Interview with Ruth Stewart Johnson

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Tillery (N.C.)

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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


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

Interview with
Ruth Johnson

Interviewed by
Rhonda Mawhood

Unedited Transcript by
1. **Mawhood:** I'd like to ask you, have you always lived in Tillery, Mrs. Johnson?

2. **Johnson:** No.

3. **Mawhood:** How long have you lived in Tillery?

4. **Johnson:** Even since 1936. I moved here from Hertford County, Murfreesboro where I was born.

5. **Mawhood:** Why did you move here to Tillery, Mrs. Johnson?

6. **Johnson:** My father passed in 1934. He was a logger and my mother was a sharecropper. She heard of land being distributed to farmers in Halifax County so she was advised to come over here. Her roots was already of Halifax County. Some of her back parent was of Halifax County. I had one year in school, my last school. I was presently three years in Waters Training School, Winton, North Carolina. So I graduated that one year of 1936 Weldon High School. After two years I married. During the time I substituted for different teachers. There were no other work and I was unable to attend college. I joined a club. My mother was already president of a homemaker's club. After I had children I joined a younger club which I became active in, taking part as all of officers local, county and state. Then I began farming for twenty-three years. I took an active part in the community. I became PTA president, the first woman president. We sought to improve our school by raising funds due to the condition of the school. We didn't have enough books. Their seats were worn. Our group began to circulate and finally we asked for a better school or a school to be built from
the ground up. We didn't get the school although I was bearing down. We was moved to a previous all white school which had four large rooms. Later seven new rooms was added to that building.

I began to work with a group that was interested in job hunting. We went into various offices and buildings in Halifax town asking for vacancies and applying for work. There were no work at that time. Later years we organized Halifax County lower branch in NAACP in the Tillery area which I was secretary of for a number of years. In our homemaker's club I attended various workshops, income tax filing, international interracial training at Woman's College at Greensboro and every other group that I could associate with. I wanted to further my knowledge of skills and activities. We heard of voting. There were no one voting in our precinct, the Tillery area because they had to go to Halifax. A teacher and I decided we would go to read the constitution and apply to vote. Our names was recorded. For a number of years I decided that why not serve at the poll. So I volunteered in getting others interested in voting after which I served for the last twelve years as a judge enjoying the work and the service that I was giving.

After I stopped farming I began to work in other areas, sewing school. I'm sort of running blank.

7. **Mawhood:** You're doing fine. You say you were working sewing and in school?
8. **Johnson:** Yes I worked three years in ESEA, elementary education act and I would sew at home and sew in the sewing shop two years before retirement. There were many blocks and hardships in trying to work, get into work. I felt I had skills because I had been brought up in a home that my mother was a seamstress. I could quickly learn most any job but my age was a factor by the time I reached those areas. We as a community group fought for rights to work. So many was unprepared when we learned there were no work. It was some time before doors were opened for anyone and most of all preparation was the answer. So we began to prepare ourselves in what-so-ever workshop or training available through the community college which had began and other areas.

During the time my children was in school there were insufficient books and lots of second hand school desks. Even in high school insufficient seating, overcrowded rooms because the population had grown. Some parents had taken children to the all white school to enter, to register but was denied during that period. Now that the doors are open I would say to each and everyone especially young adults to get prepared to face the future. They can make a difference. I felt that I had contributed or made a difference to our community, to our church as an usher and a secretary and to the community as a 4-H chair person for twelve years and working at the poll twelve years. I can't think. You might have to ask something.

9. **Mawhood:** That's a wonderful summary of a lot of things in your life, Mrs. Johnson. I'd like you questions about the different parts. You said that you made contributions to your community. I'd like to go back and ask you about your parents a little bit.
10. **Johnson:** Was mother was born in Hertford County. Her back parents were of Halifax County migrating to Hertford County. My father's father came from Florida and returned to Florida. He had relatives in Virginia. He was a logger. He worked on the water most of his life. He died at age fifty-five which was early now as an age. He was sort of a Robinson Cruseo if you might compare his life.

11. **Mawhood:** How's that?

12. **Johnson:** He loved the water. He worked on a skeeter boat or a house on the water. He would go into not the jungles but the woods they called it the ( ). He made his own equipment to snake the logs where mules or animals could not move and he used steers who could get on their knees and pull things through to mud logs in order to get them up on the hill to move them because trucks or other animals could not move like a steer which is a male cow or bull. He lived on the water lots of his life.

My mother sharecropping with my older, I was the fifth one among the seven, she farmed, she sharecropped. So when he passed with pneumonia it was so close and everything she heard of this settlement in Halifax County and decided she would try to get on this housing and land ownership. Just a few miles called Pee Hill was where some of her father's parent had lived, Croors. Not too far, five miles from Tillery. So she felt she was back home even though she had brothers and sisters in Hertford County.

13. **Mawhood:** How did your mother hear about the land that being...?
14. **Johnson:** Down to the courthouse. There were no social services in that day, my day. They were telling various people that a housing project was being set up. That was over on the Tillerys land over there going to Halifax. At that time this one, it was five areas, Tillery, this is called Pierce, Blightgate is further over and Kitchen Farm is further around and something called the Horseshoe is further over, that this land would be housed by the government after the Hoover days, you know the president.

15. **Mawhood:** By President Roosevelt?

16. **Johnson:** Yeah, would start this. People came from various counties and began to work the land and pay on the houses and the land for a number of years even though different ownership, I mean the farm would pass, the project passed through different ownerships. Some was good and some weren't so good. But there we learned that record keeping was a must because a lot of people lost their farms on account of they were overcharged and what not. So it was serious during those thirties and early forties, 1936-1940. Then things went into other hands. It went from one group to another group.

17. **Mawhood:** So did your mother keep these records that you say were important?

18. **Johnson:** Well we kept them but even though my husband and I in twenty-three years farming we failed to keep all of ours. We had thirty-seven acres out here that we had to sell to pay off a heavy expense that actually we had paid on but we didn’t have a receipt to show. And we weren’t the only one but we were one. That did cause right many people to lose their land. It left me five acres to sit on and garden and hog and chicken and whatnot.

