they did away with. I don't know where—when they still have the eighteen holes, I think. I don't know.**

P. Boeddinghaus: There's a very old picture of the original clubhouse in 1915.

J. Johnson: **Oh, I remember that very well! Yeah. A brown building, yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And they have an enlarged-frame lobby at the Country Club.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Joe Leiss [Joseph Leiss Jr.], I think, was the caddy in there. I think Joe wound up in the can. [laughs] Eddie [Edward Leiss, former police chief] just died not too long ago.

P. Boeddinghaus: Not too long ago.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Eddie.

P. Boeddinghaus: He did an interview

R. Gehrum: Couple of years [ago].

J. Johnson: Oh, I remember Eddie very well.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, he did an interview.

J. Johnson: And I remember their father [Joseph Leiss]. And you're talking about the Owsiks and Leisses, they were pretty friendly. They were both a Polish family. What else? Oh, I'm trying to think of something else that I can [unclear]. Oh, [Arthur] Hillpot was the funeral director [at 568 Middlesex Avenue]. He was also the mayor of Metuchen for quite a while. And one of his sons [William "Billy" Hillpot] was one of the *Smith Brothers*⁷. I don't know if you ever remember the *Smith Brothers* or not. They're all radio [unclear; mumbling]. And they were just starting radio. And it was Laurel Thomas [phonetic], and The Moose [phonetic], and *Amos 'n' Andy*. Everybody listened to that.

P. Boeddinghaus: So when you lived on William Street, was the funeral home on the corner (Hillpot Funeral Home)? I don't remember seeing [unclear].

J. Johnson: Yeah. It wasn't the current brick building, no⁸. It wasn't the current corner.

R. Gehrum: Forum Theatre?

P. Boeddinghaus: It would have been Middlesex.

J. Johnson: This would have been Middlesex and William Street. Oh, while we lived on William Street, the sewers came through. I remember the sewers. They had a steam shovel, a steam shovel to dig the trench for the sewer, that was a lot of

⁷ Harold "Scrappy" Lambert (1901-1987) was an American dance band vocalist who appeared on hundreds of recordings from the 1920s to 1940s. At Rutgers University, he was a football cheerleader and played piano for the Rutgers Jazz Bandits. In 1925, he and his fellow Rutgers vocalist Billy Hillpot (1904-1985) formed a musical / comedy duo impersonating the two Smith Brothers, "Trade" and "Mark," with their bearded faces. Established in 1852, the original Smith Brothers manufactured the first cough drops in the United States. The duo was discovered in 1926 by Ben Bernie, who signed them to perform with his orchestra and they appeared on many recordings with the orchestra and remained under Bernie's employment until 1928. In the 1930s, Lambert and Hillpot took their comedy routine to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC).

⁸ A small chapel stood at the corner of Middlesex Avenue and William Street, which was converted to a funeral home in 1906. The business was purchased by Arthur Hillpot in 1932 and he tore down the chapel and built the corner section of the present building in 1925.

pieces. We had, on William Street, there was a driveway that went all the way around that building at 43 William Street. That right now, the winter's on, but when we were there, the winters went before all the way up to the ceiling. And it was cold there. But we had an ice pole, turns out we had an ice man, don't have an ice man on horse and wagon on us. And we had the milkman whose name was George, I think. George [unclear] is the milkman and his brother Irving was the butter and egg man. And then we had a breadman, Dugan's [phonetic]. Dugan [phonetic] used to come around. I don't know, all of that—well, talk about convenient. There was an A&P [The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company] and a wellness store, I think, on Main Street, grocery stores, each up on the corner of Hillside [Avenue] and on the one side, on the other side was [Fritz] Hokanson's Grocery Store [at 420 Main Street], a small grocery store. And next to the bank was of course the firehouse [Eagle Hook and Ladder Company at 398 Main Street]. It had a tower there where they hung the hoses up. I remember that very well. They were always the participants in the parade.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you were saying like—then you'd say there's a variety of businesses along Main Street? You got butchers and groceries.

J. Johnson: As I recall, Main Street was cobblestone? I think it was cobblestone when I first came there. But when they paved it, they paved it right over the cobblestone. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: And then left the tracks for the trolley.

J. Johnson: The track was still there. I think the track, it may be gone now, but it was still there for years and years. They just left the track there. That was fairly recent though, that was after 1930. And the cobblestones were still around the track. Yeah. The post office was on Penn Avenue [Pennsylvania Avenue]?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that always amazed me that the post office moved around so much.

J. Johnson: They didn't move much. They only moved one time.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, they are on Main Street too about where like the Metuchen Center [at 400 Main Street] used to be. They used to be on Main Street, they're on Penn Avenue, and that was—

J. Johnson: That must have been before we moved there. When we moved to Metuchen in 1924, the Borough Hall [at 500 Main Street] had only been there one year, and the YMCA [at 65 High Street] one year. I think they were built about the same time.

P. Boeddinghaus: We have old pictures of the post office when it was in various locations. We have them in the archives. It's interesting.

J. Johnson: Yeah. I'm trying to think now. Yeah, they used to—the RFD, the Rural Free Delivery, had horse and wagon. And one of them was the driver was in the Methodist Church the night of—the wheels [in my mind] don't turn too fast. [laughter]

P. Boeddinghaus: That's okay. That had been Mr. Drake?

J. Johnson: Well, Mr. [Elwood] Drake was the mailman.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, he was.

J. Johnson: And he—well, we were on, had moved to [24] Sheridan Avenue. He'd pick a mail and there he had to come in and have a cup of coffee almost every day.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then they delivered twice a day.

J. Johnson: Yes, they did. Yeah, they did, two times a day. We had better service then than they have now.

P. Boeddinghaus: So let's see, then you went through Metuchen school system and graduated in 1936?

J. Johnson: Yeah, I graduated in [19]36.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you were president of your class. And how many students were in the class? About one hundred?

J. Johnson: One-hundred-twelve.

P. Boeddinghaus: One-hundred-twelve. And they came from the outlying districts?

J. Johnson: Oh yes, they did. They, Edison for one—well, it wasn't Edison, it was Raritan, Raritan Township, Raritan Arsenal. They came in every day. They came in from Piscataway, yeah. Yeah, sure. Sure, some of my classmates came from there. What was the name of the place before, bus service? I don't know.

