



Interview with Jessie J. Johnson

August 11, 1995

Transcript of an Interview about Life in the Jim Crow South
Norfolk (Va.)

Interviewer: Blair Murphy

ID: btvct08123

Interview Number: 912

SUGGESTED CITATION

Interview with Jessie J. Johnson (btvct08123), interviewed by Blair Murphy, Norfolk (Va.), August 11, 1995, Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South Digital Collection, John Hope Franklin Research Center, Duke University Libraries.

Behind the Veil: Documenting African-American Life in the Jim Crow South

An oral history project to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s.

ORIGINAL PROJECT

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke
University (1993-1995)

COLLECTION LOCATION & RESEARCH ASSISTANCE

John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African
American History and Culture
at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

The materials in this collection are made available for use in research, teaching and private study. Texts and recordings from this collection may not be used for any commercial purpose without prior permission. When use is made of these texts and recordings, it is the responsibility of the user to obtain additional permissions as necessary and to observe the stated access policy, the laws of copyright and the educational fair use guidelines.

<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/behindtheveil>

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University

Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life
in the Jim Crow South

Interview
with
JESSIE JOHNSON
[DOB 5/15/14]

Norfolk, Virginia
August 11, 1995
Blair Murphy,
Interviewer

Johnson: My name is Jessie J. Johnson, lieutenant colonel, retired from the U.S. Army. My date of birth is May 15, 1914, born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Murphy: Could you tell me a little bit about what growing up in Hattiesburg was like?

Johnson: Yes, from the age of one to about six, I don't remember much, but my mother died with influenza during the great influenza epidemic. I don't remember her hardly, though. I was the oldest, and I had a sister named Annie Johnson and a brother named Isaiah Johnson, Jr. We three were taken to the farm of my mother's parents, in Brandon, Mississippi. That's

about 100 miles north of Hattiesburg. I'm so proud that I had a chance to live with them, because it taught me a great deal in life.

My grandparents were a "prosperous" black family. They had about 175 acres of land and they had orchards and cotton fields and corn fields, and watermelon fields, and pear trees, peach trees, pecan trees, cows, horses, chickens, and everything that goes along with a farm, mules, wagons, and they had the community store for the rural community.

Of course, I've learned later that my grandfather was possibly of Cherokee descent. It is said that his father fought in the Civil War. However, I've been unable to document that. He was supposed to have died when my grandfather was a baby. Of course, my grandmother married again--my great-grandmother married again.

I grew up on the farm for two years while my father was looking for another wife. Eventually he decided to marry another girl from that community named Bonnie Belle Proctor [phonetic]. When he married her, he took we children to Jackson, Mississippi, for a year or two. After that, he took us back to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where I was born, all three of us. I stayed there until I finished high school. I finished

high school in 1933.

Murphy: What was Hattiesburg like?

Johnson: Hattiesburg was about 18,000 population, predominantly white, but to a large extent there were a lot of black people. Incidentally, I was accustomed to seeing black people as a sort of almost majority or half until I was about twenty, when I went to the North. I saw so many white people, it was a surprise to me. When I grew up in Mississippi, I thought that the majority of the people of the United States were black, because we were 51 percent of the population. Hattiesburg was very prejudiced--white people. I never, while there, met a friendly white person.

Murphy: What were some of the ways they manifested their prejudice?

Johnson: They would not speak to us, they were insulting, politicians would use "nigger" terms and make bad jokes about the niggers. We couldn't even vote, and he was appealing to the public to vote for him, the white public. Of course we were

segregated in school. High school was segregated and colleges.

We were segregated on the transportation. It was really a demeaning situation. I never personally accepted it, but I couldn't do anything about it.

Murphy: How were the communities separated?

Johnson: Physically. Communities by separate segregated communities, with all-black communities and, of course, the city was primarily white. The better homes were white. The black community was on the outer skirts of the city and we'd have to go to town to do our shopping and so forth. We had to ride through their white community, and better homes. That's the way segregation worked community-wise.

Of course, I lived in that environment for nineteen years. I finished high school. I was two years behind high school because I stayed two years in the country. In the rural area, I went to school about four months out of a year. The school was one room for about seven grades, with one teacher. Of course, we had the potbelly stove for heat, long benches for seats, and no desk. The teacher taught seven grades. Of course, we boys had to go out in the woods and bring in the wood for the fire

for the heater. That's what I had for two years.

Murphy: Before you go on, do you know how your maternal grandparents had obtained the land?

Johnson: I checked on that. Well, unfortunately, my grandmother, the wife, my mother's mother's father was a white man. Of course, my grandfather was, as I said, Cherokee, I'm told. Now, I've never known, but I believe that the white man helped the daughter and my grandfather achieved that land easily, because it's very difficult down there for blacks to get land. Of course, he was prosperous.

Now, that's interesting, too, because although my grandmother looked like a white lady, she refused to accept his last name. She accepted her mother's last name. However, she has sisters and brothers who accepted his name. The sisters and brothers are McLarens [phonetic]. She was Allen. Her maiden name was Allen. Of course, she was pro-Negro and she married my grandfather, who looked like a dark Indian.

Incidentally, when I was out there for two years, I was not conscious of race. They were just people to me, although my relatives were all shades. I wasn't conscious of race until I

went to Jackson, Mississippi, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

When I finished high school in 1933, June 1933, that was amidst the great economic Depression. That shaped my life [unclear]. There were millions of white people and black people unemployed--millions of them. All over the country, people were looking for jobs. There were no jobs, there was no temporary relief, no Social Security--nothing in '33. It didn't start until about '36 or '37. They needed food. There was no jobs for high-school graduates, because the grown men had the little jobs that were available to try to feed their families. People were losing their homes, white and black. A million men were hobbing up and down the road. They'd hear that some jobs were available in a certain city, and they'd hobo a train and go there looking for work. That's the atmosphere in which I graduated.

All right. When I finished high school, I applied to all the black colleges that I knew. Let me go back. In high school, I was what they called an accelerated student. I made four grades in three years. I made those grades because of my brilliant black male science teacher. He was sort of a role model. All of my teachers were role models, all of them were black. But he was a great role model. I tell everybody that he

had an encyclopedia mind. He had a memory that didn't fail. He knew all of his books, all of his sciences, all of his math, verbatim. He would come into the classroom talking as soon as he sat down and then he was talking until we left the classroom. Most students couldn't follow him, but I did. I'm not boasting, but I'm just telling you the fact. I don't boast.

But when I finished high school, I wanted to be a scientist because of his inspiration. I met him in the ninth grade. Before that, my model was black ministers, so I wanted to be a minister to try to help my people. But when I saw that I might be able to help my people in science, and the nation, I turned my aspirations to being a scientist, and maybe a minister.

So when I finished high school in about June 1933, as I said, I applied to all the black colleges. as a work student. I wanted to enter as a work student, because I was penniless. The only college that responded to my inquiries, my application, was Tuskegee Institute. Tuskegee Institute at that time had a work program, so that a student could work five years for a four-year degree, working his way through.

Incidentally, as a sidelight, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, a few blocks from my home, there was the University of Southern Mississippi, but it was segregated--all white at that time, and

wasn't integrated until maybe the sixties and seventies. All right. I decided to do what I called the Booker T. Washington. I read his story, *Up from Slavery*. I don't whether you've ever read it.

Murphy: No.

Johnson: *Up from Slavery*. He migrated from--much of his way from West Virginia to Hampton University, and when he arrived there, he was penniless. He became one of my role models. I said, "Now, if he did it in the 1870s, I'm going to try to do 1930s, go to one college."

Tuskegee replied. I had only \$35. I needed \$50 to go there and work for five years, but I had only \$35 from my newspaper money, as a newspaper boy. So I decided, in about August 1933, to just leave home and go from college to college, knocking on doors, ask people to let me work my way and, of course, to look for a job.

So I caught a train and went to New Orleans, Louisiana, and fortunately, there was a very educated black man at the railroad station when I got off. He had been a farmer, reconstruction orator and politician, but they put him out of politics at that

time. He had been pushed out of politics. So he ran a little hotel. He came to me, very intelligent, made a good impression.

He said, "Young man, where are you going?" And I told him what I wanted. It was about four that evening. He said, "Come to my hotel and I'll show you where you can go to these colleges and see whether they'll accept you."

So luckily, I guess it was God's hand that he was there. He was very intelligent, a very good man. So I went to his hotel, paid my--I think it was \$3 a night, out of \$35. He told me to go to New Orleans University, an all-black school, which is now Dillard University. So I went over there [unclear], a long way from the hotel, maybe forty, fifty blocks, by segregated transportation, with my bags and everything.

I got there about one, and the black president wouldn't interview me. I sat there until about five, and he refused to interview me. So I went back to the hotel and told the man that the man didn't interview me. He said, "Well, go a few blocks down to Strait [phonetic] College," which was a few blocks, maybe about ten blocks from where I was living.

So I went over there and asked the president, who turned out to be a white man from Connecticut, a missionary, and I told him what I wanted. I wanted to work my way. He said, "Well,

young man, if you can stay around here until September, maybe I can find you a work job."

So August or September, I was around there struggling for room and board, and no money, no job. Couldn't find any jobs. People were unemployed, greatly unemployed. So I stayed there, hungry. But in September, the president, the white president, allowed me to go into the dormitory. That was just like going from ground to heaven, because there they had nice electricity, running water, and my own room. In fact, there were two other roommates there with me. All the modern facilities. Nice diet, food. It's a miracle to me now, how he could get so much food for the students during the Depression. He must have had support from the North, because the southern organizations and businesses wouldn't support.

So they offered me the job to take care of the lawn, mowing the lawn. So I did what I call the Booker T. Washington. Booker T. did that room immaculately to be accepted at Hampton University, and I did the lawn immaculately to make a good impression. Luckily, the president, the students, the faculty could all see it. So I kept it trimmed and everything--an old push-type mower. No electric power in those days.

So I stayed there two years, working my way through, 100

percent. The only money that came in came in from a white missionary group of women from Parkerville, Connecticut. They sent \$25 to the college and told the president to give it to a deserving student. So the president called me in, he told me who they were, and that the \$25 would be put on my bill, and that's what he did. He gave me the address of the people, so I wrote them a thank-you letter. But this is what I did for the thank-you letter. I was a sophomore then. I went to the library and looked up all the big words to show how well educated I was, and wrote them a lengthy letter.

They wrote me back and said, "Young man, great men use small words." That stayed with me the rest of my life. But I was so thankful for them. Incidentally, many years later, I got in touch with that church and sent them money. I was so thankful, because that's the only outside help I received in four years of college. I had to pay my way. I received nothing from home.

Luckily, my father had a job during the Depression. You see, he was a country boy, accustomed to hard work. So they gave him a job at a factory that cut trees from the forest and then trimmed those trees into lumber for houses. Of course, he was lucky to have that job, whereas most people were unemployed.

But the salary was low and he couldn't save anything. My brother told me later that after he paid debt on that little house note and everything, he had about 35 cents left each week. So he couldn't send me anything.

I made two years there, but NOU--New Orleans University-- that I visited first, that rejected me, and Strait College combined to make Dillard University; they unified, and they went out of existence. So that meant that I had to find another college that would accept all-work student. So I applied to Dillard University. In fact, I cleaned some of those bricks that they were bringing over there to build the new building, as a student. But they wouldn't accept me as a work student. So I had to find another place.

Fortunately, I had to go back to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for a few months, and I decided to go to Tougaloo College in Mississippi. Fortunately, the president of Tougaloo at that time was the same white man that had been the president of Strait College. I went up there in September, uninvited; they didn't tell me to come up. Uninvited, I went there and I did a Booker T. Washington. I asked them if they would let me work my way, and the president and the treasurer knew me. So they accepted me as a work student at Tougaloo College. I worked my

way, the same job, primarily on keeping the lawn. Now, Tougaloo College is an old farm, about 500 acres of an old slave farm. It was huge compared to Strait College, which was on the main street of New Orleans, Canal Street.

Now, I worked so hard at Tougaloo College, and [unclear] was not as strong as at Strait College. I had to leave college in the senior year, because I worked so hard night and day, I ran out of energy. So I had to take a rest. Then I applied for--at that time Civilian Conservation Camps (CCC) were begun.

Have you ever heard of that?

Murphy: Yes.

Johnson: That's a camp for poor boys, and it was financed by the U.S. government. The basic fee was \$30 a month, and clothing and housing and food and medical care, in camps like the Army. So I applied to them in Mississippi, to be accepted.

When I went to the office to apply, there were about nineteen black boys there to apply for CCC camps. While we were there, about three white boys came in. They were farmers, because they were full of farm mud and everything, and their hair was long, and they were illiterate. I knew they were illiterate, because

they had to use the men's room, and they went to the colored men's room. They couldn't read the signs. So we told them. They said, "Excuse us, we're ignorant." They went to the white men's room.

But the white lady took them into the office, and they interviewed them for about an hour or more, and apparently accepted them. But she came to the door and said, "What do you boys want?" There were about nineteen of us there. "What do you boys want?"

One courageous-like boy--not myself--jumped us and said, "We want to apply for the CCC camp."

She said, "I ain't taking no more applications today."

So they were accepting applicants every four months. Of course, the newspaper reported that about 975 boys had been accepted for CCC camp, but only about 75 were black. But blacks were in greater needs than the whites, but they wouldn't accept us.

So I waited around there and wasn't accepted, so I decided to go to Chicago and Detroit, where a lot of my relatives had gone. When I got off the train in Chicago, a white policeman came up to me and spoke in a friendly manner and started a conversation. I'd never had that experience before in my life.

I was in my twenties. I thought it was wonderful, because I'd heard about the North. Then as I looked around the train station, there were thousands of white people and very few blacks. That was new to me, because in our train stations, most of us were sometime black people.

Murphy: What year was that?

Johnson: That was 1937. I left college about February to about April, 1937. I trotted around Chicago to find a job. There were no jobs around there. So in about a year, I went to Detroit. In Detroit I applied for jobs, including CCC work. So they accepted me up there in Detroit. I was sent to a camp. I had three and one-half years college. Most of the boys were high-school dropouts. So they put me in the office and I became an office worker, and they promoted--see, there were three statuses in the CCC. There was a private, assistant leader, and a leader. So they immediately made me a leader. I stayed in the office there until '38, and then I went back to Mississippi.

See, in Michigan, the black boys' camps were in all-white neighborhoods, about 300 miles way up in Detroit, and there were

no black neighborhoods. I always had an aspiration to do something for my own people, so I left CCC and went back to Mississippi, hoping to get on down there.

I went again to CCC to see if they would accept me. They would not speak to me. Although I had a year and a half experience or something, and knew what it was all about, they wouldn't even speak to me.

So I went to my grandparent's home with the idea of maybe cultivating an all-black neighborhood out there with all that land. Next to that 175 acres, my father had 40 acres, and next to that 40 acres, his father had 80 acres. So there was 80, 40, and about 175 acres all there together, so my idea was that since blacks were not doing so well in the cities, maybe to start something there as a support for them.

When I was looking around out in the country one day, I wanted to go to town for something. There was a white man driving a truck, with three black men loading the truck with trees that had been cut short enough to go in the truck bed. So I went up to the white man to ask him if he was going to the city. I wanted to ride with them, thumb a ride. He looked down at me and said, "No, I'm not going that way."

I said to myself, I said, "Uh-huh," trying to figure out

how I could get to town.

He looked down at me and said, "Nigger, did you say 'Yeah,' to me, a white man?"

And I looked up surprised. He was sitting in that high truck. And he said it again. He said, "Nigger, did you say 'Yeah,' to me, a white man?"

Actually, I had just said, "Uh-huh," to myself, thinking, you know.

He hit himself in the chest again and said, "Did you say 'Yeah,' to me, a white man?"

And I was surprised. I was still standing there. So he reached down and got that long crank and swayed at my head. I just had ducked. When I ducked, I fell back, and I said to the black man--now we were about ten or twenty miles from the nearest white. I said to the black men, "Let's get him. Let's get him. Let's get him."

They didn't stop loading the truck. That taught me, that second, that I had no protection in Mississippi. So I decided that moment to leave Mississippi. That was 1937.

Of course, I've told you about going north and getting work with the CCC. I decided to go back to college and get my degree, because I had, all except four and a half months, my

degree. So I went back to college and got my degree.

Murphy: Where did you go back to?

Johnson: Then I went back to Michigan. Then I became a teacher with CCC camp. I applied for teaching at the CCC camps, which was officer status. Luckily, I worked there. That was in 1939.

I became a teacher and I worked with them until the war started--World War II--and then the camps closed down about a month earlier, because people were receiving employment in industries during the war.

They drafted me. So in about July, August, September--well, in October 1942, I was drafted as a private. When I was drafted as a private, fortunately when I went to camp at Fort Custer, Michigan, a white captain who had worked with me in CCC camps was the commander. There was about 300 of us privates standing there--black. The whites were segregated in another part of the post. He looked at me and said, "Private Johnson, come to my office." So I went to his office, and he said, "Well, what do you want, Private Johnson, in the Army?"

I said, "I'd like to be an officer, sir, if I can." Of course, I'd had officer's status as teacher. I knew the

difference between officer status and enlisted status.

He said, "Well, I'm going to have to send you over to one of those southern camps where they've got a lot of Negro troops." [Telephone interruption.]

Fortunately, this white captain, with whom I had worked in CCC camp, too, for years, in Michigan, had been impressed by my work. So he said, "I'll have to send you to the South where they've got a lot of Negro troops, so you'll have a chance to become an officer."

I'd been reading in the black newspapers about how they were mistreating black soldiers down here. Very bad. I said, "Sir, can you send me to the East or the North or the West?"

He said, "If I send you there, you'll remain a private or a PFC for the rest of the war, because it's mostly white soldiers."

Then I took two or three seconds. I said, "Sir, send me to the South."

He called the personnel officer and said, "Do you have any men going to Camp Lee, Virginia?"

They said, "Sir, we have just cut the orders for a train loader going to Camp Lee, Virginia."

He said, "Well, amend the order and put Private Jesse J.

Johnson on it."

About three days later I was on the train, a trainload of white and black troops, a long trainload going to Camp Lee, Virginia. So for days we were on the train, and we arrived at Camp Lee, Virginia, and, of course, we were segregated. They put us in the charge of black sergeants and white officers. The white soldiers would march toward the front of the camp, and we would march toward the last buildings in the camp. That was the standard practice for the whole war, to segregate us.

Of course, the black sergeants had been selected for a big voice counting and so forth, and their military training. I can still hear them counting. They marched us, and I can still hear their counts fifty years later. They took us to the last building and put me in a company as a private.

We were allowed to apply for officers' candidate school (OCS) in six weeks. Now, this white captain gave me a letter of recommendation for officers' candidate school, but I needed two more. So I contacted the black medical officer, who was a captain at that time, and he gave me a recommendation for officers' candidate school. I contacted my minister up in Detroit. He gave me a nice letter of recommendation. I still have copies of them, for officers' candidate school. I applied

in six weeks, and about my eighth week they called me for an interview, to be interviewed by a white board of officers, colonels and majors and so forth.

The day that they called me, a black sergeant was also called. He was a peacetime soldier who had made sergeant. I was private. He had made sergeant, and he had been in maybe about nine years, because he had three stripes. Each stripe represented three years. He was sergeant. So they interviewed both of us.

About two weeks later, a letter came out and said, "Private Jesse J. Johnson is qualified for officers' candidate school, with Sergeant blah, blah, blah (I've forgotten his name)--he did not qualify." I was surprised. I thought for sure that he would be accepted. But in my research, I have found out that a college degree was required by blacks to be commissioned officers. I think that he was not a college graduate, didn't have a degree. Now, white officers, if they made their intelligence score on that test that they gave us, they could become officers with second grade. High-school dropouts, high-school graduates, they could become officers. Luckily for me, I struggled through college, penniless.

I went to OCS. I finished three months' basic training,

rigorous training. Then I was sent across the base to officers' candidate school. Of course, we were integrated in the officers' candidate school, because the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] had protested in World War I. They segregated the black officers, to training them segregated. But they integrated them. However, this was the proportion: there were about twelve of us Negro troops, compared to 700 cadets, a class of 700 cadets. We were about twelve. Luckily, I passed and made second lieutenant in three months. So in six months, I was a second lieutenant, from private to second lieutenant, whereas many men, millions of men in the armed forces, never did get that far, took them two, three, four years. Some of the white fellows in my class had been in the Army maybe two, three years to make second lieutenant.

Well, I made second lieutenant, and then my troubles started. There was a policy not to utilize black officers. So they put us in what they called an officers' pool at Camp Lee, Virginia, awaiting assignment duty. While in this officers' pool, we had little or no duties to perform. I volunteered for some classes and so forth--military classes.

At the end of three months, they sent about eight of us to

Louisiana for an assignment. We thought since there was eight of us, they must be starting two black companies, four officers per company. We were happy. When we arrived there, they didn't know that we were coming. They had white officers in the positions. So we were on the sideline, and wasn't given any duties hardly, but about two or three weeks, they shipped us to Texas. We arrived there; it was the same situation. The white officers had all the power and we were on the sidelines. It would work this way. If there were second lieutenant, white, black lieutenant, second lieutenant, we report to duty at 8 a.m., fifteen minutes to 8:00, the white captain would say, "Lieutenant So-and-so, you do such and such a thing," a white lieutenant. "Lieutenant So-and-so, I don't have anything for you today," talking to us. So that's the way it worked.

So what I did, I went by the library. I told the black first sergeant, who was an old peacetime soldier--you've heard of the Buffalo Soldiers [unclear]? All right, he was an old Buffalo Soldier that worked up to first sergeant. I'd tell him where I was at the library across the street. I started reading books and trying to find a solution to this race situation. Of course, I was reading for history. I'm a history major. I read books, books, books, books all day. Some of the young

lieutenants went downtown, but I told the sergeant where I was.

See, the day I entered the Army, I said, "Now, if I survive the war and don't become a little white cross, I'm going to make it a career," because I knew the advantages of the CCC camp, you see, which is similar to the Army. And that's not all. I had aspired to either be a scientist or go into the military. My brother told me--I had forgotten this--my brother told me not too long ago that when I was eight or nine years old in Jackson, Mississippi, I said that I wanted to join the Army, he told me.

He told me that I'd get killed in the Army if I went into the Army. He said that I'd say, "I don't care. I'd be glad to give my life for my country." Now, I don't remember that, but my brother does. He told me. But anyway, I had a double interest in life: Army, minister, scientist. Those were my great interests.

Now, I stayed in the Army for twenty years, but much of my career was pushed to the side, where I was pushed to the sidelines, but I stayed with it. I didn't give up like some of our people. Many of our people gave up. You see, during World War II there were about 6,500 black officers in the armed forces as a total. At peacetime it was cut down to about 1,100. Many

of them were pushed out against their will--cutbacks during peacetime. Well, I was lucky enough to stay in.

Of course, while I was in, I was at Philippines, Korea. See, I was on my way to the Philippines when the war ended and the surrender was signed. I was about three days out of California on the way to the Philippines with an old convoy of ships, white and black soldiers. Many of them had been to Europe, and Germany had surrendered. When they surrendered, they'd raided our convoy to Hawaii. We hadn't passed Hawaii. They took us off and then they began to screen those men who wanted to come back home, get out of the Army, who'd been to Europe in combat and so forth. They screened them out and let them come back home. But those who wanted to stay in, including me, I volunteered to stay in, and sent us on to the Philippines.

When I arrived at the Philippines in December 1945--see, the war ended September '45, and I arrived there in December '45. I saw destruction in Manila from war. It was absolutely destroyed, and the people were in poverty. Men and women and children, boys and girls, just hungry and begging, no food for them or anything. Very few clothes because the Japanese had taken it. During the war, they destroyed what they didn't take.

When I saw that, I couldn't sleep for two or three weeks. I saw the destruction first-hand of war. I was in the Philippines for six months.

Then I was sent to Korea by way of Japan. The plane landed in Japan. We were there about a week or ten days, and then they sent me to Korea. That was 1946. Korea was very isolated at the time. The Korean population was very hostile to American soldiers, white and black--no friendliness. Of course, the Russians had North Korea and the Americans had South Korea. It was a very isolated existence. I was there nearly two years. It wasn't pleasant, but I stuck with it--grit and determination, just like in college, you see.

So then it so happened that when I had to be reassigned to the United States, when I was at Fort Lee while I was waiting for orders, I had volunteered for a little military course, and they looked on that and saw that I had taken that course, so they sent me to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, from Korea.

Incidentally, while I was in Korea, a white officer, a white captain, who had been born in Japan before the war started, of missionary parents, started a Japanese course of spoken Japanese. I joined the course. The others were white. But eventually, in a few weeks, the people started coming to the

class. But luckily I met a Korean man who had been born in Japan, but who was a teacher in Korea who wanted to learn English. So I taught him English after duty, five or six o'clock, after I'd eat supper. He'd come by my house and study English and then he'd teach me Japanese.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

Johnson: I was there nearly two years, like I said.

Oh, the accommodations for the black officers. There were only two black officers located in Pusan, Korea, which is the very tip of Korea. It was like Florida where it's a peninsula.

Then with the tip, the port, Pusan. They gave the two black officers, myself and another one, a twelve-room Japanese mansion to live in, whereas the white officers were on the other side of town in segregated accommodations. Well, that was the situation. Our companies was what we call a reclamation and maintenance company. We repaired clothes and shoes for the divisions, and gasoline and bread, you know, support for the troops.

Now, when I came back, they sent me back to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I heard that they sent hundreds of black officers to

Camp Lee, Virginia. But here's what they did. Each company was allowed about four officers, but they put 90 or 100 black officers in one company. You see, there were 90-some officers excess. So what they did, they weeded them out in cutbacks. Luckily, I was at Campbell, Kentucky, and I didn't get weeded out.

So while I was there, I met another white man who defended me. See, I've never been a politician, but I impress people with my work. In fact, I didn't know much about politics at that time. I was there from '48 to '50, at the time of the Korean War. He was impressed, apparently, by my work, because I didn't know him. He was in headquarters. Of course, he was transferred to what is now the Pentagon. It was called the War Department in those days. While he was in the War Department, when the Korean War started, I was in command of a company. We'd packed up to go to Korea. Well, all of a sudden, an order came down from the Pentagon to transfer me out. I was transferred to Camp Lee, Virginia, for a few months, and then to ROTC duty at Virginia State College. There again, because of my college training and my limited military experience, I was sent to Virginia State College, ROTC duty, January of '51. And there's where I stayed until June of '53.

Now, while I was in the Army, I studied, by correspondence, a law course. I started it when I was in Korea, and I finished that law course. I did a lot of law work in the Army. You see, in the Army, white officers don't like to fool with it if they're not full-time lawyers, so they give it to Negroes. Well, I had a degree and I had the experience in the law, so I taught military law at ROTC and quartermaster courses for three years at ROTC Virginia State College.

Then I was sent, with my wife with me--she had been teaching up in Michigan until I came from Korea. She was a teacher up there. We moved together there to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and then at Camp Lee, Virginia. Then I got orders for Germany.

Incidentally, I received those orders this way. I began to become a little conscious of the advantages of contact. I went by the Pentagon and I took a look at my official records. It so happened that the white man who had transferred me out so that I didn't have to go Korea a second time had left good word for me there at the Pentagon. He came down a year after I was at Virginia State College and told me he was the one responsible for transferring me out. I didn't know it. I didn't know. I didn't even know where he was. This particular captain, a white

captain, got out of the service and the white major was in charge then. I went to the office just to read my record, see what people had been saying about me. See, efficiency reports could be sent in secretly without letting you see them. Years later it was different. But then in secret they could say anything about you. You could be the most efficient genius in the Army, and they could rate you as a dummy. That happens sometimes.

Now, I went there to check my records, and I asked the white major who succeeded this captain who transferred me there, what I was scheduled for. He said, "Well," he looked at the list, he said, "You're scheduled to go to Korea again."

I said, "Well, sir, I've been to Korea once."

He said, "Oh, that's right," and struck my name off the Korean list and put it on the European list. Now, that's how I got to Europe, and my wife and I went to Europe, and we took her niece with us, six years old. We were there for three years.

Then I came back to Fort Lee, Virginia, and they put me in research. See, there had been a lot of agitation about integration and so forth at that time. So they began to give blacks a little better of assignments, duties. So they put me in research, quartermaster research. In that organization, they

research experimental clothes, experimental food, experimental equipment that the Army had to use, to test it. It's a testing agency. So I was there for four years at Fort Lee.

From there I came to ROTC duty at Hampton University, January 1960. I was there until October 1962. Now, I entered the Army in October 1942, so that's twenty years. I applied for separation and retired because of this trouble, whereas some of my white fellow workers wanted to stay in thirty years, because it was pleasant to them. But it was never pleasant to me. I liked the armed forces, but emotionally it's difficult to serve when you're segregated and discriminated against and humiliated, and so forth, emotionally.

Murphy: Did it ever improve as the years went by?

Johnson: Yes. Yes, it did. They began to integrate. They integrated in 1950 during the Korean War. President [Harry S.] Truman issued an order in 1948 to start integration. Well, they were slow about integrating until the Korean War started. Then when the northern troops came down so fast, they were running over the white troops. For instance, we'll just say 3,000 white troops could go into battle and they'd come back in a jeep.

Survivors. So they had to rely heavily on a lot of the black troops. Many of them were a little older and a little more experienced than the white troops, because they were staying in as a career from World War II.

They sent in the all-black regiment from Japan, 24th Infantry, and the 24th Infantry was submitted to battle. The 24th Infantry, all black, except for some of the officers, they had black officers and white officers, they won the first victory. They stopped the North Koreans. That was the first victory and, of course, the newspapers and Congress and everything cited them. It's a matter of record now.

They began to integrate during those battles there, because they needed the unity, and they put black and white enlisted men and officers together. The black sergeants and officers were commanding white troops and vice versa in combat, and they found out that it worked better in the Korean War. After that, they began to give black officers a few more assignments so that they could work up to second lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel.

But I forgot to tell you that we, during World War II, were kept only second lieutenants for about three years. The time in rank was three months. All the white officers had to do was put

in three months and he was eligible to be promoted. Well, they began to promote us more in '50, '51, '52, '53, in the sixties.

I retired in '62, and they put me in an integrated unit at Fort Lee, Virginia, before I went to ROTC duty, for a few months, and it began to feel better being in the service. You were more respected and you weren't segregated in the armed forces. You were still segregated in some places out in the base, in the city--housing and stores and things and streetcars and things were still segregated. But of course, the Army began to put pressure on these civilian communities to stop segregating. You couldn't find housing for your wife and your children. They began to put pressure after the fifties.

Then in '62, I retired from ROTC. After nineteen and one-half years in the service, I was promoted to lieutenant colonel, but white officers were lieutenant colonels the first year. But it took me nineteen and a half years. But I stuck to it.

Now, that was October 1962. The next day, Hampton University hired me as a personnel officer. They were impressed by my work. So I was there for five years, then I went on leave to write my first book, *Ebony Brass*. I wrote the experiences of a typical Negro officer as a group biography in *Ebony Brass*. While I was on leave and I wrote that book, vacancies occurred

at Fort Eustis, Virginia, for writers in mechanics, 200 or 300 vacancies during the Vietnamese War. So I applied. I waited about a year and I hadn't heard from them, so I went up there to see. I didn't know anything about civil service, when they answered, how soon they answered anything. I assumed that they were processing it for a year.

So I went up there in the office and asked what my status was of my application, and an old grey-haired lady said, "We don't have any vacancies for writers."

Then she went back to her office and I asked a young, white lady who was still standing there, I said, "Where do you use these writers here at Fort Eustis, Virginia?"

She said, "Oh, yeah, they use them at the extension course section where they write courses for home study," and another place I've forgotten. But see, I'd taken nineteen years of extension studies from Fort Lee, Virginia, while I was in Korea and Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I'd taken all the extension courses and got promoted on the reserve, not active--on the reserve. First lieutenant, captain, and so forth, on reserve.

I said, "Oh, I've taken those extension courses. I sure would like to help write those courses." I said that to myself.

So I went to a pay station phone. She said the boss of that

particular job was Mr. So-and-so-and-so. So I went to a pay station phone and called him.

He said, "Yes, we need four writers, and we've been looking for them for a year, and everybody was employed." It was during the Vietnamese War, you see. No unemployment around here.

"Yeah, we've been looking for them. We can't find them." He said, "Salary is only \$9,000 and some-odd dollars a year."

Well, that was nearly twice what some people at Hampton University were making a year in those days, you understand. I was shocked and surprised. So I contacted the equal employment opportunity officer, who turned out to be a retired black officer. He contacted them and said, "What's with the delay in hiring Lieutenant Colonel Johnson?"

They made some excuse, but in about a month, month and a half, they hired me as a writer. See, at that time I had three degrees. I had a law degree, A.B. degree, and a master's degree from Hampton University. Well, the white writers were high-school dropouts or high-school graduates, that I had to work with. But that didn't matter to me personally. They had been there eighteen to nineteen years as writers, they knew their technicality, but they did not want me there. They objected to it. So for thirteen years, they never fully cooperated with me.

However, I worked up to GS-11, writer, correspondence. In thirteen years I retired from civil service as a writer, GS-11, education specialist, [unclear]. Of course, I had to make complaints [unclear] job, had to go to court to hold my job. It was very terrible.

But the point that I want to make is this. While I was there working at Fort Eustis, I was writing books on blacks in the military. I wrote about seven books on blacks in the military. But it was very difficult, because I had to come home and write legal briefs with a lot of my leisure time. It took me away from writing books. I could have written twice as many, but I had to use my nighttime writing complaints and legal briefs.

I point out to young people that I struggled through college, finished college [unclear]. Of course, I had to leave my home state which I loved. I wanted to work and build it up and do something for the white and black people. In fact, I had an idea then of doing something to bring white and black people together, like Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.]. But they weren't ready. They were a long way from ready. So I point out to young people, I still love Mississippi as a state, I admire the

abilities of white people to build empires, I liked the armed services except for the discrimination and humiliation, and I'm pro-military. Of course, I see that if we hadn't won that war, the Japanese and Germans would treat us like nothing. They would have exterminated a lot of us and made us slaves. I mean, that's what they did wherever they won. I don't know how much you keep up with it, but the Japanese were very cruel, and they made slaves out of people, and they exterminated a lot of them. They shot them when they won. They didn't care about your abilities or nothing. The Japanese felt that they had enough talent among their own, so all you could do was just be a slave in a mine or labor--just shoot you down. That would have been the condition if we hadn't won World War II.

Now, of course, I put in twenty years, but I retired in '62. This is 1995. '62 through '95 is what, thirty-three--

Murphy: Thirty-three years.

Johnson: --in October. Thirty-three years, because I stuck to it. I've been retired thirty-three years [unclear]. Nobody gave it to me or said, "We're happy to have you in the military. We have to have you in the service." I had to push to get

there.

So I tell young people, they asked me if it was to my advantage of being in the military, I tell them, yes, there are advantages. Historically, the blacks have won things after the war because they served with the white man, compared to the Indian who fought the white man, and the Indians were pushed out to the reservations. We were given opportunities, more opportunities, after each war.

Of course, I'm so thankful to have stuck to it and to have retired as a lieutenant colonel, actually, about the thirty-ninth in U.S. history, 350 years, to retire. You see, because after the war, the United States pushed us out. We didn't have a chance to retire until after World War II. So I was about the thirty-ninth to retire as a lieutenant colonel from the armed forces. Of course, we were only allowed in the Army at the time, very few of us in the Marines. We weren't allowed to work up in the Navy. We weren't allowed to work up in the Air Force and so forth, until after the Korean War.

Incidentally, that's just on my videotape now. I'll show you. But I've been retired now thirty-three years in October. Of course, it's pleasant to have the income of a lieutenant colonel, plus anything else I do. You understand? It's

pleasant. I got there, as I say, by sacrifice. It didn't come easy. So I'm retired now three times--Social Security, civil service, and the Army. I tell young people that so to try to encourage them to stick to it in spite of everything.

Now, here's what is helping. A young female who finished ROTC, eighteen years ago I encouraged her to join ROTC and to join the Army. She's retiring next month. She has requested that I speak at her retirement. So that's a plus. I'll speak at her retirement. She said the retirement wouldn't have any meaning unless I was there to say something.

Now I'm busy, always busy, and I've been busy since childhood when I wasn't forced to be idle. I'm busy working on videotapes about blacks in military service, and I'll show you all some of that before you leave.

When I was in Germany, I studied German in night school. The University of Maryland had courses over there for the GIs. Well, let's see, I had a degree, and all I needed was a language, so I studied languages in the Philippines. I studied Tagalog in the Philippines, I studied Japanese when I was in Korea, and I studied German in Germany. I say now, as they say in Germany, "Haben sie [unclear] fragen?" Do you have further questions? [Laughter]

Murphy: I'm glad you translated.

Johnson: One day when I was on my way to Petersburg, Virginia, to go to the USO, one soldier was standing up, but there were vacancies in the white section. So he sat down in the white section. A white captain said, "Soldier, you know you're not supposed to sit there." The soldier got up and made a violent remark toward him. In fact, he was ready to start a fight or something. Of course, there were other black soldiers in the back of the bus, and when the white captain got off at the bus station at Fort Lee, he walked hurriedly away. I'm just showing you how tense it was. Quite often, see, the white soldiers were the aggressors toward us, racially. They were harassers and would call us "niggers" and make us feel bad. Then some of the soldiers, especially from the North, would start riots. There were many riots, race riots, among the soldiers, white and black.

Murphy: Was this when it was still segregated?

Johnson: Still segregated. Yes. Yes. Very few during

integration. It was when segregated.

Murphy: Why do you think they would even bother? Because the military was trying to make white soldiers better, so you think that they would be pleased with their status.

Johnson: At what time?

Murphy: During segregation. The white soldiers would have been pleased with their opportunities and their status.

Johnson: Well, some of them were not. They had a very racist attitude toward us. For instance, at Fort Lee, Virginia, when I was a private in training, it was the most segregated, the most prejudiced camp maybe in the United States. In general, it was southerners, and most of the officers were Southerners. They hand-picked them, especially with the black troops. They put southerners primarily, 99 percent of the officers they selected for black troops were southerners, who "understand blacks better." But they were going to segregate them and mistreat them more and keep them discouraged.

Murphy: They understood oppression better.

Johnson: Yes. So that was the situation. For instance, up in New York, there was a black regiment. This was during World War I. A black regiment, 369th Regiment. When they were called to duty as a group, 3,000 men, they were called in and sent to a camp up in New York. There were black southern units sent up there from Alabama and Georgia. The white troops would at night shoot a black troop and kill them. But the white commander of the black troop said the black troop got the word that if you kill a black troop tonight, the next night a white troop was killed. So that was the tension.

It so happened that because of that friction, the black troop was sent to South Carolina or North Carolina, to take a boat to Europe. When they went to Europe, they were reduced to handling supplies, and the soldiers said, "We don't want to handle supplies. We want to be combat troops. We're trained to be combat." So they put them in battle in World War I, and kept them in battle longer than any other white unit in the war. More days they kept them. But they won more decorations, and they were the first to get into Germany. They had no AWOLs, they had no waits or anything. They had a good record, and they

made an outstanding record--the 369th of New York City. But that's an example of the tension.

Murphy: How was being in Europe different than being in the United States?

Johnson: Oh, yes, the civilian population was very friendly toward us, very friendly. Not 100 percent, but I'd say maybe 90 percent of the Germans were more friendly toward us. They talked to you as if they were talking to another European. You see, when I went to Germany, there was more housing on the base for couples, American soldiers, so I paid to have my wife come over there and the little girl that we kept, and we stayed in a German home for ten months awaiting availability of quarters on the base. Of course, the German family treated us as another German family. They were very nice to us.

Let me give you an example of what happened in the Philippines. When I was in the Philippines, this is all about race. When I was in the Philippines, one night I was reading a book and I heard shots. Of course, they shot into the trees and it would ricochet down to the tents where the black troops were.

The other officers were out somewhere. I was the only one

there that night. The black troops became upset because the bullets were coming down in their tent from the trees, ricocheted. They ran to the supply room and they broke open the door, and they broke the weapons rack and got the weapons. But fortunately the supply sergeant was out, but he had hidden the ammunition. So luckily, they couldn't find the ammunition. They were running around there.

So I ran over to the supply room and asked them, I said, "Fellows, be calm. Be calm."

They said, "Lieutenant, they're going to kill us. Lieutenant, they're going to kill us."

Of course, the firing had stopped. By that time, white MPs were surrounding the base, with jeeps with big lights, flashing lights, going around the base with lights. When I went to negotiate with the white lieutenant, the black fellow said, "They're arresting our lieutenant. Let's get 'em."

I said, "No, fellows, they're just negotiating."

Incidentally, in the supply room, I was asking them to be calm, and they would. But a big black soldier, about 6'6", was strong, and he picked up one or two of them and through them out of the supply room, carrying out my orders. Then they became calmer because the firing had stopped. I explained the

situation and then they said, "We'll investigate tomorrow, see what happened."

Well, they had an investigation, and they found out that some of the black boys and white boys were dating the same girls, and there was a friction, you see. So what the commanders, the generals, did was to make all of our men--we had about 400 men getting ready to come back to the United States in that area--they made us move within two days to another location which was [unclear]. See, the fellows had polished it and had painted the area, and they beautified it and everything. So we had to move to a gasoline dump where it was unprotected, unpolished and so forth. Of course, it's quite a job.

I was a commander at that time. It's quite a job moving 400 unwilling men, who were draftees, at the end of the war. The war had ended. Of course, they were relaxed. They were only concerned about getting back home, to buy a car and to see their wives and their girlfriends. That was all they were concerned about. But they made us move, and we had to move within that length of time, all the men. That's the way the commanders would do. If the white soldiers did something to us, we were wrong, you see, and then we'd be punished. So that's the way it worked.

I met, for instance, a lieutenant who had participated in the riots. Of course, after a while they put him temporarily in jail. Then they let him out and they split them up, sent them all over the United States in various camps. This fellow was reduced to master sergeant. When the Korean War started--see, he was a first lieutenant at the time of the riot. When the war started, they called him in as a first lieutenant, since he was a fighter. They called him in as a first lieutenant and sent him to Korea. Then after the Korean War, then he ended up as a master sergeant at Hampton University ROTC as an instructor. That's the way things worked during segregation.

For instance, at Camp Lee, Virginia, the telephone operators, if they thought that your voice was Negroid, she'd insult you. And if you walked on the street, the white soldiers could insult you. The white officers were obviously prejudiced.

They didn't hide it at all. It was obvious discrimination and prejudice. They'd show it openly. Then when you'd go to town, it was segregated and so forth. Personally, I stuck to what we called USO. Are you familiar with that?

Murphy: Yes.

Johnson: USO. I didn't go to these private places, because they were generally juke joints, and I didn't care for it. I'd go to the USO and the campus library and so forth. But anyway, because I was always looking forward to retiring. You see, some of the black officers, all they wanted to do was stay in there until the end of the war. They'd do a lot of things against the regulations, because they weren't concerned about a career. But I was looking forward to retiring, and by the [unclear], I made it. As I said, now I'm working on videotapes. That is, in summary, my life story.

[End of interview]