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Sometimes I think it was a good idea. I lost my husband in 1989 and we had began on social security because he had stopped and rented out and began to work out because we would have dropped dead I guess in the field. You see the mechanized farming came about, airplane dusting, tractors, two or three farms you know behind one tractor. We had mules and they turned to the machines so that ultimatum of farming came about and people dropped out like just so. They just couldn't keep up with the new day.

19. **Mawhood:** Who did you sell your land to when you sold that, you and your husband?

20. **Johnson:** To Edward Martin, the person that furnished the seeds and fertilizers.

21. **Mawhood:** This is a white man?

22. **Johnson:** Yes. He was getting it from Norfolk and we heard that he hadn't paid his bills so he was adding on a little extra to everybody else's. Because some people who didn't raise tobacco was known to have a tobacco fertilizer bill even though they had leased their tobacco out or allotment out. So it was sort of twisted. Everybody got a little sting.

23. **Mawhood:** And does Mr. Martin still own this land or did he sell it?

24. **Johnson:** No. What happened he got his money but a colored guy that has the second farm up the road needed extra land for his tractor. So he goes to the people, the federal land bank, and he buys it and attaches it on to his bills, his home place. Then when he gets to the place his children leave then he has to sell to somebody else to keep him from going under. So it's been turning over, turning over like that. So far it's another colored guy has it and I'm hoping

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that he can hold on because we hope that there won't be somebody come in and offer him a large sum of money and build a hog farm near us. Then we will be in trouble. That's what's happening now. We don't fault people for getting out of debt and selling their land. But it's hard when you've got to live under a large hog operation.

25. **Mawhood:** This is an issue which people are really concerned about these days.

26. **Johnson:** Yes, yes because it smells so long and so far and it's all through the county now.

27. **Mawhood:** Mrs. Johnson, you were saying that your mother was a sharecropper and the children helped her I'm sure. Then she worked to get land in Tillery. What were the differences between being a sharecropper and being a land owner in Tillery?

28. **Johnson:** Well, the sharecropper at the end of the year, you work the land, you do all the work, you got your half and the owner of the land their half. Here we had started the North Carolina Cooperation Farms from Washington started the people. You worked your lot and they ran from thirty-five to forty acres depending on where they were located. Ours was thirty-seven acres. The land you pay on yearly. Ours was a hundred and fifty dollars a year. So by the time, we only owed about seven hundred dollars because it was very cheap, only fifty-five dollars an acre. You know at that time in the forties, 1943 it was very cheap. Then you paid your taxes and you paid the insurance and you had something left. It went on like that maybe three or four years. Then we had the farm resettlement to come in. They bought the first group out. They had a change but it was similar. Then we had another group, Farmer's Home Administration. They came in. But every time a different group come in
somebody would be lost out. So it was an elimination process all the way through until very few could keep their land or is here today that started in the early days. But they did have a better because we had people to come here and teach us how to keep a record book, home agents to come in teach you methods of canning and freezing, some of all types of modern house work and different things that as the world was upgraded you was moving up with it.

29. **Mawhood:** These agents who came in to teach these things were they white or black?

30. **Johnson:** They was both. The first one was black. The first one we had was white. She did tomatoes, only tomatoes. Then the county agent he started with tomatoes first. Then we had white. Then we had black. We'd have white. Then we got black. Now we've got black and white, two years one, two years the other. We are in our extension homemaking. We move up higher and higher into more and more counties doing the same thing but different groups.

31. **Mawhood:** You say you were the fifth of seven children. Was it sixteen you were when you moved here with your mother?

32. **Johnson:** About seventeen probably. I had one year at Weldon and then you graduated at the eleventh grade. You know eight to eleven. It wasn't like nine to twelve like they're doing now.

33. **Mawhood:** What kind of work did you and your brothers and sisters do on the farm with your mother?
34. **Johnson:** When she came over here in 1936 we only tended peanuts, cotton, soybeans, corn. Well we tended the things Halifax County tended. When we were in Hertford County we were younger but we mostly had peanuts and tobacco and corn. Cotton was the specialty in Hertford County. But here very little tobacco on these farms.

35. **Mawhood:** When did you first go to school, Mrs. Johnson?

36. **Johnson:** My first schooling was in the rural part of Murfreesboro. That's Hertford County. I went at six years of age. I lived three miles from school, the old Gatling Schoolhouse. I guess it was a Rosenwald School because it was built and the first of school I heard my older sister went to was a church, old church. But this was the Rosenwald School. It had two large rooms, twice as large as this, two teachers and about three grades in one room. It was so far to walk I lived within a quarter of a mile with my grandmother during the school nights so I wouldn't have so far to walk because I was very tiny at that time. Then my brother three years younger, when he began we both stayed there and would come home on Friday evenings. Then I went to high school at C.S. Browns High School in Winton. That was the county seat of Hertford County located out there on the Chowan River. I went there three years. At that time when my mother moved I had just one year to complete high school in.

37. **Mawhood:** What do you remember about your teachers from school, Mrs. Johnson?

38. **Johnson:** Well when I first entered school this teacher looked like me. She was large as that. (Laughter) But she was kind and she had this long black gum whip. Looked like to me it ran up in the top of the building and this big potbellied stove and ( Interruption) one part
you know beginning from six up in the other. But all the teachers had them long whips. In the winter that potbellied stove sit up in a corner. Either you was too hot or you was too cool. And we carried lunch buckets. I had my little bucket and I carried my little bucket and talking about children eating, they ate because they carried food to school. I mean all kinds of food was in that bucket.

39. **Mawhood**: What kind of food?

40. **Johnson**: If they decided to have baked potatoes, collard greens, meat, or fish or whatever, bread, molasses pudding, whatever they had that was in that bucket. They had those ( ) lard buckets. I don't know if you've ever seen one. But anyway they had food and they ate it and they were strong. You know children were strong along then. I don't know why I was so small. I had a little brother he stammered so he was slow learning so I would have to hear his lesson every day and I thought I was doing something. He was three years younger. I felt like I was doing something. I was teaching my brother. We walked, as we grew older we walked and there were lots of children in that area. The road would be littered with children. Everybody went to school. Nobody hung in town. Everybody went to school. Those teachers were strict and children learned. They learned. I don't know what's happened today but they learned. That whip and that lunch bucket and that keg of cold water brought up from the well sitting in that room and you had your own drinking cup. Everything was in order. Children could walk miles and you wouldn't hear a fight between here and their home because if they did the parents would get them when they got home and the teacher would get them when they got back to school. So it was strict along then.

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41. Mawhood: And you lived with your grandmother at this time?

42. Johnson: Yes I stayed Monday night through Thursday night. My sister would take me home Friday evening. And we walked to church about three miles too. We didn't want to ride on a little buggy stuck all around it. We didn't want to ride on the rail cart so we just walked.

43. Mawhood: What do you remember about your grandmother, Mrs. Johnson?

44. Johnson: Oh she was very strict too. I thought she was the meanest woman I ever looked at. (Laughter) She was a good cook and she would set and teach me at night many, many things. And she was a good fairy tale storyteller. She really raised me a lot by me being with her. Then I stayed with her as I got older in the summer. She lost her husband. She married twice. When she was younger she used to be a cook for a white lady and she could really cook good. She took care of a lady that was ill baby. She would nurse that baby and she'd just care for it at all. I would wait on her and she would take care of the baby. But she was very strict.

45. Mawhood: What kinds of things would she punish you for, Mrs. Johnson?

46. Johnson: I wouldn't talk to her. (Laughter) I was like my father. He was a man of few words and along then I didn't talk. My other sisters talked too much but I wouldn't talk to her and she said I was like my daddy and it angered me. So then I wouldn't talk. (Laughter) I was nice to her otherwise but I just couldn't talk to her.
47. **Mawhood:** Why did it make you angry when she said you were like your daddy, Mrs. Johnson?

48. **Johnson:** I don't know why she wanted to pick on my daddy. (Laughter)

49. **Mawhood:** When she told you stories what kind of stories did she tell you, Mrs. Johnson?

50. **Johnson:** I don't know. They were old, old tales, folk tales that happened or didn't happen. She could have made them up or they could have happened. I remember some of them was old witches tales and things like that you know. She had to talk something to amuse me so she would tell me these old stories. Told me about an old witch that came in the stable and the horse's tail was tied up in knots and she got the horse and rode the horse and the horse was wet when the grandpa went out and looked at the horse. The witch was sitting up under the trough and this thing and the other and they would come to your house and you'd put a broom under the step and the witch couldn't leave out of the house. Whole lots of funny things and I was interested in listening to all of that but I just couldn't talk otherwise.

51. **Mawhood:** When you were a little girl you went to school every day it sounds like.

52. **Johnson:** Yes, everybody went to school and I went to school every day.

53. **Mawhood:** You continued going to school every day as you got older?
54. **Johnson:** Yes, yes. I was able to ride the bus when I went to high school. The year before I entered high school in the eighth grade, but the year before you had to pay five dollars to ride the bus. Then the county paid for the bus. The children's parents didn't have to pay for the bus. So I could ride the bus without paying. But the school down in Winton, this Waters Training School I went to, we had to attend football games because the coach was my biology teacher and he wanted us to understand. He'd draw that thing on the board and show us a touchdown and it was some large boys in school and they could play well from their surrounding area. And we had to carry dried beans, potatoes, molasses, everything you raise to the lunchroom because they boarded children from afar off and we'd sell it for a nickel and we'd pay that nickel for to go in and we'd carry the other nickel to the cafeteria and buy something we could eat or drink.

55. **Mawhood:** Did you ever learn any African American history or literature or anything like that in school?

56. **Johnson:** No it wasn't in school. My only literature was American. I had three years of it but it was all American.

57. **Mawhood:** So white American?

58. **Johnson:** Yeah.

59. **Mawhood:** You mentioned going to church, can you tell me about church, Mrs. Johnson?
60. **Johnson:** Oh yeah. Well I joined at an early age over in Hertford County and when I came over here I attended a Sunday School and would help teach in Sunday School in 1936. Then after I married in 1938 I joined the church and this is my fifty-three years that I have been in the Tillery church. I've beenushering twenty-three years but I have to give it up now due to my heart condition, my eye condition. But I'm still an usher and I've served seventeen years as the secretary but I've given that up due to my eyesight.

61. **Mawhood:** Which church is that you're a member of?

62. **Johnson:** The one on the corner, Tillery Chapel. The old church is up the road over the mill run. Just go through that little woods and you get to an old building. It's burned down now but it's right across.

63. **Mawhood:** Is that a Baptist church?

64. **Johnson:** Yes.

65. **Mawhood:** How did you get ready to go to church when you were growing up, Mrs. Johnson?

66. **Johnson:** What do you mean the transportation?

67. **Mawhood:** Transportation, getting dressed, how you got there. What did you do to prepare for church just before you went I guess?
68. **Johnson:** Well as I say, I was a great sewer and I made most of my clothing so I would make certain clothes for the church and certain clothing for casual wear. In attending the club and our agent, I was in a lot of fashion shows and dress reviews from Raleigh back in the county. It gave me an idea what to wear when. I could sew so it helped me a lot in preparing my clothing at that time and material was cheap. So I would dress for church in just the church clothing. My mother and I, we didn't have a car but someone would come by and pick us up and we would ride to church. At that time I was living on that side of the church and the church was over the mill run, over in that neck of the woods like, up the highway. When I moved over here my husband and I had an old car. So he'd drive and I'd drive and we'd take the children. I would take them to Sunday School all the time because he'd find an excuse not to go, not to drive. I guess he was tired when he plowed all the week or something, he was tired.

69. **Mawhood:** What was the difference between the clothes you wore the other days of the week and the clothes you saved for church, Mrs. Johnson?

70. **Johnson:** I sort of gussied them up a little bit. Most of the time I just had a straight, something that might look like a housecoat you know, my everyday wear. And I wore jeans for work because I'd be outdoors, indoors, all kinds of things around the house and about. I'd make an over blouse to use with that. By being small I loved my little gathers and flares so I sort of gussied up a little bit. I used to like my little round collars that sort of give my little

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shouders some boost. I used to wear little sashes and everybody said I looked like a child. So I stopped wearing my bows in the back. (Laughter) I stopped putting them in the back.

72. Mawhood: That sounds nice. You say that you wore jeans around the house and to work. Did other women on the farms around here wear jeans too?

73. Johnson: Yes lots of them did, lots of them.

74. Mawhood: I'd like to ask you about your husband, Mrs. Johnson.

75. Johnson: Well he was born here in the Tillery area. I forgot now what place. A long time ago he said houses was on this ridge from Tillery all the way back and all this was land in the front and then over there was land and people lived. Then you go down to the center, there was another ridge and people lived all the way down there. But the roads have changed now. He went to school down in an area about two miles called Judy Bank. He went to school down in there. He was two years older than me. I'm seventy-seven. He said they would walk from up in here somewhere back down in there to school. But school before nine so they had time to get there. Seems like he got as far as the sixth grade and his father on the farm he was working put he and his brother to work. His brother left and went to the city with an aunt. Seems like her husband was ill or something but anyway, it left...

76. End of Tape 1 - Side A

77. Tape 1 - Side B

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78. Johnson: ...to Baltimore, to New York, to where some of his older people was but not to stay or work. He didn't work.

79. Mawhood: Were his parents from this area also, Mrs. Johnson?

80. Johnson: Well his father was. His mother was from Northampton County right across the river, the Roanoke River in Northampton. She was born over there.

81. Mawhood: And where did you meet your husband, Mrs. Johnson?

82. Johnson: I met him here after I came here you know at church. But I met him here.

83. Mawhood: So you just met each other at church?

84. Johnson: Well I saw him at church first. Seemed like his cousin, a lady, I don't where she had a birthday party or something, anyway it was something to do and she introduced me to (Interruption). Yeah we had lived together fifty, let's see, we got married in 1938, well a little over fifty years I reckon. Time go away so fast! Anyhow, we got old together. (Laughter) We got old together. We farmed twenty-three years and then both of us went out and worked. He did go to Richmond and work with a group building the Philip Morris cigarette place before he retired.

85. Mawhood: And how many children did you have?

86. Johnson: Five, four boys and one girl. My daughter is dead. She had cancer of the breast first. She lived six years and then it went in her bones and other parts of the body.
87. **Mawhood:** And did your children work on the farm with you when you were farming, Mrs. Johnson?

88. **Johnson:** My daughter never did. She worked out summers mostly. She made in Baltimore with my mother. My mother went to Baltimore after she and my brother, they couldn't buy that's what happened in 1943. Only the husband and wife could purchase the farms. So they went to Baltimore because my older sister was there. And my brother went there and worked so my mother went. So then she took my daughter up there and my daughter worked during the summers and she went to Elizabeth City State Teacher's College. That's about a hundred miles away in Pasquotank County. From time to time she would work during the summer until her last year of school. She because a teacher. She taught seventeen years before she taken ill. She had two children.

89. **Mawhood:** You had mentioned that you taught also.

90. **Johnson:** Mine was substitute work. I did that before I had any children. It was quite a while before I had any children. I did that for a lady from Enfield and one from Roanoke Rapids at the old school. Then I did that again. Bakers is near Scotland Neck and Dawson is near Scotland Neck so I put in for sub work and I did that in between but I wasn't farming then. I had stopped farming. Three years doing aid work working under the teachers then I started substituting.

91. **Mawhood:** So you worked in many different schools.
92. **Johnson:** Yes.

93. **Mawhood:** What was that like, going to different schools to work?

94. **Johnson:** Well it was compelling. I would prepare this morning in case somebody called because you were supposed to be ready, your vehicle and everything ready and nobody called. Tomorrow morning you have somewhere you want to go and somebody would call you to come. So it was like that.

95. **Mawhood:** You mentioned when you went to school there were students who were small and there were students in their twenties. Did you teach in schools like that?

96. **Johnson:** Well no. Children began to - I'll tell you, dropouts. I've never seen so many dropouts. They began to drop out in the second and third last year of school as the years past. So it wasn't these older children in school like it was when I went to school. They were in their teens but they weren't old like some of them was. They looked like grown men but some of them stayed in school to play ball. They played football and they were large as any man. But the teachers kept them in there. They weren't passing. Just kept them in school and school was very short.

97. **Mawhood:** I'd like to ask you a question about segregation itself. How were the lines of segregation drawn in the places where you lived?

98. **Johnson:** I didn't understand too much about it over in Hertford County because where I grew up we had, just like we have Sunday School, we had Sunday School at our church was

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in the heart of the small town and we had a white lady for the piano director and player. And when revival time come, you know the week of preaching and whatnot, we sit in the back of the church to the revival nights to listen to the revival, preaching and they would come in our church and listen. We had separate buildings but we interact just the same. If we went fishing my mother would be down you know popping peanuts for to plant because then you shelled your peanuts that was planted and the neighbor would be down there. They would be shelling their peanuts and everybody would be fishing and talking and working. So I didn't understand it then but when I came over here and grew up a little more I could see the work places and see the school more and I could see a line drawn much more than I was raised with because my mother was a good cook and my grandmother was a good cook and white neighbors, if one got sick she would take and go over and cook and carry and if she got down or something with a child, my mother I mean, they would come over and wash and do so I didn't know nothing about this tightrope until I grew up over here. I was getting older and I could see more and understand more. Until we got ready to vote and we couldn't vote. We were denied to vote. We were denied a lot of things, work and we were denied. Or we had to be overqualified to get a job if a vacancy was there and all. There were a lot of things that came to light even though in my work I could work with all ethnic groups. Now my father his grandfather was Indian and we had one territory where they didn't do anything but just visit each other. (Interruption - That's my son that lives with me two or three days a week.)

99. **Mawhood:** You were talking about the things that African-American people were denied when you moved here and grew up and saw, Mrs. Johnson.
Johnson: Yeah. We have fought in groups for many movements. We have kind of fought our way you might say into society. We had good people. We had educated people. We had people with good skills and all but most of the time the vacancies they said weren't there. So what can you say, if there's no vacancy you move on.

Mawhood: Was this round about the 1960's?

Johnson: Oh yes, yes. Leading all the way up to it.

Mawhood: So in the 1960's you were working for people's right to work?

Johnson: Yes. That was the highlight of the movement to get in people to help us in opening avenues that led to the struggle of the civil rights. There were one man, Dr. Durn that came from Raleigh and one of our men that was in the movement, myself, a doctor's wife and another person's wife, we challenged the ASC office. We challenged the courthouse and the health center and there were only one black person holding a job which was a nurse. So we asked for applications but they said they didn't have vacancies at that time and they could hold as long as they were able to work. Then we had other people to come in and we continued to struggle to see. But the worst was our voting, trying to get to vote. So many people couldn't read the constitution so we had somebody from Franklinton Center to come down. At that time our building was the Franklinton Center building and we bought it from them. So to come down and teach the constitution because we had a lot of elderly people and after that they were able to read so that wouldn't stop them from being
able to vote. That was one of the greatest issues I think we conquered during that waiting period. There were others but I just can't get them together.

105. Mawhood: When you moved here to Tillery, Mrs. Johnson, when you were a young adult, did anyone talk about voting ever? Do you remember that when you were growing up?

106. Johnson: Oh no, no. I never heard or there were no speaking of voting until - let's see I worked at the poll twelve years but I was voting so many years before that - I'm trying to think when did some of the elderly people go to Halifax and vote. They were voting at Halifax, Scotland Neck, Enfield but not in Tillery and it was a very few. It was a man that lived across there, elderly man, one over at the Tillery farm and two more. They would go to Halifax so what we wanted was to open a poll in Tillery. At that time it was over four hundred people eligible of age in Tillery, ( ) precinct that could vote including the young ones, the old ones and all. Because on the book we had over five hundred people one time and some died and some young ones going away. It's down now to around three hundred and some. The next thing after we got it so they could vote, got it opened up, haul them to the poll, it's hard now to get them to come in and vote. We can get three hundred. That's a round figure we can get.

107. Mawhood: So now it's hard to get people to vote?

108. Johnson: Yes, some. We get the majority but we don't get them all. I understand every precinct does have that problem. And they're not only black. The white doesn't come in. Seems like they lost interest.
109. **Mawhood:** Do you remember who first mentioned voting to you, Mrs. Johnson?

110. **Johnson:** I'm trying to think. I had heard rather these four older men were going to Halifax and I was saying to a young male teacher that lived across the farm why do we have to go to Halifax when we have four or five hundred people around here? See our line runs from Springhill back to 561 and ( ). Why do we have to go to Halifax when we got enough people for a precinct? First we had to get the board knowledge of the people here, get the precinct board, because they didn't know. So after getting them to understand that we had enough people that we could open a voting place and we had one man, Mr. Alfred Cook, who's one of the stores, his father's old store, he was very instrumental. And Mr. Jack Jones, he's dead and gone but very instrumental in getting the people to open up in Tillery. So we had help. It was much better than having to go to Halifax or Scotland Neck.

111. **Mawhood:** I'd like to ask you about something which is not very nice at all but which we'd like to know more about if we can which is before the civil rights movement, during the period when segregation was still very strong, do you remember hearing of violence between whites and blacks around here?

112. **Johnson:** I may have but I can't address it to my knowledge too well. I know we always had some people did more talking actually than they did work. But I always followed the working people so when it was a lot of unrest I never was in the unrest. I only followed the people who, and they were doctors, they were lawyers, they were teachers, they were preachers and all that I was following during my time.
113. **Mawhood:** When you say did more talking than working, can you tell me a little more about that?

114. **Johnson:** Well, that's what I want to kind of strain my memory to understand when it occurred and what happened because I'm not too much aware of it. It didn't occur with the group that I followed. That's all I can remember.

115. **Mawhood:** There is one more question which isn't very nice but I'll ask you anyway. Did you know anyone or hear of anyone, black people men or women, going to jail in this area ever?

116. **Johnson:** Oh yeah for other reasons. Now during the, now that is something else, let me see if I can voice it enough. First I've got to find out a group that, if I can get this tied in together, there is an old school building that was recently children moved from it because they said it wasn't sufficient children to spend money on, spend large sums of money on. Our population went down a few years ago. I mean children went down and they were bussed and moved to other schools. And we had to issue if we as concerned citizens could get that building and use it for a home for sick people who may need some assistance or help, people who live alone. And we do have lots of people living one person in a home around here, men and women, disabled and whatnot. But there was a sewing plant that came in and purchased the building from the commissioners. I know there was a struggle on that and they didn't use it long. They ripped it up and fixed it and went there awhile and found out they didn't stay and they moved away and left the building. The people who own it now, they
don't use it, the sewing people. And it just bothered what we had in mind could be used to
give more people jobs and I think jobs was the answer to what we were planning. When we
met the commissioners and I was given two or three pages to read what we had planned to do
with the building if we could purchase the building, we the concerned citizens, but it had
already been decided and we had people that lived around here was with the sewing group
and it kind of hurt for some of our own people to go against it and somebody else get it. So it
got pretty rough and one lady did destroy the sound system, the work and went to jail. Some
more talked and they took them to jail but that was another issue. It wasn't the voting issue.

117. Mawhood: That was recently that happened too?

118. Johnson: No. That was, well it was past a year ago. Don't trust my memory. It was past a
year ago. Yes. So we lost that building for a community use which it would have been good
to have had it.

119. Mawhood: You mentioned to me that you have been involved in a lot of different groups.
You've been involved in the Homemaker's Club. You were PTA president. You were
secretary of NAACP. I'll start asking you about the Homemaker's Club. What kinds of
things did the Homemaker's Club do when they got together?

120. Johnson: We just have the local club in various communities. We have an agent to come
out twice but we have leader lessons that we go to the office in Halifax and listen to. Then
we have what you call a group area meeting that some things is taught in the area meeting.
These is food for health, care of clothing, just the daily things of life. Everything that you
meet up with. We do have a district meeting and we pay dues which goes to, some goes to
the state, some of the money. Some goes to girls haven. We call it the bad girls. And some
goes to charitable such as the Rescue Squad. We give here the recreation for children, Red
Cross and the Ronald McDonald House. But mostly it's an enlightenment for rural women.

121. Mawhood: And are those the kinds of activities that the Homemaker's Club was involved
in several decades ago also when your mother was president?

122. Johnson: Well we didn't have as wide a range as we have today because now we have
district, we have state and we have all of the levels that we can help. For example, every
club member gave a dollar to finance a thousand dollar well for Guatemala, piping water
down on those people who couldn't get the water. Then there were other projects that was
done together. And there's a lot of women that travel not around the, yeah actually around
the world and work with various projects. So it's much broader today where they were
mostly trying to update homes and health. Today we reach out in the foreign world and help.

123. Mawhood: When was it that you were the president of the PTA, Mrs. Johnson?

124. Johnson: It must have been in the fifties. I know we were in the old school before we went
up to Tillery to the second school.

125. Mawhood: How was it that you got to be president of the PTA?

126. Johnson: An elderly man, very old, was president and we had these new people come in
from various counties homesteading and they had new ideas and we were beginning then to
look into the school and it was the old, old school, look into a new school. They just voted me as president because they felt, I guess they felt that I would go along with them much better than this older person. I had children and I saw the needs of better conditions, more space and better books as we complained to the central office what we needed and to the school. Yeah, we were busy traveling so they decided they would vote on me as a president.

127. **Mawhood:** What kinds of ways did you use to get the new school, to make them listen to you?

128. **Johnson:** We had a group to speak for us at the Board of Education on the Monday night they met and ask for a new school. In some other area they had built a new school from the ground up. It so happened during that time this old stove that sat in there had set the ceiling afire and burned it down so they placed us in this previously white school up on the other end of Tillery but it still wasn't enough rooms. Then we continued to ask for additional rooms. So we got seven classrooms then, modern classrooms, bathroom and whatnot. Later instead of hauling the lunch from another school we asked for a lunchroom. So we got the lunchroom in the next couple of years. Then the children got fewer and fewer. People went out to worked and declared they wouldn't have children so children become scarce so we lost the school.

129. **Mawhood:** When was it that the NAACP was formed around here? Was that in the fifties or sixties?
130. **Johnson:** We went to New Jersey to the forty-seventh annual convention. It was when Nixon was vice-president, 1947, so we had been operating then maybe two or three years. Okay, I moved here in 1943 and I'd say two years, it's 1947 so maybe began in 1945 with the NAACP, organizing the NAACP, the lower Halifax County branch. And we got lots of information through that on several issues.

131. **Mawhood:** What issues were those, Mrs. Johnson?

132. **Johnson:** There were speakers that would come each year to something we had formed as a banquet. Each speaker would shed a little light on our rights to various things. I guess that's what you'd call it.

133. **Mawhood:** Civil rights?

134. **Johnson:** Well, I guess so.

135. **Mawhood:** What kind of rights?

136. **Johnson:** Like trying to move our citizenship from second class. You know your right for this, your right for that because years before like our train station, you know we had two parts, colored and white. We had restrooms likewise. The buses was likewise, front and back. You'd go to buy hot dogs or something the little window, you'd go to the window to buy. You didn't go in and take a seat. It was lots of things that you were excluded from. Lots of these people came from the north and they begin to sort of push us into our rights to

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speak, the right to do. From that led these marches and various things. Sit-ins and speak-ins and all.

137. **Mawhood:** You mentioned the words second class citizen, Mrs. Johnson. Did you ever feel that someone was trying to make you feel that way, someone wasn't treating you right?

138. **Johnson:** Individually, me, I could move on. Somehow I had a knack to move on. I can't explain it and I'm not bragging. But I've been accepted in a lot of things that I've seen other people denied. That's about all I can say. I don't know why. I guess attitude or perseverance, personality, anything you might call it, I can move on when I've seen others denied. So I don't know why.

139. **Mawhood:** What kinds of things would you be able to achieve that other people might be denied, Mrs. Johnson?

140. **Johnson:** If I try to explain it it would like I was bragging or something and I don't want to show that I would be bragging or nothing like that. With God as my helper it might have been just something that helped me to move because a lot of things as I say I was accepted in and I can't explain it. I appreciate it but I can't explain it.

141. **Mawhood:** I'm sure you're not bragging at all. You've managed to accomplish a lot of things.

142. **Johnson:** I'd rather do the work and let somebody else praise it or see it than to try to give myself the pats. They might call me a witch. You know it's a lot of ups and downs now and

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I might have had more downs than I have ups but I always managed to get up. If it wasn't for them downs I wouldn't have no call to want to get up.

143. **Mawhood:** If you don't want to praise yourself maybe I can ask you about other people. Where did you get the strength to do all the work that you did?

144. **Johnson:** I don't know. My mother always told me to stand up and look up if I didn't feel like getting up. But I don't know. She always was like Confucius. She always had something to say. And don't mention, as I told you my grandmother I guess. But I enjoyed it. I just enjoyed it. Some people do because they are told to do. I do because I love to do.

145. **Mawhood:** Was your husband involved in these kinds of works too, Mrs. Johnson?

146. **Johnson:** He wouldn't be involved in anything if you would push him with a ten foot pole. He said you go too much, you do too much. You're a people puppet. If somebody calls, you answer it. I won't only just doing, there would be a neighbor in trouble or a neighbor needed some help, I was right there. All around me lots of them gone on and I'm here struggling. But I have been a help in words and comfort and whatnot too. And he would fuss with me about that. And I guess by me being that way it caused him to draw back further than he would.

147. **Mawhood:** But you kept on with the work?

148. **Johnson:** Yes. And enjoyed every minute of it.
149. **Mawhood:** Once you had registered to vote, Mrs. Johnson, did your husband also register?

150. **Johnson:** Yes, yes. Then I got him studying and he was able to read the constitution and all that then he came on and voted. Then we had something called the challenge day on the last Saturday in that month. Everybody would go to see if their name was on the book because it was just a piece of paper they were taking the names on. So we'd go back to challenge to see if our names was there.

151. **Mawhood:** Were they there?

152. **Johnson:** Yes they were there.

153. **Mawhood:** But you wanted to check?

154. **Johnson:** Yeah. And now it's so easy. They'll beg them even when they get their driver's license, they register them right then, those young guys.

155. **Mawhood:** Did you talk to your own children?

156. **Johnson:** Oh yes. My daughter was in Greensboro during a sit-in at a lunch counter. I was so afraid she would be hurt. She left Elizabeth City and they did it there and they did it up there. It took all of that just to show we meant what we was asking for. Just give us a break.

157. **Mawhood:** How did your husband feel about your daughter's political activity?

158. **Johnson:** Well he was very frightened.
159. **Mawhood**: I don't want to tire you out.

160. **Johnson**: No it's not bothering me.

161. **Mawhood**: I'd like to switch maybe to another area and ask you some things about health care. I know there's a wonderful community curing house now but I'd like to ask about the earlier times. When you were growing up, Mrs. Johnson, when someone in your family got sick what would you do?

162. **Johnson**: Living over here in my family, my own children's family, we didn't have but one doctor almost in each town and we didn't go to the doctor as often as we go now, as people go now. There were older people in the community and I thought they knew everything. If a child had a temperature, they knew something for that. They grew all kinds of herbs from garlic, sage and ( ) and catnip and

163.(End of Tape 1 - Side B)

164.Tape 2 - Side A

165. **Johnson**: ...and Scotland Neck.

166. **Mawhood**: So you're say the old people's cures in the old days seemed to work but they don't work now?

167. **Johnson**: No I don't think they work now because I've heard people say you know so-and-so it don't work.
168. **Mawhood:** Do you think it worked then, Mrs. Johnson?

169. **Johnson:** It must have. I still think it must have. We had a young guy from Duke, he was Chinese. He stayed here with some of the group at the center in our homes and he wanted some of the old herbs and what they were used for. So around here I collected right many various things and told him what people used such as the red oak bark, not the red oak but the wild cherry bark they said was good for low blood. Something that grew in the Spring, they used that as a purgative to clear you up in the Spring to work a person. They had catnip for babies teething and fevers and things. But anyway when we got through getting odds and ends using old poke root for swelling, I guess it was rheumatism they called it at that time, swellings and some type of leaf, plant the leaf, withdraw the fever from the person's head. When they got through with it he was amazed at the many things people had used. That was just a part of them. I guess they might go back and see if they can work some of that stuff into real medication.

170. **Mawhood:** And when your children were born Mrs. Johnson, were they born in a hospital or at home?

171. **Johnson:** All of them were born at home. I had the doctor with the first and the last. A mid-wife lady with the three in the middle.

172. **Mawhood:** Was the mid-wife a black lady?

173. **Johnson:** Yes.
174. **Mawhood:** Was she from around here?

175. **Johnson:** Yes.

176. **Mawhood:** Did she deliver a lot of babies?

177. **Johnson:** Yes, yes, yes. She was really busy.

178. **Mawhood:** Was it different being delivered by a doctor and by a mid-wife?

179. **Johnson:** Yes because the doctor he waits so long and the mid-wife she seemed to be watching every movement and sort of talking and giving you a little pep you know to steer you on. Felt like you feel closer to them. It's a job either way. (Laughter) You got to do the job.

180. **Mawhood:** Did people usually pay the mid-wife in money or would they give her other things?

181. **Johnson:** Mostly she'd charge a small fee. From year to year it would go up, up, up. I remember when it was eight dollars. I remember on the last it was fifteen. I don't know she might have gone up higher now with everything else moving.

182. **Mawhood:** Is she still working around here?

183. **Johnson:** No. Those ones are dead that I knew. But there are some in Scotland Neck. I heard a white lady had used one. Said she'd prefer her than going to the hospital. Because
they tend to know -I heard one lady say she came to a girl up the road and I was there, they'd look in your eyes and tell where you are really suffering or is it too serious for her to keep you there. They have to go to school too.

184. Mawhood: Do you remember the name of the mid-wife that delivered your children?

185. Johnson: Yes. Lizzie Tillery. She used to live down to Tillery. Lizzie Tillery.

186. Mawhood: Do you know if she went to school?

187. Johnson: At that time I doubt it. I knew a young lady she wasn't no older than I was and she started. They go to a clinic seems like and they're taught at the clinic certain rules and whatnot. It's a job I don't think I'd, I wouldn't tackle that one. I don't think I would have the nerve to tackle it. I was there when a lady had her baby and I attempted to comfort her and talk and she grabbed me right by the arm and she liked to have pulled my arm off. I'm telling you I just couldn't stand it. I don't know where I had the baby or she had it but I'm telling you it was serious. That is one thing, why do it have to be so hard?

188. Mawhood: A lot of people would like to know that.

189. Johnson: I think it's the curse God put on the woman bringing forth the children and the man to till the soil. And we said we took the man's job. The man ought to take our job sometime. Just too much. An older lady, she's still living, she had eighteen. The doctor wanted her to stop and she wouldn't even let him stop her to rest up.
Mawhood: How did women who didn't want to have so many children work that out, Mrs. Johnson? I don't mean now. I mean years ago.

Johnson: This woman said the doctor told her to come to him and he would give her something. Maybe at that time he might have had some birth control pills or something he could have given her. But she wouldn't go. Maybe he did have something and that was years and years ago.

Mawhood: Do you remember women talking about childbirth and how to avoid getting pregnant if they didn't want to?

Johnson: Oh yeah, oh yeah now.

Mawhood: But not when you were growing up or when you were first married?

Johnson: No. I hardly knew what it was all about. You know you didn't even worry about things like that. You didn't even know about a lot of things. I'd never seen a child born. I mean been around a little baby you know. Now the world is open so wide and TV and they're born every day on TV until I got a little grandchild nearly four and time she hear somebody talking about a baby she's looking - is it going to be born. Looking to see is one going to be born so she can look. I cut it off to keep her from looking so and she could tell me more than I could tell her about it. But then you know we didn't have television. We didn't have this talk. If a person had a child, even if they were single, they stayed home. You didn't know nothing and when you saw them that child was big enough to eat cornbread.
or something. Now they're out walking around. They come from the hospital about a day or two and they're out in the street.

196. **Mawhood:** Do you remember hearing about women who got pregnant who weren't married?

197. **Johnson:** Oh yes, yes. Not then. I mean after they had a child you would hear about it but not as often. Not as third as often as you do now. Mighty seldom when I was growing up would you hear about a single girl having a child. Now that's all that's having them is the ones that's unmarried.

198. **Mawhood:** When you were growing up and a single girl did have a child how did the people in the community react?

199. **Johnson:** You didn't hardly know until you saw that girl after a long time and then it was whispered then. They had to go to the church. They had to ask for forgiveness and then you learned.

200. **Mawhood:** Did you ever hear rumors of young men who fathered children without being married?

201. **Johnson:** Yes but they didn't talk about the men and the men didn't have to go to church and say a word and I always thought that was wrong. It seemed wrong that they didn't have to say anything because they were a part of it. Now single women make having children just to get a check an everyday thing. The majority of them do not work. They don't know how

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to work and they don't care if they don't. That's the only thing that I hate about my race. And they don't treat the child well such as prepare them a good breakfast or doing for them or something. Most of them their child is not treated half as good as somebody out there working and scrambling trying to make a decent home for them and married.

202. **Mawhood:** You mentioned work Mrs. Johnson. Of all the different kinds of work that you did, I'm wondering which one you liked the best and which one you liked the least.

203. **Johnson:** My least was working in the field. I could work, chop, pick cotton, shake peanuts or something but I had to do it very slow. That was one thing my husband and I certainly didn't agree on, the way I worked. But we had to hire somebody to help us. I never weighed much, most of the time about ninety, and I didn't have that vigorous touch to go out there and work hard. But you give me a pencil and paper, I reckon that's why I don't have any eyes today, no it's not, glaucoma runs in my family, an eye disease, or something like that or a sewing machine or something I can do otherwise, I love it.

204. **Mawhood:** I'm going to switch topics again a little bit and ask you if you remember how your family celebrated holidays when you were growing up.

205. **Johnson:** Well they always took time off for Thanksgiving and of course Christmas and Fourth of July. They were the three main ones being that they worked like they did. My father was an accordion player and he blew a harp so he would love to have people to come around and he would have these feasts. He believed in this feast. I don't know why we didn't gain weight. Everybody else where we lived was large people. He would make the music.
and some of his old buddies picked guitars and banjos and whatnot and we danced as children. You've heard of Charleston? And other things. Shag, tickle-toe and black bottom and all them old steps we did it. They would give us something for the ones who could do it the best. I guess my legs was longer than most of them and smaller so they showed up doing it better. I didn't have no better sense to work it out. But my mother enjoyed the people coming in feasting.

206. **Mawhood:** Did you continue to do that after your father had died, Mrs. Johnson?

207. **Johnson:** Well not as much, not as much, she didn't. We would have our little family but not like he did. He believed in worked, eating and gathering because he was I guess born that way.

208. **Mawhood:** You mentioned to me that one of your father's grandparents was Indian?

209. **Johnson:** Yes he said he was. He said his grandmother raised him because his parents separated. His father went back to Florida and his mother went back over in Virginia so he didn't live with his parents. His grandmother took him and raised him on his mother's side.

210. **Mawhood:** Was that his Indian grandmother?

211. **Johnson:** No that was his grandmother on the mother's side. And logging, fishing and hunting was his life.

212. **Mawhood:** What was it like for your mother after her husband died?
213. **Johnson:** Well it was, well first thing, the income was certainly missed. She stopped sharecropping because my older brother had passed then and my older sister worked in Suffolk with some of the relatives, with my father's relatives. So it was four of us home. She and I would grade tobacco and my other sister. We would grade tobacco because tobacco and peanuts were the most crops in the county. So we would work but the price was small because at that time everything was mighty low. Things was cheaper but everything you'd buy was cheaper. It was cheap all the way around. Therefore when she heard about this home ownership she was anxious to try it out. So after she and my brother, younger brother, couldn't buy a place they went to Baltimore. He got a job and she lived to be eighty-two. She still bought her a home. One of my brothers was in the service, had died in the service and the other one just passed two years ago. So she had some good years.

MR: Your brother who lived in Baltimore, what kind of work did he do there?

214. **Johnson:** First he went to the ( ) Rubber Company working on a machine. That was during the war, about 1945. Well I know it was the year 1945 when the war closed and he was working then. A lot of men had gone to service but somehow they didn't take him and he was showing women how to work on the machines. Along then a lot of women went to work. So he worked on this making shoe heels, ( ) Rubber Company making shoe hills. He worked there and worked there until he got injured in his back and then he had to go on disability and from that to social security. We just sold his house in Baltimore last year. My sister, I only have one living sister, older one so we sold this house in Baltimore last year.
215. **Mawhood**: Did your brother have children Mrs. Johnson?

216. **Johnson**: No. He didn't have any children.

217. **Mawhood**: You talked about working hard and about how your mother taught you to keep your head up and to stand up if you could. I wanted to ask you about the kinds of values that your mother and your father before he died taught you.

218. **Johnson**: Well he always would tell us, he'd get us all together, the children and tell us to stay out of trouble. Of course trouble along then didn't read like it do now because we didn't hear tell of children with guns and other knives and other equipment like they do now. So we didn't have too much to worry about. There were no drugs on the street. We didn't know about alcohol. I mean we didn't use it. So we didn't have too much to fear. We listened but we didn't have too much to fear. He would often chastise us in how we should live. I guess that he must have realized somewhere that his life would be shorter than we knew it to be. My mother she was very strict.

219. **Mawhood**: Who were your heros Mrs. Johnson? Who did you look up to?

220. **Johnson**: Well, I hardly know. I guess I just, maybe I was looking so straight down the road that I didn't worry about looking at nothing, up to nobody. I just felt like I could carry myself. I don't know.

221. **Mawhood**: Thank you. I like that idea.
222. **Johnson**: That is odd.

223. **Mawhood**: My question is odd you think?

224. **Johnson**: No not the question. It's me. