

Roger Johnson

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Interviewer: Phyllis Boeddinghaus
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, July 2004 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, August 2019
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Abstract: Roger Allen Johnson (1932-2009), son of Arthur Leroy Johnson and Gladys (Peck) Johnson, was born in Orange, New Jersey and moved to Metuchen as a child in 1936. Mr. Johnson was an Eagle Scout in his youth and he graduated from Metuchen High School in 1950. He entered Princeton University on a Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship and graduated in 1954 with a degree in public affairs. Following graduation, he became a commissioned officer in the Navy for three years before working as a marketing and advertising executive until his retirement.

Mr. Johnson campaigned as a local Democratic politician during the early 1970s and he served on the Metuchen Board of Education and the Metuchen-Edison Racial Relations Council. He was a member of the Regional Girl Scout Council and he entertained many children at the local YMCA. Mr. Johnson also produced several children's board games, was an award-winning actor in amateur theater, and was a nationally-known collector of antique dime-store soldiers and toys. He married Marilyn Edelman in 1954 and they had two daughters: Marcia (Johnson) Kaufman and Christina (Johnson) Swaak.

In this interview, Mr. Johnson primarily discusses famous local sport athletes and sporting events in Metuchen. He also discusses his parents, his early childhood and education, and his involvement in local politics during the 1970s. Mr. Johnson also touches upon the gas line explosion in Durham Woods as well as his memories of World War II, his classmates and teachers, and Gort Bone China.

Disclaimer: Please note that all oral histories presented by the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society are unaltered. The language, comments, and thoughts contained therein are solely those of the individuals interviewed. Our goal in presenting them is to make the personal recollections of these individuals available, to be considered within both their historical context, and during the time the comments were made, as a part of the historical record. The content and language of these interviews should not in any way be attributed to any of the past, current, or future members of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society Board of Directors, or to the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society membership as a whole.

P. Boeddinghaus: This is an oral history interview done under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society on June 15, 1995. Roger Johnson of [31] Rolfe Place is being interviewed at the Metuchen Senior Citizen Center on [15] Center Street and the person interviewing is Phyllis Boeddinghaus from the historical society. [recording paused]

You can start Roger.

R. Johnson: I would like to start first talking about some specific things pertaining to sports in Metuchen many, many years ago. Most clear in my mind is the story of Jimmy Fielding [James Fielding]. In the fall of 1947, a new track coach came to

Metuchen. He was actually a geography teacher. His name was Pete Wilson. He had been in the Army and he had been a star runner at Seton Hall [University]. And one day, Pete went out to watch the Metuchen football team practice and he noticed a young boy named Jimmy Fielding, who was on the junior varsity. And he saw that Jimmy Fielding was just a natural runner. So Pete—after the football season—started the first winter indoor track team for Metuchen and his first recruit was Jimmy Fielding. That would have been somewhere in October or early November. In January of 1948, Jimmy Fielding ran his third race for Metuchen indoors; it was the United States National Championship in Madison Square Garden and Jimmy Fielding won the National Championship 60-yard dash. He won it again the following year in 1948 and in 1949. His senior year, he went to Seton Hall Prep [School in West Orange] and he won the third straight National Championship.

In 1948, Jimmy went to the Olympic Trials for the 100-yard dash in Los Angeles [California]. Pete had always been with Jimmy when Jimmy ran, but there wasn't any money to send Pete to California. So Jimmy went out alone. And about three or four days before the meet, my father [Arthur Leroy Johnson], who was very active in athletics, found out about this and went to all the merchants on Main Street for contributions and they got enough money to get Pete on an airplane to fly out to California. Those were the days of older airplanes and the plane was downed by bad weather in Denver [Colorado], but finally got off and Pete was very late getting to the stadium. In fact, he came into the stadium as the runners were down for the finals of the 100-yard dash and Pete came running through the crowd shouting, "Jimmy! Jimmy!" And just before the gun went off, Jimmy looked up and he saw Pete and he waved, and then the gun went off and sad to say Jimmy did not win the race; he pulled a hamstring, but at least Pete was there with him. Jimmy went on to Georgetown University [in Washington, DC] on a track scholarship, and unfortunately again, in his freshman year, he died. His sister [Frances Fielding] before him, a year earlier, had a strange kidney disease—congenital—and Jimmy also the year later. Pete Wilson arrived at the hospital in time to be at Jimmy's bedside when Jimmy passed away. And at the time, Edgar Field—I was told—was renamed Fielding Field, but I don't know of anyone who calls it that or knows of it now. A number of years ago, I saw a dusty corner of a cabinet in Metuchen High School, where all the athletic trophies are, Jimmy's bronze shoes. But then and now, no one seems to remember Jimmy Fielding, who was probably one of the greatest athletes Metuchen High School has ever had. [recording paused]

This is not something that I actually saw, but in my younger years certainly heard about. There was a Metuchen men's baseball team in the 1930s. I guess there were baseball teams—in all the men's baseball teams—in all the small towns, and Metuchen had a good team. They had a pitcher named Bud Humphries [Bertram Humphries], who was the son of Rev. [George M.] Humphries, Dr. [Adolph] Behrenberg's predecessor at the [First] Presbyterian Church. Bud Humphries actually had a contract with the New York Yankees, and I'm told in the minor leagues, he hurt himself and he never did make it to the major leagues. But at one point, he was apparently quite a pitcher because somewhere in the mid-1930s the St. Louis Cardinals (the world champion "Gas House Gang") came to Metuchen [and] played an exhibition game on Edgar Field against the Metuchen men's baseball team. And Metuchen won one to nothing with Bud Humphries pitching. So that was a great moment in the athletic

history of Metuchen. Angelo Donato has talked to me about this game a number of times. I think he may have been there; he's a little bit older than I am. Oh yes, the home plate was directly opposite the field where it is now; it was in the corner on Brunswick Avenue by Edgar School. I assume that the end of Lake Avenue at that time was all trees and it would be okay to hit a home run into the trees. And probably when the houses were all built along there [Lake Avenue], that's when they changed home plate. So now it's okay to break a window on Edgar School if you hit the ball far enough and hard enough. [recording paused]