P. Boeddinghaus: Rossmeyer [Brothers Inc.] or Rosenvinge.

J. Johnson: No, no. Pete Rosenvinge⁹ was a taxi man—he ran the bus! I think he only had one bus. That went to Rahway. And Angie [Perry] worked for him as a dispatcher, I guess.

R. Gehrum: Didn't [Reinhold] Brehmer have a bus stop too? What was that?

J. Johnson: Brehmer, he had a garage [Brehmer's Garage at 544 Middlesex Avenue] where the firehouse is now. And he had an automobile agency [Brehmer Taxi Service at 5 Pennsylvania Avenue], I think. Danford's [at 376 Main Street] was there, of course. And there was a hardware on the corner of Highland and Main. And then there, they had the Acme [Markets] there. What's there now?

P. Boeddinghaus: The Converys have law offices [at 450 Main Street] and there's a smoking shop [Smoker's Haven at 470 Main Street]. I've never been—

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah. There's a barber shop there too.

⁹ Otto P. Rosenvinge was the president of Pete's Taxi Service Corporation at 3 Pennsylvania Avenue.

P. Boeddinghaus: And the barber shop, Luigi [Luigi's Men's Styling Shop at 472 Main Street]. So getting back to that smoking shop, they sell cigars.

J. Johnson: Well anyhow, on the corner, there was a hardware.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was that Mr. [Benjamin] Ford [Hardware Store at 468 Main Street]?

J. Johnson: That was Ford and his sister was in the shop with him. And they had everything in there. And then they had [George] Hanemann's Bakery [at 395 Main Street], was up on the other end. And I think later that bakery, didn't that become Drake's [Middlesex] Hardware?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, was it in that location? The bakery?

J. Johnson: Yeah, and there was a feed store up there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was that [William] Crowell's [Feed Store at 389 Main Street]?

J. Johnson: Crowell's. And up on the hill there was a freight station [for the Pennsylvania Railroad] and a Railway Express [Agency] station. Of course, the [signal] tower [Amtrak Lincoln Tower] was there. Or it was—[unclear] what the name is now. I don't even know if they are operating that tower now or not?

R. Gehrum: No.

J. Johnson: Not anymore? They have done away with them all. They operate out of New York or out of Philadelphia.

R. Gehrum: Yes. [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

P. Boeddinghaus: So what I would like to ask you now, Jim, is about finishing off with your education in Metuchen High School. And then you went in the service?

J. Johnson: Not quite. Yeah. We were talking about the [signal] tower. Oh, 1941, I went on the railroad as a fireman, but I retired in 1981. So I had forty years on the railroad. But five of those years, I was in the Army. I was only on the railroad from about June the seventeenth until October the second, at which time I was drafted into the Army. I went to Fort Dix. [From] Fort Dix, I went down to Camp Lee, Virginia and got my basic training down there. And then I went to Clerk's School there and became the clerk of the Aviation Cadet Examining Board. And in about six months, I went from private first class to corporal. And then only then was second corporal and technical sergeant—not a tech sergeant, a tech—well, it had a "T" underneath it with stars and stripes. And I was doing fine, I was coming home, I had worked on the railroad, so I got passed twice. [laughs] So I could get home about every other week. And the colonel that was in charge of the Aviation Cadet Examining Board said, "Jim, why don't you go to OCS [Officer Candidate School]." I said, "Oh, I'm a happy sergeant." [laughs] But he said, "Well, you

should go.” He said, “I’m sure you can make it.” And so I did. And so I went to OCS. I never went to college. I wanted to go to Syracuse [University in New York]. But this is the Depression.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah. And also World War II started.

J. Johnson: Yeah, World War II started. I was in the Army before it started.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you were drafted?

J. Johnson: I got drafted in October. Well, the war was going on, yes. But we weren’t in it yet. We went in, of course, after [the attack on] Pearl Harbor [in 1941]. I remember I had just finished my basic training, I put on [unclear] Pearl Harbor. We were up on Skyline Drive [at Shenandoah National Park] down in—we went down in the University of Virginia. And we were where the dormitories were and we could hear the radio, and they were talking about the attack on Pearl Harbor. And all military personnel returned to their post immediately. And I remember that very well. But there was a gap between my graduation and the railroad. Right after I graduated, I went up to Pennsylvania. I drove a truck, grocery truck for my uncle, Uncle Lawrence (Uncle Jim we called him). And I remember that was a cold winter up there, thirty-two [degrees] below zero up there. Kane was the icebox of Pennsylvania.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was it in the mountains?

J. Johnson: Yes, the Allegheny. The Allegheny National Forest is there right now. Kane is a gateway to it, one of them. But I was there for a year and then I heard—I don’t know where I got the information—but I could get a job at American Encaustic Tile Company in Perth Amboy. Actually, it was Maurer; it’s now Barber, I think.

P. Boeddinghaus: I’m not catching that, Jim.

J. Johnson: Barber [Perth Amboy].

P. Boeddinghaus: Tile company?

J. Johnson: A tile company, American Encaustic Tile Company. And I worked there, but there wasn’t much pay there. So I took a test too and wound up in the Social Security Board. The Social Security Board had just started. But I had to go down to Baltimore [Maryland] for that, had to wait about a year. And then I transferred from the Social Security Board to the War Department and worked up at the Raritan Arsenal for a year. And then I went on the railroad. So that took care of that part. In between, I was in the Scouts all that time. I got my Eagle then; that’s my Eagle [badge] up in the corner up there. [pointing to object] Those badges up there—the one of the red, white, and the blue—that’s the Eagle. Of course, when I went in the Army, I couldn’t be with the Scouts anymore, but my tenure kept going through because of the military service. When I came back, I became a committeeman and then later a Scoutmaster. And I was Scoutmaster for over twenty-five years.

P. Boeddinghaus: And what was your project to become an Eagle Scout?

J. Johnson: We didn't have a project. That came later.

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, because the historical society has helped some of the fellows with different projects. For instance, cleaning up the cemetery, doing something—

J. Johnson: I know a lot of them because we had ninety-three Eagle Scouts in my troop.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Well let's back up too. Where did you meet your wife Mary? When you were in the service in Virginia?

J. Johnson: Mary was from Virginia. She lived on a little town right near Fort Lee. Camp Lee later became Fort Lee. And I don't know if you know that much about the history of the Civil War, but the Siege of Petersburg, the Siege of Petersburg—yeah. Anyhow, Mary had relatives that were in the hospital, that died there in the Battle of Petersburg. And Fort Lee was on the battlefield, later became Fort Lee.

P. Boeddinghaus: And so did you meet her when you were in the service?

J. Johnson: I met her at a roller-skating rink. Yeah. I miss her too, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you married and then you came back this way and worked at the Arsenal?

J. Johnson: No, I didn't get married down there. I came back and then I went back—I was in the Reserve then. I was in the Army Reserve and I took a refresher course, went back there, and I looked her up, of course. And got married while I was down there on the refresher course. We got married in 1947.

P. Boeddinghaus: That when you lived on Main Street then, upstairs over the A&P?

J. Johnson: Yeah, we did. We lived up there. Walter Blyer was the manager. Walter lived right across the street from us [at 15 Charles Street]. Is she still living?

P. Boeddinghaus: No, Rose [Blyer] passed away.

J. Johnson: Rose died? Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: So now let's see, what street are you on? You mean Lincoln Avenue?

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah, 11 Lincoln. That's an old-time house too there. It's still there. Lawrence, Old Man [Charles] Lawrence was the—I don't know if he owned it or not? But we lived upstairs over him. We had a couple of rooms up there. And then got know Dinnebeil pretty well [at 24 Lincoln Avenue]. Carl, was it?

P. Boeddinghaus: Carl William [Dinnebeil], yes. But they called him Bill, yes. And his brother George.

J. Johnson: And he said he had an apartment for us if we wanted it. We said, "Oh yeah, we do." I think for twenty-five dollars a month we had this apartment.

P. Boeddinghaus: And so you were like back in your old neighborhood because your parents lived on [19] Lincoln Avenue.

J. Johnson: And right across the street from us was the Ochs [phonetic]. That house was—last I know it was still there. I don't know if it is or not.

P. Boeddinghaus: Are you still talking about Lincoln Avenue?

J. Johnson: No. Now I'm on Main Street.

P. Boeddinghaus: Main Street. Okay, Main Street, yeah. I'm hazy about that.

J. Johnson: There's a parking lot up there. That's where [Fritz] Hokanson's was [at 183 Main Street], I think. And Jimmy Oliver has his dental place [at 167 Main Street] up on the corner up there also. What else is up there? [John] Gubik's had a grocery store up there [at 137 Main Street].

P. Boeddinghaus: We always liked the Garden State [Super] Market [at 203 Main Street]. They always had good things.

J. Johnson: Oh yeah. That later became—later before the heart of the Leis' [Hardware].

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Mr. [John] Leis.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Leises. One of the Leis girls went to school with me. She was in my class.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was that Gertrude [Leis]?

J. Johnson: That was Gertie. Gertie, yeah. Gertrude.

P. Boeddinghaus: We have very nice pictures in the archives of the old hardware store that Mr. Leis had. Yeah, I think the family gave them to the society and they are in the archives, yeah. And there was somebody along in there that had a gas station?

J. Johnson: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: [Charles] Goforths?

R. Gehrum: Goforths had a gas station.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Goforths had one and later it became—

R. Gehrum: Richard Ziegler's [Texaco Service at 188 Main Street].

J. Johnson: Richie's, yeah. Richie Ziegler's [Richard Ziegler]. Yeah. And there used to be an ice cream store there too, right where the gas station—near the gas station or where it is (where it was).

R. Gehrum: That was across from the gas station, I think, near the bus stop.

J. Johnson: Well, Zieglers had a gas station. And then there was another one across the street. But the other one was on the corner of High Street.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Johnny Shersick [Metuchen Cities Service at 199 Main Street].

J. Johnson: Shersick, yes.

R. Gehrum: Before that, it was an ice cream store.

J. Johnson: An ice cream store, yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: I can still picture the storefront.

R. Gehrum: Yup, and a porch.

J. Johnson: Yeah, I remember that store. And there was an ice cream store next to the A&P too.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, for a while Russell's parents had that too. Mrs. [Marion] Ochs-

R. Gehrum: Was down the street, 147, 176?

J. Johnson: Well, 176 [Main Street] is where we lived. That was the A&P.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, but see they had the fire there too along with-I don't know before or after when they closed?

R. Gehrum: It was after we had-after we got rid of the barn.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, that was a very convenient neighborhood-wasn't it?-with the various-

J. Johnson: Yeah, I liked most of the neighborhoods, William Street, Lincoln [Avenue], Sheridan [Avenue]. It was always a real friendly town.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then, let's see, you were back in Metuchen and you were married and living on Main Street before you moved to Sheridan Avenue. You were working on the railroad and you were active during the Boy Scouts.

J. Johnson: Oh yeah, and in 1960, they had the Jamboree (the Boy Scout Jamboree) out in Colorado Springs [Colorado] at which time the local council had Scouts from all different troops that were interested and formed them into a troop. And I had the honor of being the Scoutmaster of that troop. And that's how come I got the Silver Beaver, which is up there too. [pointing to object] There's the Silver Beaver Award there. But there aren't too many of those given out. It is an honor. My military service-I guess I was commissioned in 1942 and I was-my first assignment was at Camp Butner in North Carolina with the all-black unit. The only ones that were officers were the white. They don't do that anymore. But it was a pretty interesting experience and I had no problems there. But they were scheduled to go overseas and I was in Company B, the 530[th] Quartermaster Battalion, and they were overspent one officer so we lost one straw, and I won, I didn't go. [laughs] Then I was at Butner for a little while without assignment and

then I was assigned to the Ninety-Eighth General Hospital as an assistant quartermaster. So I went overseas with the Ninety-Eighth General Hospital.

P. Boeddinghaus: And about what year was that?

J. Johnson: Nineteen-hundred-forty-three. I think it was [19]43. I was over there eighteen months anyway.

P. Boeddinghaus: And where were you?

J. Johnson: I was in England. There were a lot of hospitals in England (U.S. hospital). I was the order officer, I was the assistant quartermaster, I was the dog catcher, I was provost marshal, I was a fire marshal, anything they didn't know what else to do with, I became. [laughs] The quartermaster, he graduated only one class ahead of me, one month ahead of me. And he made it to major, I only got to first lieutenant. He was a Kentucky hillbilly. [laughs] So I was in the Reserve I guess not too long. I should have stayed longer, got a pension out of it. [laughs] But I didn't. I was on the railroad then. Oh, when I came back, I had some built-in seniority [with the railroad].

P. Boeddinghaus: They kept your seniority?

J. Johnson: Oh yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: And what line was it then?

J. Johnson: The Pennsylvania [Railroad], later became Penn Central, then Conrail. Right away, I took the examination for engineer and I passed the requirements. But I didn't go running until 1951, was it? No, that GG1¹⁰ there is [No.] 4907. I worked on it twelve times.

P. Boeddinghaus: What yard were you out of?

J. Johnson: When you get promoted, you go on the exit list.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, this sounds familiar.

J. Johnson: And they put you wherever. [laughs] Anything that turns up, they'll call you. And Mary remembers it very well because she used to take me to Rahway to get connections so I could get in quick. Or she met me at Rahway, we could meet in that trains.

P. Boeddinghaus: Then where was your run?

J. Johnson: Wherever they sent you. You had to qualify though, you had to learn the railroad. I had to learn the railroad to Philadelphia up the Delaware River up to the end of Belvidere? Belvidere, I think.

¹⁰ The GG1 was a class of electric locomotives built for the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR). The GG1 entered service with the PRR in 1935 and later ran on successor railroads Penn Central, Conrail, and Amtrak. The last GG1 was retired by New Jersey Transit in 1983.

R. Gehrum: The Bel Del [Belvidere] Division.

J. Johnson: Yeah, the Bel Del, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you know Jack's brother Charlie [Boeddinghaus]?

J. Johnson: Yes, I did. He died; he's in an accident.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, he was in a head-on automobile accident after they went through.

J. Johnson: Yeah. Well, I remember a lot of times when I got called in, I dive in, and I opened the windows, and let the wind blow on me because I'm afraid I go to sleep. And I guess that's what happened to him.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I think he doubled through. And then coming home early in the morning, he dozed off. But I recognize all the terms that you are using, the family having been on the railroad.

J. Johnson: I worked with Charlie too.

P. Boeddinghaus: Dad?

J. Johnson: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Before he retired, he was out of the Ford Yard¹¹.

J. Johnson: Well, that's where I retired from too. That was good for me because I walked over there a few minutes. And talking about the ponds, there was a pond there up by you. Is that pond still there? Is it Connor's Pond?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, but you can't see it because there's homes built all around it on Oak Avenue.

J. Johnson: Yeah, but is the pond still there?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, it's still there. It's in the back of the [Bruce] McDowell property [at 2 Chestnut Lane], which had been the [John] Connor property [at 279 East Chestnut Avenue], which then had been Schwalje. Phil Schwalje [Philip Schwalje] built a house on that pond [at 2 Chestnut Lane]. It's surrounded by houses and you don't know it's there. I hear Mrs. McDowell speak about it.

J. Johnson: I know I haven't seen it in years. But I do know there was a pond there. And there was a Spear's Pond?

R. Gehrum: That's gone now.

J. Johnson: That's gone. But I remember ice skating on that, yeah. And Daniels Hill.

R. Gehrum: That's gone

¹¹ The Ford Yard was located behind the former Ford Plant on the Bonhamtown Branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad.

J. Johnson: Yeah, they chopped that off. Oh, talking the Forum [Theatre], that wasn't the Forum in Rome [Italy] or anything. "For" was for [James] Forgione and "Rum" was for Rumler.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah. The name of the Forum.

J. Johnson: Henry Rumler. That was the Forum Theatre. Rayle Court, Ray Leis, Rayle Court, and they chopped the top [of Daniels Hill] off there. And the reason why the [Centenary United] Methodist Church is up on [200] Hillside Avenue, that property was owned by the railroad. And one of our members was an official in the railroad and he made arrangements for us to purchase it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Who was that, Jim?

J. Johnson: I'm trying to think. [laughs] His son was in our troop and he was on my Troop [14] Committee. I can see him just as plain as day, but I can't remember the name. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: So were you in on the building of that church? Because I remember a lot of the members pitched in and you know do a little on the manual labor.

J. Johnson: No, I didn't do any manual labor there. Well, I cut grass and did things like that. But that was all.

P. Boeddinghaus: So why did the church move from Main and Middlesex up [to] Hillside Avenue?

J. Johnson: Because they had to expand. The building was old. The building on the corner there, part of that building was real old! The Sunday School part was all wooden, wood church¹². And we got pictures of it somewhere.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, we have it in the archives too, yeah.

J. Johnson: Yeah, we've got pictures of that. That became the Blue Room, the Sunday School Room, and the expansion, they could, they had big panels that could push back and expand people [unclear] out there. But this wasn't enough room. And they had built on, and built on, but there was no parking. The parking was a major thing, and Harris Steel [Company]—

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah.

J. Johnson: He [Thomas Harris] incidentally was born at sea coming over, his family coming over.

P. Boeddinghaus: Where did they come from, England?

J. Johnson: England, England. She [Muriel (Boden) Harris] still comes to church. I saw her yesterday.

¹² The original church building was completed in 1869 at the southwest corner of Main Street and Middlesex Avenue. In 1918, a new church was built in the same location at a cost of \$15,500, and the original church building was moved twenty feet and became the Sunday School wing. Having outgrown its facilities in downtown Metuchen, the church was relocated to 200 Hillside Avenue in 1964.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, she's under her nineties.

J. Johnson: She's up there. Yeah, their son now runs that. Harris Steel provided steel for the George Washington Bridge [over the Hudson River]. Not all of it, of course, but some of it. They're out there at Pumptown.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, she's still there [at 301 Plainfield Road].

J. Johnson: Who else lives out there? Laura Westcott lives out there. She lived out there. Later she lived in Redfield Village [Apartments]. Her daughter still—

P. Boeddinghaus: Ruth?

J. Johnson: Ruth! Yeah, Ruth Westcott. Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: She married Dick Hale [Richard Hale]. They live on Buchanan [Road].

J. Johnson: He's dead now, isn't he?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, he did pass away [in 2004].

J. Johnson: Yeah. I remember he was my dentist, by the way, her father.

P. Boeddinghaus: Her father, Dr. [Wilbert] Westcott.

J. Johnson: I still got some of his filling [unclear]. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: So what were some of your hobbies? Like you were a busy guy with the Boy Scouts and with your church activities. I heard you say that you cut the grass at the church. I always remember seeing you go past the flower shop [Jack's Flower Shop] with your lawnmower.

J. Johnson: Oh yeah, cemetery [Hillside Cemetery].

P. Boeddinghaus: You know the cemetery to cut the grass for your parents' plot.

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah. That poor cemetery plot, it's in bad shape. I got to get—what's the name there in town there now?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, [unclear]. But they have a whole new board. It's really looking very good down at the cemetery.

J. Johnson: Oh, he's good. He's good.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, they keep things in good shape now. Yeah, and some of the board members—[mumbling offhand comment]—yeah, there's all new people on the board like Bill McDuffie, Bob Flaherty, there is one woman, Rose Ann Allen [phonetic]. Oh, some of the names escape me. And I said, "I always wanted to manage the cemetery by going to Metuchen. Now the leaves reign." Of course, today they use blowers and mechanical equipment, but I never got to do that. But that's okay because things are in

very good shape down there, I think. I think it looks very good. They've opened up new sections.

J. Johnson: **They didn't put that gate up yet, did they? They could put it up if they wanted, yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: But that's what I started to say, I remember you were going down to cut the grass on the plot, the main plot, you walked past the flower shop on Charles Street.

J. Johnson: **Yeah, yeah, I was down there. I walked down to the post office every day. That's when I first realized I had Parkinson's. I didn't know what I had. I just knew that I was slowing down, and slowing down. And my doctor—I was talking to him—in fact, he later became my cardiologist because he stopped general practitioner and became a cardiologist. It was his specialty anyway. And he's the one that put in my pacemaker.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Who is that, Jim?

J. Johnson: **[Peter] Duch, his name is. But it is not D-u-k-e, it's D-u-c-h.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Then his partner is Dr. Molk.

J. Johnson: **That's right.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Molk and Duch, yeah.

J. Johnson: **Yeah, yeah. In fact, I would see him the other day. I like him. He used to be down in Metuchen.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Now he's out on Ethel Road in that complex out there.

J. Johnson: **Yeah, Durham Park [Durham Center]. Durham Woods? Durham Park? Well, I don't know. Anyhow, it's right down there after you come across the swamp.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Russell, do you have any questions to ask Jim?

J. Johnson: **There's a lot of things I probably forgot.**

R. Gehrum: All I can think of is a hundred I'd like to ask you about the railroad.

J. Johnson: **Yeah. Yeah, I liked the railroad. My father was on the railroad too.**

R. Gehrum: What kind of work did he do on the railroad?

J. Johnson: **He's a locomotive engineer too. He was a fireman and a locomotive engineer. He used to operate a trolley in Brooklyn, the BMT [Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation], I think it was. I got a picture of him too somewhere here. He was in New York and stayed, played the violin for those people.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever belong to a Masonic Order?

J. Johnson: No, but I've got the Masonic somewhere. I got the Man of the Year from them. That's given to another little mason; my uncles were all masons.

P. Boeddinghaus: Getting back to Russell's question on the railroad.

J. Johnson: Yeah, what about?

R. Gehrum: What kind of engines did you run mostly when you worked at the railroad?

J. Johnson: Well, I ran a GG1, the GG1s a lot, the diesel steam engines, a few steam engines. When I went running, there weren't so many steam engines left. They only had a few. You know that Metuchen has the highest point on the Pennsylvania Railroad between New York and Philadelphia. Did you know that? Daniels Hill was a part of the glacier, the terminus of the glacier, and Beacon Hill was also. And there was no Beacon Hill when we came. I remember them putting the beacon there. And the first air mail didn't go out of New York at all, it went out of Hadley Airport [in South Plainfield]. And they came on the railroad and they dropped it off at the Stelton Station. They never even stopped, they just dropped it on the platform there. And picking it up the other way around, they had to continue with the arm that broke off [unclear]. I remember when I got promoted from—or went running, that is—I was on the Broadway. I ran the Broadway Limited¹³, briefly.

R. Gehrum: That was with the GG1?

J. Johnson: The GG1, briefly. I say briefly because the engineer—I forgot his name—I got all of this in the book somewhere. We were running late and he said, "Hey Jim, hey sis, here come on, you take it and I'll be back." [laughs] So he went back, but he knew he went back, pulled the tape out, took out in the field. I said, "What are you going to tell them?" "I'm not going to tell them anything!" [laughs]

R. Gehrum: You got to explain what the tape was for the people that don't understand it.

J. Johnson: The tape was—they had a big long chart at the railroad, the way the railroad was, and the longest chart they would cross over to the signal, everything was on there and there were speed limits. And you didn't want to exceed that speed limit by much. They'd all steer fine. But he did more than that.

Talking about that, we used to have a train that stopped in Metuchen that went to Atlantic City. And I was the fireman on that for a while, and I had a Scotty Craig [phonetic] on it, and he was a Scotsman. Actually, operated Scottish trains before he came to America. He pulled his throttle a lot and I'm looking at this [unclear] where he's pushing a hundred [miles per hour]. And he's got the train behind him, a local train at that, I said, "Don't you think you should slow down a little bit, Scotty?" "Oh!" [laughs] And he's the one that they were jacking up the railroad and he did get the jack out. And they could have dumped this—but we came along. I said, "They got the jack under the railroad." He said, "I'll take

¹³ The Broadway Limited was a passenger train operated by the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) between New York City and Chicago. It operated from 1912 to 1995. The train's name refers to the "broad way" of the PRR's four-track right-of-way along the majority of its route.

care of it.” **Crack**, he didn’t! And pushed the jack off. We could have derailed. Yeah, yeah, very easily.

R. Gehrum: Jim, when you were involved in the Scouts, where did you take the hikes to in the old days?

J. Johnson: Oh yeah, that’s a good thing too! You’re talking about the power lines that ran from the railroad over, but still run back here, right back here. We hiked those all the way back. We hiked up to Washington Rock [State Park in Green Brook Township]. We camped up there, down Grove Avenue. Grove Avenue was all dirt.

R. Gehrum: That’s when they called it Dark Lane?

J. Johnson: Yeah, yeah. Well, yeah. But we went further than that, we went all the way down past [unclear], all the way down to the end there. We did a lot of hiking and again I remember slowing down and wondering why I couldn’t walk faster. Then it was the Parkinson’s. But I also was interested in stamps for my [unclear] and railroads. I was always interested in nature, all the nature books. Even now I stand here wondering what happened to see the birds. This used to be pretty rural out here, [unclear] lots of houses back there now.

P. Boeddinghaus: So what do you contribute your longevity of life? What would you say?

J. Johnson: I suppose genes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, okay. But like how—to what age did your parents live?

J. Johnson: Well, my mother was eighty-eight. I got up to them now. My father, he died in 1950? He was only sixty-something. But I attribute his problem to the railroad. He fired a steam engine as far as Washington, and fired—and that was just too much. And I think he strained his heart. He had heart problems and then he had a stroke. Coming home, he fell, right here at the station he fell, in Metuchen. And they just kept him on there until they could get to New Brunswick, and he went to the hospital over there.

R. Gehrum: How many years did he have on the railroad?

J. Johnson: Not as many as I. Thirty-something. Thirty.

P. Boeddinghaus: And you had?

J. Johnson: Forty.

P. Boeddinghaus: You said that already.

J. Johnson: Less five.

P. Boeddinghaus: When you were in the service.

J. Johnson: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: We have terrific pictures in the archives about the train wreck, the 1977 [at Metuchen Railroad Station].

J. Johnson: Yeah, Mary remembers that too. She's got a lot of pictures, had a lot of pictures of it. I don't know where they are now, I don't.

R. Gehrum: Remember the Woodbridge wreck¹⁴?

J. Johnson: Yeah, I sure do. They were building the [New Jersey] Turnpike then. That was the engineer's fault. He had orders to slow down there, but he was going too fast. They had a heavy train. Firemen died, the whole heap there fell right on. That was a steam engine.

R. Gehrum: It was a K4 [steam locomotive], wasn't it?

J. Johnson: Yeah.

R. Gehrum: Did you ever run a K4?

J. Johnson: Not on a regular run. I run with it, you know light engines or things like that [unclear].

P. Boeddinghaus: So did you do more passenger runs, or were you into freight?

J. Johnson: I was freight mostly.

R. Gehrum: What did you think of the GG1 locomotive?

J. Johnson: Oh, I liked them. Yeah, I liked them.

R. Gehrum: It was a long-lasting locomotive, wasn't it?

J. Johnson: Yeah, I got a book here on the original one.

R. Gehrum: The 4800?

J. Johnson: The 4800, the "Old Rivets" [unclear]. I worked on that—ran that one and fired it about six to eight times. I got a record of every engine I ran.

R. Gehrum: Is that right?

J. Johnson: Yeah, in my time book. I got my time book and I have—when I was firing, I had several experiences. When I was running to where I was on a local train from Philadelphia to New York, we were in the Broad Street Station [in Philadelphia]. We were hanging way out so we must have had twenty cars and a GG. And the engineer was shorty, he was so shorty he had to stand up on the grid, the throttle.

¹⁴ On February 6, 1951, a Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) train derailed crossing a temporary wooden trestle in Woodbridge, killing eighty-five people. The train had been diverted onto the wooden trestle near Fulton Street to allow laborers building the New Jersey Turnpike to work on the main line. The train conductor failed to slow the train as it approached Woodbridge and eight of the train's eleven passenger cars derailed and hurtled down an embankment. It remains New Jersey's deadliest train wreck.

[laughs] But anyway, we got the signal to go, he pulled out and we started to go, and the train went in emergency, and I didn't know what was going on. He didn't know what was going on. He said, "Check the back and see what's going on." So I went back and this woman, she—the Broad Street Station didn't have platforms, it was ground level. She was on this train. We were the local train and right beside him was the express train. She wanted to get on the express train, but she got up on the local. We started to move and she wanted to get off. And the conductor even grabbed her and stopped her! And she pulled away from him and [unclear] and got under the wheels. She lost her feet. And I had to go to court on that. And you know they found the railroad at fault because they didn't have all the walls closed. The steps were still open. A couple days I had to go to court there.

The other one was I was on the Orange Blossom Special [train]¹⁵, I guess it was. Coming up from Washington, and coming in to the Wilmington Station [in Delaware] which again at that time—now it's a raised platform, but then it didn't have one. It had a windbreaker on the end, we're coming into the station, the engineer's looking down, they bringing her down, they are bringing her down, but he's got twenty cars back there. And he's got the length of the station to go to get stopped. And this guy jumps out from behind the—right under his wheels. And he [the conductor] turned white as a sheet. I was on the other side, I didn't see it. But he pushed her [the train] into emergency, but of course it was too late. Five cars, the engine and five cars had passed, they swept him up in plastic. But we lay there and lay there and lay there for a long time till the authorities came. And we finally got started. But they turned the engine because there was blood all over the engine.

R. Gehrum: How many years did you put in Ford Yard?

J. Johnson: Not too many because I didn't have the seniority to hold it. But the last four or five I did there. And I worked at the tower mostly. That's why I know.

R. Gehrum: That would be Lincoln Tower, right?

J. Johnson: Yeah, Lincoln. The operator was—he lived right up here on ... [recording ends]

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, did you ask that question, Russell, about Gort Bone China?

R. Gehrum: Do you remember the Gort Company in Metuchen?

J. Johnson: Yeah, they were our next-door neighbor.

P. Boeddinghaus: On Sheridan Avenue?

J. Johnson: On Sheridan Avenue.

¹⁵ The Orange Blossom Special was a deluxe passenger train on the Seaboard Air Line Railroad and connecting railroads between New York City and Miami. It ran during the winter season only.

P. Boeddinghaus: And was it the artist [Eric Gort] or the ceramist [Walter Gort] that lived next to you? There were two brothers.

J. Johnson: I think it was the ceramist [Walter Gort]. Didn't they move up to New York State?

R. Gehrum: I don't know.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I thought they lived locally. One brother lived in Redfield Village and they had the—

J. Johnson: Well, the Gorts were next to us. I'm not sure which they were. But they moved up to Lake George [in New York], and they had a motel up there. And we stopped to visit them one time.

P. Boeddinghaus: Because they only had the business on Main Street for eleven years, from [19]44 to [19]55, and they made very beautiful figurines and commemorative plates and candy dishes and so forth. And it was equal to Royal Doulton.

J. Johnson: I guess they were. I don't know. They were ceramics people up there. They did move from 20 [Sheridan Avenue]. They were only there a short time. Those houses were built in 1951. Yeah, 1951.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, Gort Bone China, it was the gift to give in Metuchen for a shower or birthday, wedding, anniversary. And a lot of local women did the artwork and it was on [456-460] Main Street about where the gas company [Elizabethtown Consolidated Gas Company] used to be on [454] Main Street. And you could stand outside and watch the women doing the artwork through the storefront window. And a lot of local ladies did that.

R. Gehrum: Wasn't it where the old movie [Metuchen Theatre at 460 Main Street] was, right on the corner there?

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, right around the neighborhood.

R. Gehrum: Yeah, I thought it was the theater.

P. Boeddinghaus: It was fired elsewhere. The mold was made elsewhere and then brought to that site.

J. Johnson: Was the fire that they [unclear] from ceramic?

P. Boeddinghaus: You know I'm hazy on that. But here is what is going to happen. Joan Breen, whose father was a production manager of the [unclear] Company, [will] tell us the history of Gort Bone China. And she has a big collection from her father who was the [loud noise] manager and she is going to show us some of her pieces. And it's being sold on eBay [an e-commerce company] for very high prices because it's so collectible and so limitless being made for eleven years. Do you have any pieces of Gort? I think they did Madonnas. They did figurines of dog and birds, and Chinese figures, Oriental figures.

J. Johnson: No, but my sister worked at ceramics.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, where did she work?

J. Johnson: In Raritan, Raritan Township. There was a factory out there by the Clara Barton area. So that the hunters, they worked at that place too. I know [unclear].

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I think they made sanitary ware. I worked at [unclear], he made sanitary ware. But there was another one, I think it was called General Ceramics. There was such good clay in the area and they utilized the clay in the clay pits. And who else used those facilities for Mr. [Francis Joseph] von Tury¹⁶, and his daughter gave us a talk on where her father produced the pottery that he made. And it seemed to me it was out there on Piper Avenue out near Clara Barton section. And as a little kid, she would play there in the factory and her playdates come there to play, but that's where her parents were working. That was something else [unclear] Mr. von Tury. Then there is [Charles] Volkmar.

J. Johnson: I remember Volkmar.

P. Boeddinghaus: And there's the Bloomfield Clay Pits. But getting back to Gort, the one brother was the ceramist and the other was the artist. And I had forgotten that they lived in the South End, the one brother.

J. Johnson: Yeah. [long pause] They were right next door to us.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, it's very desirable. It's very collectible and there is a lot of interest out there in Gort Bone China¹⁷.

J. Johnson: We had some china, but we threw it away.

P. Boeddinghaus: You didn't throw your Gort away? [laughs] I know you wouldn't let you throw the Gort. Maybe your kids took it.

J. Johnson: Yeah, I think they did. I think my daughter must have it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Edna [(Johnson) Michael]? I remember Edna. She used to work for us in the flower shop. She went into nursing?

J. Johnson: Well, she went to—

P. Boeddinghaus: Like radiology?

¹⁶ Francis Joseph von Tury (1901-1992) was a well-known ceramist, designer, and craftsman. Born in Hungary, he immigrated to the United States in 1929 and established his own studio in Perth Amboy by 1936. During this period, von Tury conducted research for improving the ceramic body, glaze, color, and design of high-fired porcelain art ware. He also had studios in Metuchen and Edison.

¹⁷ The Gort Bone China Company was founded on August 15, 1944 in Metuchen, New Jersey. The business was established by Eric Gort, a Russian artist and sculptor, and his brother Walter Gort, a ceramic engineer that set up the kilns in the factory. Eric Gort trained many high school girls to work in the factory at 456-460 Main Street and produced some of the highest-quality bone china figures made in America. While initially successful, the Gort Bone China Company struggled with competing against cheaper foreign imports and closed in the 1950s.

J. Johnson: **No. Nuclear medicine, nuclear medicine; she's a chief practitioner. She's been there over twenty-five years.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Really?

J. Johnson: **We've got a [unclear] on the board down there now. A woman, [unclear] was the mother of the maintenance chief here, and [unclear].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Who was that, Jim?

J. Johnson: **She worked there for twenty-five years. Mary Grogan, G-r-o-g-a-n, Grogan. And his father had died not too long ago.**

R. Gehrum: Jim, when you first moved down to South End, do you remember a big house that used to be down further in the woods? Just before you—well, [Route] 287 wasn't there. But there was quite a big mansion down there with a large swimming pool. And when they built those new houses on—oh, I can't even think of the fancy street—McPherson Avenue down through there. They tore it down, but it was quite a big house. I often wondered who lived there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, the husband was at the flower shop.

R. Gehrum: Oh, you remember it?

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember the house. I remember those people, but the neighbors came. I think [unclear] in like two groups.

J. Johnson: **What street was this?**

P. Boeddinghaus: McPherson. In the [unclear] section of woods.

R. Gehrum: About a three-story house?

J. Johnson: **That's the one that goes across Route 1? McPherson [Avenue]?**

R. Gehrum: No, it was parallel to [Route] 287.

P. Boeddinghaus: Like the last street in Metuchen before you go over [Route] 287 and Route 1, onto the right.

J. Johnson: **Oh, oh. Oh yeah.**

R. Gehrum: It would have been before [Joseph] Fater's Greenhouse [on South Main Street] if I remember right.

P. Boeddinghaus: Were Fater's on Main Street [unclear]?

R. Gehrum: Before [Route] 287, at least.

J. Johnson: **I remember when I went through there. One of those houses is on Sheridan Avenue, but not a big one.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, did they move it?

J. Johnson: Yeah, they moved it. They moved it. I remember the mover, they had to take the wires down to get it out and put it in. It was across the street from us. You know where the Knoxes lived [at 27 Sheridan Avenue]?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah.

J. Johnson: Right next door, that house there. That used to be on—up there where they did that work to prevent those houses. Who's in there? Joseph.

P. Boeddinghaus: So did Grace Knox live across the street from you on Sheridan? Was she the last house?

J. Johnson: No.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was your house after hers.

J. Johnson: Oh yeah. [unclear] groups there, warehouse place up there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I remember that long time.

J. Johnson: Yeah, there were four houses there.

P. Boeddinghaus: I know Grace's lease, Sheila, lives in the first house.

J. Johnson: Yeah, that's a new house.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that's a nice new house, yes.

J. Johnson: Yeah, Sheila was a neighbor.

P. Boeddinghaus: So what do you think the greatest changes are in our area? You lived in the area so many years since you moved into Metuchen.

J. Johnson: The biggest change is—the Foodtown, I'll tell you that.

R. Gehrum: [long pause] Do you remember all the stores that used to be on New Street?

J. Johnson: On New Street?

R. Gehrum: Down along there where the A&P [at 45 Pearl Street] was built?

J. Johnson: Oh, there weren't so many stores there. You mean where I would have lived—

R. Gehrum: On the opposite side of the A&P.

J. Johnson: There were no stores there. That was open.

P. Boeddinghaus: Weren't there some houses on—where they put the [unclear] of your houses on that street?

R. Gehrum: Yeah, and the printing press was printing albums in there. Bradstreet Printing [at 85 Pearl Street] was down there.

J. Johnson: Oh, that's on Middlesex.

R. Gehrum: No.

J. Johnson: Oh, the printing, oh. Oh yeah.

R. Gehrum: That area is all built up now with parking lots.

J. Johnson: Yeah. Across from Costa's, the ice cream plant [at 16 Pearl Street], the parking lots of the [unclear] there now, yeah. What there was there?

P. Boeddinghaus: As I recall, there were six or seven homes and that they were—

J. Johnson: Yeah, they were homes.

R. Gehrum: Freedman Trucking [Freedman Motor Services at 19 Pearl Street] was there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Freedman Trucking, they had [unclear]. And the Parking Authority bought up the property and then demolished those homes.

R. Gehrum: Do you remember when the fire, the lumber yard [Manning Freeman & Son Inc. at 709 Middlesex Avenue] burned across the street from Celotex [Corporation] happening over there?

J. Johnson: No, I don't remember that, but I remember when the school [Metuchen High School] burned [in 1957]. I remember when the Reformed Church burned [in 1948]. The blow torch did that job.

R. Gehrum: At the church?

J. Johnson: Yeah. They give them a blow torch; they set the church on fire. [laughs]

R. Gehrum: Burning the paint off of something. Did you paint it?

J. Johnson: Yeah, down one side of it. I remember that.

P. Boeddinghaus: They have good pictures in the archives too of the school burning. It started on the third floor. So the kids went on split session to Perth Amboy.

J. Johnson: You remember when Heartmans was down there [at 612 Middlesex Avenue]?

P. Boeddinghaus: What business was that, Jim?

J. Johnson: No business; it was a residence. This was—Walt lives there now, or was. I don't know. I guess now that was part of Metuchen Manor, is it? Down there. It was by

the Franklin School. The Franklin School used to have a lot that went out back of it toward Central Avenue. And then there was a fenced-in area there which was hard because there was—a private house.

R. Gehrum: Well, there's still a few private houses along the Central Avenue side.

J. Johnson: Yeah, but that was gone. That was gone. Well, the last time there was a ballfield there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, and now there's all the Franklin Square condos and townhouses.

J. Johnson: Yeah, they are all over the place there now.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. I was talking to a lady last week and she said she used to live in a big house on Middlesex and Lake [Avenue] where the old Foodtown used to be. I remember that big house in there too.

J. Johnson: Yeah, well the doctor used to live in there [at 625 Middlesex Avenue].

R. Gehrum: Doctor [Alonzo Clark] Hunt?

J. Johnson: Hunt, yeah. Yeah, I mean for a while.

R. Gehrum: Yeah, it was known as Hunt's Corner.

P. Boeddinghaus: I heard that before. Well, I think we'll end it now and come back another time. You could think of more things to chat with us about. We thank you very much for reminiscing with us.

J. Johnson: I'm glad you could come.

R. Gehrum: Very interesting, very interesting.

P. Boeddinghaus: You and Russell could have a good chat on engines.

J. Johnson: Yeah. We hiked along the [unclear; loud noises] there. Yeah, the swamp back there.

R. Gehrum: Dismal Swamp?

J. Johnson: Yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you ever do any trapping?

J. Johnson: No, I know people that did though. The Oswiks did, trapped muskrats.

R. Gehrum: Muskrats, yeah. That's what Jack did?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, Jack [Boeddinghaus, husband] used to trap muskrats in the morning, calmly whistling.

R. Gehrum: It's how they eat them.

P. Boeddinghaus: He says he feels [unclear].

J. Johnson: [unclear] farmhouse there. The Kelly's house is probably out there. And then that old house that Kelly lived in, that must have been built long before the Revolution.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now where was that, Jim? The Kelly's house.

J. Johnson: You know [unclear] was. The far side of Paffendorf's farm was another farm. That was Kelly's farm.

R. Gehrum: Do you remember when the Lehigh [Valley Railroad] had a railroad station in Metuchen? Do you remember that?

J. Johnson: It was gone when I lived out there. It was gone there.

R. Gehrum: How about the station along Durham Avenue? Where the Lehigh had a freight station out there?

J. Johnson: Yeah, I remember there was a building there. There was a building there.

R. Gehrum: There was a fellow by the name of Slaight. Remember Gil Slaight [Gilbert Slaight]? His father used to rebuild railroad cars right in that area because there were several sidings there. And they used to build railroad rebuilds.

J. Johnson: Yeah. Slaight, did you say? Or freight?

R. Gehrum: No, Slaight.

J. Johnson: S-l-a-i-g-h-t.

R. Gehrum: I believe that was it.

J. Johnson: Michael Slaight. I don't know Slaight.

P. Boeddinghaus: One family lived on [22] George Street and another family lived on South Thomas [Street].

J. Johnson: Yeah, that's the one I knew, Slaight at South Thomas.

R. Gehrum: Yeah. One brother worked with Public Service [Corporation], and the other made a career out of the Navy.

J. Johnson: Yeah, that was Alan.

R. Gehrum: Alan Slaight [at 23 South Thomas Street].

J. Johnson: It comes back to me.

R. Gehrum: He was radio operator.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, this has been great. We really appreciate your time. We will make sure you get a copy.

[END OF INTERVIEW]