Charlie Butler, Metuchen High School Class of 1949, was a good friend of mine in high school. And I was in the Navy—as was he—and one day I looked in my Navy newsletter and saw that Charlie Butler had won the middleweight [boxing] championship of the United States Navy. Actually, he won it for four years in a row, and in 1948, went to the Olympic Trials and lost as a finalist on a split decision. I was told then that the fact that the other fighter was a white man may very well have had something to do with Charlie losing the fight, because people who were there said he clearly won it, which is very sad for a lot of reasons and we were denied an Olympian from Metuchen as a consequence. [recording paused]

Roger Johnson again, talking a little bit about my childhood in Metuchen. My father was born in Bayport, Long Island and his father [Gustave Adelphus Johnson] was a dairy farmer. And my mother [Gladys (Peck) Johnson] was born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey and she was an artist. And they met at the paint company that my father worked in Newark. My mother was in charge of color samples and my father was a budding young chemist and they married, and I was the first of two sons. And they moved to Metuchen in 1936.

P. Boeddinghaus: May I interject and ask what brought them to Metuchen?

R. Johnson: Well, they were living in Irvington and Newark before that and they wanted to have a house. And they moved to Metuchen to rent a house and just get a little bit further out into what was then farm country, my dad being a farm boy as it were.

And to make just an interjection, I think that my father and I are the only two father-son combinations to both have served on the Metuchen Board of Education. I'm not sure of this, but I don't know of anyone else whose father—though many, many years earlier—preceded him.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

R. Johnson: Can you stop for a second? [recording paused]

So my parents moved to Metuchen. Unfortunately, the Depression was catching up with my dad, and he had a series of pay cuts. He never lost his job, but his pay cuts eventually amounted to almost 60 percent of what his salary had been. And every time there was a pay cut, my dad moved to someplace else within Metuchen to save three, four, or five dollars a month in rentals. So in a year and a half, we moved from Maple Avenue to [27] Elm Avenue just in the backyard, then to Linden Avenue, then to way out at the end of Oak Avenue, and finally to [36] Bounty Street where we lived for about sixteen years. The house on Oak

Avenue, which is a lovely home today, was very run down then and I remember my mother looking at the wood-burning stove in the kitchen, where she would have to cook our meals over wood, and standing there just crying her heart out. And I also remember my going and telling Mrs. Prickett, the landlady, that my mother said the bathtub was so small she'd like to wrap it around her neck!
[laughter]

My dad bought the house on [36] Bounty Street in 1941 and he paid \$4,100 for it. And I believe it was sold recently and the selling price was somewhere in the area of \$250,000 or a quarter of a million. So it costs a little bit more to live in Metuchen today than it did then.

What I'd like to do is just have some random memories of Metuchen as a boy, as a child. One of the most vivid ones to me is during the winter when there'd be snowfalls, the police would block off a large section of Woodbridge Avenue from about Bounty Street down to beyond Eggert [Avenue], McCoy [Avenue], those streets down there, about a five-block stretch. And the streetlights would be very bright, and you might have several hundred people out at night sledding, and you could ride for three or four blocks. The road would become hardened and icy, and it was just a wonderful sleigh ride that you really can't experience around here anymore.

And I remember Beacon Hill. A lot of people who live in that area don't know why it was named Beacon Hill. As I understand it, it's the highest point between Trenton and New York City [New York] and a beacon was there to direct aircraft into LaGuardia Airport [in Queens, New York]. And in the late 1930s, I guess up to World War II, you'd stand outside on a dark night and every minute you'd see this flash go over their head because the beacon took a full minute to revolve. One of my fondest earliest memories is seeing that flash go by at night knowing that the beacon was there.

Again in aeronautics, I remember one day, and it had to be 1937, I was in the schoolyard at Washington School [present-day Mildred B. Moss Elementary School], which was right in our backyard from Hunt Place, and an enormous Zeppelin [rigid airship], very low, flew over the schoolyard. Certainly it wasn't a blimp, because it seemed to me to obscure the sky with all sorts of engines along the side. It had to be the Hindenburg on its way from Lakehurst to New York City because it was in 1937, later in the year, that there was the terrible fire¹ and that was the end of the Zeppelins. So I probably saw one of the last trips of the Hindenburg that afternoon at Washington School.

Stop for a second. [recording paused]

Really, the core of my boyhood was World War II. My dad was an amateur radio operator, and in his backyard—and this is prior to World War II—our backyard here, he erected a tower, which was about thirty-five feet. It looked like a small wooden oil well, but that was for his transmitter and he would talk to people all over the world. I remember one day when a Piper Cub [aircraft] flew over. I guess it was a friend of my dad's because he cut his engine and actually flew down Hunt Place, which is only about fifty yards long, and he

¹ He is referring to the Hindenburg disaster on May 6, 1937 in Lakehurst, New Jersey.

couldn't have been more than fifty yards in the air, and he was actually silent enough that he could shout down a message for my father to call him. And then he turned his engine back on and off he went.

Stop. [recording paused]

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, you're on.

R. Johnson: By the way, the address on Bounty Street was 36 Bounty Street. Anyway, World War II were really the core years of my childhood, and I had a very patriotic father and certainly that radio was put to good use. He was in charge of the Radio Section of the Civil Defense in Metuchen. And he was quite a home patriot. He saw the posters that said: "If you think you see a spy, tell the FBI" [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. Well I recall his doing it several times, and I don't think they were real spies, but if someone had an accent my dad was on the phone, much to my mother's embarrassment. He of course had a victory garden out behind Washington School, and I remember all the hours I spent there. And he actually put in a chicken house behind our house with—we had fifty chickens. That was also part of the war effort, and I would sell the eggs up and down Bounty Street, and I was also responsible for cleaning that horrible place up.

Stop. [recording paused]

My father also recruited me to sell war bonds in World War II as a Boy Scout, and from the third victory loan through the seventh victory loan, I sold more war bonds than all of the other scouts in Middlesex County combined, which I guess was quite an achievement. It was enough to turn me off from ever wanting to go into sales for the rest of my life. [laughter] But I did get a special medal from the Boy Scouts for having got pledges for so many war bonds.

I would like to read something about World War II. A good friend of mine, Jack Kaufman [phonetic] from South Carolina, recently had a book published about the home front and children's life particularly during World War II. And there is a paragraph here that is as appropriate as if I had written it myself:

"From an economic standpoint, these were happy years of many American citizens. For those who did not suffer in combat, lose a loved one, or spend long periods away from home, the war years were far better than the Depression."

And I certainly recall that with my father's salary started to come back up when the war started. But to continue the quote:

"As children we were totally caught up in the war, but it wasn't the war our parents knew. In our minds, we had created our war the way we wanted it to be. It was game of toys and play and no one really died. Although we listened to the news on the radio with our parents and older siblings, tracked war theater campaigns on the wall maps, for the most part we had no real knowledge of the details. Nor did we care. Geographic locations were fuzzy, political and ethnic causes totally obscure, we were far from the killing and bombing. And so for most American children, the war was a huge game and the war years actually a fun time. This may sound terrible, but in perspective it is true."

And indeed it was true for all of us. It was a time of recovery from the Depression, and an exciting time for a young boy to grow up. But there was also some sadness as we got older and as the war came to an end. In the Forum Theatre, I saw the first pictures of the Holocaust, and I guess I was about thirteen at the time. Then, as now, [it's] impossible to comprehend, but certainly one of the great horrors of all time.

My mother, who is still alive and living in North Carolina at the age of ninety, recalls going into Wernik's Pharmacy [at 412 Main Street] one afternoon about that time, and Don Wernik's grandfather, who founded the pharmacy, was reading a letter and was crying. And my mother asked him what was wrong, and he told her that he had just received news of the relatives in Europe who were killed in the Holocaust during World War II. And what a horrible thing that was.

But on a personal note, in 1944, I joined the Boy Scouts, Troop 15, Metuchen. Of course, I was very wrapped up in the war and I found out that the assistant Scoutmaster—his name was Percy Milligan—was in Europe in combat. And I got his address and I sent him a letter. And for the last year of the war, he and I corresponded. I remember one letter I got from him that he said, "Roger, I'm writing this from a foxhole," and this was very thrilling for a twelve-year-old. So when the war was over, someone told me that Percy Milligan was back home, or maybe he had written me. And I was very excited by that. And I hadn't met him, and I wanted to, and I remember with great excitement asking my parents if we could have him over for Sunday dinner. And they said, "No." They told me that, "Percy Milligan was a black man and what would the neighbors think if we had a black man for dinner on Sunday?" I remember going up to my bedroom and crying my heart out. That was my first real understanding of what prejudice meant.

And in Metuchen, I'm reminded of another, years later, a man named Henry Brown, who was the first black man on the Board of Education, when he first moved to Metuchen. This was the early 1970s. He moved to a very nice home on Linden Avenue and shortly thereafter a fiery cross was burned on his lawn. And these horrible things happen. I guess they'll continue to happen, even in Metuchen. [recording paused]

One other very pleasant memory, Metuchen has had a number of young people go on to be celebrities in the field of entertainment. I guess most recently, David Copperfield [magician]. Probably the very first such person was Suzy Parker [Cecilia Ann Renee Parker], who back in the early 1950s was a very famous model—a top model such as the—I can't think of the ones today, but one of the first name models. Her sister before her, Dorian Leigh [Parker], was the first really name model. And Suzy moved to Metuchen when she was in fifth grade, and she was in Metuchen through her sophomore year in high school. I never saw that mentioned in the press; it was always that she was from Texas, which was a lot of baloney. But anyway, in the fifth grade, I had my first date ever and it was with Suzy Parker. And unfortunately, my purpose was to make another young girl jealous—a girl who had the highest grades in the class—and that was then the turn-on at that age. But anyway, a number of years later in the early 1950s, my wife [Marilyn (Edelman) Johnson], who was a Metuchen High School

graduate², showed Lieber Anker³ a copy of *LIFE* magazine with Suzy Parker on the cover. And she remembers Miss Anker looking at that and saying how could she believe this gangling awkward redhead was on the cover of *LIFE* magazine? [recording paused]

One other pleasant memory was the [Metuchen] Sweet Shop in Metuchen. The one that I recall is about where the bank is now.

P. Boeddinghaus: The old [Metuchen] National Bank, you mean?

R. Johnson: No, the one across—it's across the street from the pet shop and Meiling's [Shanghai Restaurant at 435 Main Street]. I guess that's also a First Fidelity Bank, but there was a sweet shop there. And it was sort of an unofficial gathering place for all the high school kids from after school. Well into the early mid-hours of the evening, the place would be filled and kids standing out in the street. It was a gathering, a meeting place and it was always very orderly and there were never any problems, and a place where kids could go in the evening to see their friends, which I don't think exists in Metuchen now. I don't know, but I don't think so. But it certainly is a pleasant memory of a place that filled quite a function.

P. Boeddinghaus: By the way, did you go to the dances at the Y [YMCA; Young Men's Christian Association]?

R. Johnson: The coeds at the Y? Oh, of course, I went to the coeds at the Y! That was part of growing up, and standing there and finally getting the courage to ask someone to dance. And did you go to the noon dances?

P. Boeddinghaus: I was going to mention that next, yes.

R. Johnson: That was something. Once a week or once a month, whatever, Metuchen High School would have a noon dance, where in the gym they would actually have a dance from about twelve-thirty to one o'clock. It wasn't very romantic because the lights were all on. It was the middle of the day, but it was fun also.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I think that may have been because so many of the students came from out of town by school bus from the outlying sections, and so they had that activity once a week like you say or once a month in the school gym (Franklin School).

R. Johnson: Yeah. Well, the school dances were all very important, and particularly, the junior dance and the senior dance. And they were a lot of fun.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you go to that reunion they had for the classes of the fifties?

R. Johnson: No, I didn't. I had some reason that we couldn't be there and I'm sorry that we missed that because I heard that it was great also.

P. Boeddinghaus: It was very well organized, and they used the Franklin School, which must have brought back a lot of memories for the—

² Marilyn Edelman graduated from Metuchen High School in 1952.

³ Miss Lieber B. Anker was an English and German teacher at Metuchen High School.

R. Johnson: Well, I was in Franklin School for kindergarten and then when we moved to Bounty Street; it was six years in Washington School and then back to Franklin School from seventh grade through graduation. So I have very good memories of the Franklin School going back a long, long way.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes [recording paused]

Let's talk now about your years on the Board of Ed [Board of Education].

R. Johnson: Well, let's talk about politics and my years on the Board of Ed.

P. Boeddinghaus: All right, fine.

R. Johnson: In the mid-1960s, the company that I was working for sent me to Germany for two years to work in—it was in advertising and they had bought a German agency and they wanted someone to go over and teach the German agency the ways of American advertising, and particularly of Proctor and Gamble, which was the company that I was working in the advertising for. And I was something called an account supervisor and there were five of them on Proctor and Gamble in this great big agency. And since I was the youngest of the five and therefore the least necessary one, I was the one that was asked to go over, which I did with my wife Marilyn and our then eight-year-old daughter Marcia [(Johnson) Kaufman]. And we lived for two years not in the American zone, but really in a very German city and our daughter, younger daughter, went to a German public school—our elder daughter rather. We adopted our younger daughter [Christina (Johnson) Swaak] there. We thought it would be easier in Germany than in the United States—we hadn't had a second child—but it was much more difficult, but we eventually prevailed.

One of the things that was rather striking to me prior to going to Germany—I was sort of a not very active politically, not very aware political person. But I was getting in Germany, I was getting *LIFE* magazine from the United States, and also a German equivalent *Stern* (which means “star” in German) magazine. And I would see the same photo pictures in both of them—both magazines of something like My Lai [Massacre] and Lieutenant [William] Calley. And the German magazine would always have one or two more pictures that weren't being shown in American magazines, and they usually were pretty horrible pictures, which involved children and families and some very terrible things. And Marilyn and I started wondering whether our country was doing the right thing in Vietnam. And when we came back to the United States, this was at a time when it was very unpopular to be in a peace group. And we became convinced that our country, which we loved very much, was making a mistake and we were among the very first activists in the peace movement. And Marilyn and about six or seven other people in Metuchen were very active in the primary for Gene McCarthy [Senator Eugene McCarthy]. And indeed of the twenty-five towns in Middlesex County, Metuchen was the only one in the primary that went for Gene McCarthy. It actually was a 40 percent more greater vote in that primary than the regular Democratic candidate had, which made Don Wernik take a good second hard look at us. [chuckles]

But anyway, after that, and of course Gene McCarthy didn't win the election; he wasn't nominated. But after the Bobby Kennedy [Senator Robert F. Kennedy] assassination and the failure of Gene McCarthy to become a candidate, the McCarthy and Kennedy local groups formed into something called the New Democratic Coalition [NDC]. And Marilyn had to go back to her work at Rutgers [University], she couldn't be involved anymore and nobody really wanted to be the Metuchen chairman. And I, who had three years earlier been a sort of a very inactive Republican, found myself elected as chairman of the Metuchen Chapter of the New Democratic Coalition, which automatically put me on the [Middlesex] County Board. Each of the twenty-five towns had their chairman [who] was part of the County Board. While the other twenty-four towns were represented by ambitious young lawyers, and I was the only person, I guess, who didn't threaten anyone because I had no such ambitions. So I became county chairman of the New Democratic Coalition, which put me on the State Council. Only in America could this happen. And I was very active on the State Council for about six months, and indeed at one point to my amusement and horror, I was actually asked to consider running for Congress, which of course I did not do.

As unfortunately so often happens with liberal politics, there was so much in-fighting that the NDC disbanded. And I said enough of politics and I kept my nose clean for about a year and a half, and then I did run for Metuchen Board of Education. And the first time I ran I did not win, but I was shortly thereafter appointed to a vacancy. And the following year, I was on a very loose slate with Henry Brown, who was the first black man ever to serve on the Board of Education, and Dick Neuberger [Dr. Richard Neuberger], our fine local dentist and dear personal friend, and Pat Kay [Dr. Patricia Kay] and the four of us had a very strong victory in that election. I guess it was in 1970 or 1971. And I keep track every year afterwards to see if anyone surpassed the number of votes that I received that year and about two, three years ago, finally someone broke my own record of the votes. But in any case, there were all sorts of issues and I remember coming into the Board of Education meeting in the Franklin School one night and walking through a picket line to get in. The issues seem so trivial today compared to some of the problems that we have, but anyway I was on the Board for about four years and then I did not seek re-election.

One thing I do remember, we had bomb threats and I remember being in my very first meeting after I was appointed, and the school was being emptied almost every other day by someone calling up with a bomb threat. And the Board voted in closed, closed quarters that they would ignore those telephone calls. And the vote was eight to one, and I was the one dissenter. And I remember after the vote saying, "Are you crazy? Are you out of your minds? What happens if it's a real bomb and we have the blood on our hands of children!" And I went on about a five-minute tirade and the superintendent said, "I think we better vote again." And the vote was nine to nothing in favor of emptying the schools every time there was a bomb threat. And I could on with reminiscences like that. Should I? [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: How about one more? [recording paused]

At this point on the cassette tape, I'd like to explain that the oral histories being done at the present time are very informal and casual and they are done under the auspices

of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. Roger Johnson has some stories about some famous athletes that he especially wanted to record, and that was the purpose of this interview. And so while being interviewed, Roger Johnson told some other very interesting stories about his parents, about being elected to the Board of Education in the early seventies, and I found everything very relevant and actually there's not much that has changed with the Board of Ed and public elections. [recording paused]

After talking with Roger Johnson for an hour and half at the Metuchen Senior Citizen Center, I find that he has many, many interesting things to tell us, and that another time, another date, we could continue the interview and get his full life story. [recording paused]

I would also like to give credit to Michael Macan, who copies these recordings so that we always have one in the archives and that possibly another issue or copy could be loaned to the public on a library system. We're trying this summer—the summer of 1995—to set that up with the Head Librarian Melody Kokola. And it is my deep wish that the public would be interested in these oral histories and take them out on the library-lending basis, and to hear the history of Metuchen as it evolves from these oral histories. [recording paused]

I would also like to thank the Metuchen Senior Citizen building and Alice Fleming for letting the historical society use an area in the new building to do these oral histories. It's very well appointed, air-conditioned, and very comfortable, and the historical society is very pleased to be able to use these facilities. [recording paused]

Please run this tape now to fast forward to the end.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

R. Johnson: **I think that perhaps the most exciting football play that I've ever seen—and I'm not that much of a football buff—and Phyllis will know this name—around 1947, there was a football player at Metuchen High School named Andy Elko [Andrew G. Elko].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, I remember Andy. I think he was in my class, yes.

R. Johnson: **Yeah, you remember Andy. He was Class of [19]47 and he was a really top football player. Metuchen then had a football coach that—well I guess coaching was different in those days—they certainly weren't that concerned with, didn't understand conditioning and health. I remember how we would start on September first with practice with a full work-out in uniforms for four or five hours under a blazing hundred-degree sun. [chuckles] And a lot of the kids would get hurt because they should have had a much more of a breaking in. And some of the kids would be hurt for the entire year because the coach just didn't understand conditioning.**

Anyway, Metuchen never—back in those days they didn't have—the two teams weren't too strong. But I remember that in 1947, the player Andy Elko was pretty badly hurt. I was a manager at the time. And he kicked extra points and his arm was taped under his uniform; his left arm was taped to his rib cage. It

was like an amputee with a flapping empty sleeve. He only had one arm, at least for that game; he'd separated a shoulder or something. And we were playing, I think it was North Arlington [High School] then, and Andy Elko would only come out to kick extra points, and there were a number of—it was a relatively high scoring game and he came out two or three times to kick extra points. And in the second half, he started begging the coach to let him go in for three plays. And I guess because he was such a nuisance, the coach finally said he could go in for three plays, which wasn't very smart, the guy was hurt. So on the first two plays, Andy was the man in motion and the halfback on the other side followed him down the field and obviously he only had one arm [chuckles] and there wasn't much that he could do. And he was limping to boot, and no one threw a ball to him. So on third down with ten yards to go, he went in motion again and this time the defensive back paid no attention to him at all. So he ran out there all alone and he ran very fast and he ran down the field. And Johnny [Woodford] Hone [Jr.], who was the quarterback (Class of [19]48), threw a beautiful forty-yard pass and Andy jumped in the air with that one hand and grabbed that ball, pulled it in and went for about a sixty-seventy-yard touchdown. The place went crazy. To me, that was the most exciting single play I have ever seen—that hand going up, that one arm, and spearing that ball and going in for the score. Unfortunately, that tied the game as I remember, and unfortunately on the return kickoff, the player on the other team went a full hundred yards for the winning touchdown. My dad was standing on the sideline and he saw at the fifty-yard line the player's foot go out a foot. He even saw the footprint and of course the referees weren't going to be listening to a spectator. So we lost the game, but it was an exciting play. [recording paused]

P. Boeddinghaus: Now we are going to talk about Roger's experience when hearing about the gas line blast in Edison out by Durham Woods [Apartments].

R. Johnson: I'm sure my experience is the same as everybody else's. It was about midnight; Marilyn had turned off the light and I was reading and I turned off the light, and about thirty seconds later there was this tremendous rush. I thought a train had gone down the middle of Rolfe Place. We're, I guess, at least two to three miles away. And I looked out the window and again—the same that everybody else reported—the intensity of the fire was so great that I knew that a house had blown up one block away. And I woke Marilyn up and I said, "My God, there's been a gas explosion on the next street and this house has blown up." But after a short while, we realized that that wasn't it, that it was from someplace else. I got out and I walked around and people were walking around, and I got in the car and I drove down to Essex Avenue, and I drove sort of towards Bridge Street and I saw it coming from that direction. And I decided that the smartest thing for me to do was not to further create a traffic problem and so I was able to do a U-turn and come back home. And by that time, we had the radio on and we were listening till about three in the morning—I guess till five o'clock in the morning. But it's sort of interesting. Like everyone else, we were astonished and it was something we will never forget.

We had been in Durham Woods about two weeks earlier. My wife is an antiques dealer and someone (an old gentleman) that lived there, had by a reference from someone, had called her and said he had a few things that he would like to have someone look at. So we spent a very pleasant hour with him. And he was semi-incapacitated. In fact, I ran out to the store to buy a few things for him at the

grocery store. On the radio, when we heard the numbers of the buildings that were—the building numbers—the ones that were blown up, she said, “My gosh, I think that’s where so-and-so lived.” And she quickly checked, and we were very concerned. And then we saw on television, a woman come on and she knew this gentleman and she said how she was worried because no one could find him, and we knew it was the same person that we had known. And then we saw the next morning on television, another person came on TV [television] and said, “I saw the TV last night and that old man is safe somewhere, but we knew we saw him get out.” Then a few hours later, we saw at one of the local YMCAs or schools where people were being treated and taken care of, here was our new friend with TV cameras all around him and really enjoying, obviously enjoying the moment and all of the attention. And we were very happy that he was okay and very much relieved, and we were very excited to see him on television. And we were also very happy, of course, that the miracle that no one was killed and—I guess one person was killed.

P. Boeddinghaus: Did he ever say how he escaped?

R. Johnson: We haven’t seen him since. We lost track of him. But on television, yes, he did. He apparently was able to somehow just walk out. He was limited, but he wasn’t crippled and I guess, under those circumstances, you find great will power because he walked out with the rest of them.

P. Boeddinghaus: The story has a nice ending because that was really—

R. Johnson: We all felt, everyone in the area, of course, felt very much involved with something like this happening and like many other people this gave us a really direct personal link to Durham Woods. And if anything, it is possible to make the thing more dramatic to us that certainly did.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well my husband [Jack Boeddinghaus] is an ex-fireman and when he watched the billowing of the flames as being fed, and he said to me, “Quick get dressed, we’re leaving the house.” I couldn’t find anything to wear, but I finally threw on something and we went and stood in the street. And we were ready to evacuate.

R. Johnson: How close were you to the—?

P. Boeddinghaus: We were on Linden Avenue, but we could look west right out there.

R. Johnson: Well, Linden I would say is about the same distance as Rolfe Place, and when the thing really billowed, we were of course frightened also.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, and we stood out in the street thinking we might have to get in our vehicle and just take off. But I heard a lot of stories of people just ran down Durham Avenue and my friends called out to them trying to offer coats or shoes or some refreshment and the people never heard these offers. They just kept running until they could get to a safe spot, maybe here at the Borough Hall or Foodtown [at the southwest corner of Lake Avenue and Middlesex Avenue]. I heard Foodtown put up a lot of the victims.

R. Johnson: They were pretty close—very scary.

P. Boeddinghaus: Very bad.

R. Johnson: This on?

P. Boeddinghaus: Still on, Roger. Well, I want to thank you very much for your memories of your boyhood days in Metuchen and some of your other experiences during the war and being in the Navy. And that paragraph you read from the book is very interesting. I was thinking that too about the war days. I didn't think that much about it. It was kind of a good time. Our parents had employment, they had got good jobs, and it was better times for us after coming out of the Depression.

R. Johnson: Well the memories, just to mention some of my friends if I can do that.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, please do.

R. Johnson: One of my dearest friends was Otto [William] Will who lived across the street on [51] Bounty Street. Three of his uncles were either admirals or captains in the Navy. And I saw Otto very recently at his father's funeral; his father was ninety-three. It was the first time I'd see Otto in forty-two years. And we shared so many reminiscences and he reminded me of the day that I—December 7, 1941—all three of his uncles were at Pearl Harbor [Hawaii], and how I came running across the street and pounding on their kitchen door, and saying, "Pearl Harbor has been attacked! Pearl Harbor has been attacked!" And Nancy, his elder sister, said she'll never forget the look on their parents faces, they looked at each other and heard that.

And my dearest friend was a high school classmate named Jack Hill [John Hill] who lived at 598 Main Street. His dad had served in World War I and was a career telegraph keypunch operator. And Jack and I, from kindergarten through high school, we both went to Princeton University on Navy scholarships, we were both in the Navy together at the same time, he met his wife through me. We both were at Camp Sakawawin [in Blairstown] for five years, we shared a tent, we were both counselors together at Camp Sakawawin. I played guard on the football team and Jack was center by my side and he was a dear friend. He had a very successful career; he worked for Jones and Laughlin Steel Company in Ohio. And sadly, about five or six years ago, a combination of heart disease and heart attack and cancer, we lost Jack and that—sad that a guy who was so young, and to have that happen.

And another good friend lived right around the corner [at 55 Bounty Street]. A guy named Roy D'Andrade was also a dear friend of Otto's and mine. When I last heard, he is a professor of psychology and one of the head chairman at one of the colleges, part of the University of California college system.

A good friend was Steve Negron [Stephen Negron Jr.], whose family lived in then Raritan Township.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was that actually in the Clara Barton section?

R. Johnson: In the Clara Barton section, yes. And Steve and I also played football together and went to Scout Camp together. I haven't seen Steve in forty years and about two or three months ago, my daughter was on her way—we'd gone to North Carolina for my mother's ninetieth birthday and my daughter, one reason or

another, decided to take the train back rather than flying back. And this gentleman was sitting beside her from North Carolina all the way up. And she was doing paperwork and they didn't start talking until about Philadelphia. And in Philadelphia, they started chatting, "Where are you from?" "Well, I'm from Metuchen." "I went to Metuchen too." To make a long story short, it was Steve Negron, my boyhood friend sitting—small world!—riding back to New York City with my daughter. And he is a venture capitalist, a manager of a local venture capital company in Hong Kong. So he has done quite well. I've lost track with many other people in the high school class, but those were my dearest friends.

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember Steve Negron; he was friendly with my sister. He must have been very popular. She always spoke about him.

R. Johnson: Oh, he was.

P. Boeddinghaus: He went to Clara Barton School and then in to Metuchen High.

R. Johnson: He was quite a guy and still is. Marcia, my daughter, took a picture of him in [New York] Penn Station as they parted several months ago. And of course, like all of us, he looks a lot older, but he still looks very handsome and very dynamic and someone I well remember.

P. Boeddinghaus: That's a nice story, very nice. [recording paused]

Roger, would you like to tell us about some of your teachers in Metuchen High School? We both remember Ray Herb.

R. Johnson: Well, I remember Ray Herb very fondly, which I guess not everyone does. Ray was a civics teacher, and I guess sometimes he seemed a little stuffy to some people and the students occasionally played a joke or two. But I was very fond of him, as were many students, and recall him with only good thoughts. Some of the other teachers, oh my goodness, I had Mildred Moss—Dr. Moss—as my first-grade teacher. Moss School is named after her. Who could forget Clifford Killian, the biology teacher who was called "The Master" and was quite a character.

P. Boeddinghaus: He was a perfectionist.

R. Johnson: He was a perfectionist and he referred to himself in the third person as "The Master." And I remember Archie Elliot all too well—my geometry teacher and mathematics teacher—again, somewhat of a character, but very bright. I remember Hannah Jessen, of course, she generally was a substitute, but wow could she keep the class at attention!

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, did you ever have Miss [Octavia] Sparkes?

R. Johnson: I had Miss Sparkes for, I think, second grade at Washington School—that rings a bell. Am I right about—?

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I remember her as an algebra teacher and she too held the—

R. Johnson: Oh I'm sorry, yes I remember Miss Sparkes. Of course, of course I do! Yes. She was, as I recall, sort of frightening and yet underneath was just a warm, warm sweet person. And I remember Elsie Farrell. And I remember—it's funny how we refer to these as Mr. or Miss—but Miss [Thora] McCready, who started dancing, dance class—

P. Boeddinghaus: That's right, modern dancing.

R. Johnson: Modern dance. And Miss [Elizabeth] Talbott, who was an English teacher.

P. Boeddinghaus: Miss [Louise] Haitch. Did you have Miss Haitch?

R. Johnson: Oh yes. Yes, I had Miss Haitch, and who was the one that taught typing and so forth?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I can just picture her, but I can't think of a name.

R. Johnson: It slips my mind. Oh, Mr. [F. Truman] Buckelew—

P. Boeddinghaus: He was popular.

R. Johnson: —who was the junior varsity football coach and was very popular.

P. Boeddinghaus: How about Pop Nielsen [Paul Nielsen]? He taught science and biology.

R. Johnson: Yes, of course. I had him. As an aside, I hadn't thought of him in forty years. I can name my elementary school teachers, I think. The first grade was [Mildred] Moss, the second grade—boy, I'm blanking on the second grade—the third grade was Miss [Eleanor] Smallwood, the fourth grade was Miss [Margaret] Brown, and fifth grade was Miss [Ines] Higgins, who was quite a disciplinarian. Those were many, many years ago. I guess they've all passed on since then.

P. Boeddinghaus: Would that been Miss Alexander?

R. Johnson: The second-grade teacher?

P. Boeddinghaus: For some reason, she is always mentioned when I talk to different students.

R. Johnson: I'm just blanking on her name. I remember a junior high school teacher named Miss Black, who I had a terrible crush on; she sort of resembled Marilyn Monroe [famous actress].

P. Boeddinghaus: And who was the principal of the high school? Mr. [Elmo E.] Spoerl?

R. Johnson: Well first Spoerl, and then [William E.] Bragner. Yeah, but I remember Mr. Spoerl very fondly and I remember his daughter was a cheerleader. And I was in seventh grade and the first time I saw her spin as a cheerleader, she had on her blue panties—there was a great big white M—and I just thought that was the most daring thing I had ever seen! [laughter]

P. Boeddinghaus: I didn't know that he had a daughter; that's interesting. I never thought of him as being a family man.

R. Johnson: Yeah, yeah, he had a daughter. I think that was when I was in seventh grade and she was one of the cheerleaders then.

P. Boeddinghaus: I picked up on your speaking earlier about your mother is still living.

R. Johnson: My mother is still living. My family moved to North Carolina in 1954. My dad had been in wood finishes and his company, which was in Newark, sent him down to do a survey of the market down there. And he came back and told them what they should have already known, that 50 percent of the furniture in this country is produced within about a fifty-mile radius of High Point, North Carolina. So they sent him down there to be a combination chemist and sales service person. He was there for many years and eventually with eight years to go to retire, a local company bought out his contract. He was doing such a nice job they wanted him on their side. So my brother Richard—

P. Boeddinghaus: I don't remember your brother. Was he younger?

R. Johnson: Well, he was younger than me. He transferred down to High Point senior year in high school, which was very rough for a Yankee to come down. He then went on to Wake Forest [University in North Carolina] and he married a lovely lady from South Carolina, and to this day I have a hard time understanding the deep southern accents of my nephew and niece. My dad passed away five or six years ago. My mother is now in the Presbyterian Nursing Home—Presbyterian Home rather, because it's not a nursing home. She has her own apartment and she's ninety. She still drives. She still does not own a pair of glasses and does needlework at ninety, and is very active in—oh, what's the word when you check your ancestors? I'm just blanking—

P. Boeddinghaus: Genealogy.

R. Johnson: Genealogy. She's very, very involved in genealogy and she has, at this point, traced eight separate different Mayflower descendants. And to her, it's a great puzzle.

P. Boeddinghaus: It's like being a detective.

R. Johnson: It's like being a detective, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Now you mentioned she was from Perth Amboy. What was her maiden name?

R. Johnson: Her maiden name was Gladys Peck, and she was in the same high school class as—who was the Congressman? Eddie Patten [Edward James Patten]. She and Eddie Patten were good friends and they were in contact and exchanged letters and phone calls right up until his death a couple of years ago. And she was quite active in the [First] Presbyterian Church and for a while—this was in North Carolina—was a professional portrait painter. And the large painting of Dr. Behrenberg that's in the church now—it's in one of the back rooms—

P. Boeddinghaus: Perhaps in that lounge?

- R. Johnson:** I'm not sure exactly. It's the room where the elders meet, I believe. It's a large painting of Dr. Behrenberg, which my mother painted.
- P. Boeddinghaus: So she got back into the art field after she raised her family?
- R. Johnson:** Yeah. Well, she was always dabbling. But after she raised the family, she attended the Art Students League in New York City and took up oil painting seriously for about twenty years—mostly portraits, though some landscapes, and some of them were very nice. She was an extraordinary talented person and it was unfortunate that she wasn't given the opportunity to study art beyond high school when she was much younger.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I've heard this story before. It was during the Depression and the families didn't have the tuition money to send the kids on to further education.
- R. Johnson:** Well, she graduated from Perth Amboy High School in the early 1920s, but it was a matter of just not having the finances to send them on.
- P. Boeddinghaus: After World War II.
- R. Johnson:** Yeah, yeah. She lived on Kearny Avenue [in Perth Amboy].
- P. Boeddinghaus: World War I, excuse me. I meant to say World War I.
- R. Johnson:** World War I. And my dad, he didn't graduate from high school. And when he was on the Metuchen Board of Education, he was always in terror that someone would find that out. But he went to Pratt Institute [in Brooklyn, New York], which is now Pratt University, and he took a two-year course in chemistry and turned out to be very fine in his field, which was paint finishes.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Self-educated.
- R. Johnson:** Well yeah, over time. And they moved to North Carolina the week after we were married—1954. And I had three years in the Navy and Marilyn had college to finish. Then I joined Lever Brothers and was with them for a number of years in [the] training program, and eventually we got back in the New York area. And we moved—well first we were in a development down in Sayreville (Sayerwood South)—the G.I. [Government Issue] Bill [of Rights]⁴. But then what we really wanted to—Marilyn vowed that she'd be in a town with a good school system by the time our elder daughter was in first grade. And then the summer before that occurred, we moved to Metuchen and we have been here ever since. And she's had a career at Rutgers and I'm now retired. My career was primarily in advertising.
- P. Boeddinghaus: Were you friendly with Pete Kramer [Peter (Harry Edward) Kramer]—speaking about woodworking and so forth?

⁴ The G.I. Bill of Rights was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 22, 1944 to provide services and benefits to the veterans of World War II.

R. Johnson: I knew Pete Kramer. He was more of a peer of my brother's. He was one of my brother's closer friends. Of course, I knew who he was. I haven't seen Pete in years.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, at the end of May, he was in town and he donated a beautiful table to the BIL [Borough Improvement League] building, and I taped him. He did a little lecture about his wonderful boyhood days in Metuchen, and how he always liked woodworking and how he got started. He took soda bottles back to the Corner Confectionery [at 275 Amboy Avenue], got the deposit money—he and his friends—and went to Royal Millwork [& Building Supply Company at 253 Lake Avenue] and got a few pieces of lumber and made footstools. And then they got the orders from their mothers—each mother bought a footstool—and that perpetuated their woodworking.

R. Johnson: His niece would have been Amy Hume, right? And Amy Hume was my elder daughter Marcia's closest friend throughout high school and they still see each other occasionally. So it's all very, very interconnected, isn't it?

P. Boeddinghaus: Interconnected, yes. He mentioned too that he had made some sort of wooden planters, and Ruth Eigenbauer [who owned The Hitching Post] was so supportive and she bought the planters. And he said on his tape he probably would be embarrassed if he would see them today, what he had constructed. But he's gone to get into some very lovely woodworking.

R. Johnson: Well, speaking of crafts, do you have anything on the tape regarding the Gort Pottery⁵ [Gort Bone China]?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. Now my sister Carolyn [(Boeddinghaus) Urich] did a—

R. Johnson: Of course! I know that Carolyn collects Gort.

P. Boeddinghaus: Carolyn did a talk on Gort Pottery. But see, she researched it. It's kind of interesting. She was not in town when Gort was being manufactured. She lived elsewhere. We were all into it. That was what you would give for a shower present, a wedding present, birthday present. And we could watch the girls working in the window down below on Main Street. Remember that?

R. Johnson: I remember that well, yeah.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well then she got into the antique business and she realized how collectible Gort was—very scarce because it was only made from [19]44 until [19]55—went out of business. The molds are somewhere in a chicken coop and she has this quest for Gort.

R. Johnson: I've been to her home—come to think of it—a couple of times, and have seen the collection that she has. And Marilyn just recently found two very nice pieces of

⁵ 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 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.

Gort, and she is, I think, talking to Carolyn about it. Carolyn or a friend might be interested in them.

P. Boeddinghaus: Very highly collectible.

R. Johnson: And I remember that my mother was a good friend of Mrs. Gort.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, yes? She lived in Redfield Village?

R. Johnson: I forget where she lived. No, I think she lived somewhere on one of the side streets off Woodbridge Avenue, because I do remember my mother going over there to try to calm her down on the day that she left Mr. [Eric] Gort. And I was witness to that.

P. Boeddinghaus: The Gorts were always customers at the [Jack's] Flower Shop [at 182 Main Street] and she had a chauffeur, I believe, and the chauffeur would bring her to the shop to get flowers or plants or whatever. Now I don't want to interject a lot about this, but for some reason there's a woman in Illinois that corresponds with me about Gort. And she tells me about the pieces that she has; she has the watermelon man [figurine], for instance. She sent me photos and she wanted to know more about Gort, but of course they're out of business. And then Mrs. [Ruth] Eby, she was a very well-known lady and she is ninety-nine years old, and she lives in the Reformed Church Home in Irvington. One of her daughters made molds, made models for Gort. One sister was the model and the other sister sculpted the mold. And the particular ones were of angels and they're gorgeous. They're beautiful.

R. Johnson: I remember them. I can remember going in there. Actually, when I was—prior to my freshman year at Princeton, I wanted to have a stein, a beer stein [mug]. I couldn't wait to get to the campus to buy one or maybe I couldn't afford it, but I went to Gort's and bought a blank and then came home and hand-painted the Princeton crest and my name in Old English and I took it down and had it fired. So when I appeared on campus, there I was with this gorgeous stein, which happily my mother still has.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I hope you still have it.

R. Johnson: Oh yes, it's on a shelf down in North Carolina. Well, I don't think it's collectible because the artwork was done by me, but it was fired by Gort [laughs], though that's not marked on the bottom.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, about Mrs. Eby's angels [figurines]—oh, she just prized those angels. And when she was quite along in years, she had some people doing housework for her and they broke the base of one of the angels. So she gathered it all up and she was always hoping that someone could fix it for her. And she kept wanting to give them to me, and I said, "No, no, you really shouldn't give them to me. You should give these to a granddaughter or grandson, someone in your family because there's a lot of history involved here." And the last time I visited her in the nursing home, she had them back again and on her dresser and she's very proud of these; they're really beautiful. She said they sold them—Georg Jensen in New York—for fifty dollars each at that time. So she was very pleased about that. I have a doe and a buck because Jack [Boeddinghaus] was always into deer hunting, and a commemorative plate from the [Dutch] Reformed Church. That's my collection of Gort.

R. Johnson: **So you were in the Reformed Church?**

P. Boeddinghaus: No, it's just that I think Mrs. Eby gave me the plate. It had been hers, and she passed it on to me. I accepted that as a gift because my daughter was married in the Reformed Church. We went to the Reformed Church for a while when we lived on High Street. It was very convenient.

R. Johnson: **My high school heartthrob was a girl named Joan Groben.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember the name.

R. Johnson: **Oh, she was so gorgeous. I haven't seen her now in forty-five years**

P. Boeddinghaus: Have there been any class reunions?

R. Johnson: **There was the twenty-fifth reunion, and I've heard nothing since then. It was very well attended, and it was a very exciting evening. I enjoyed it.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You ought to organize something. It takes a lot of work though.

R. Johnson: **I know it does. [laughs] Well, we'll see in a couple of years. Unfortunately, it's starting to get close, isn't it?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I thank you very much Roger. It's been very enlightening about your boyhood days in Metuchen and all your nice stories and now this is recorded for posterity.

R. Johnson: **Wow!**

P. Boeddinghaus: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]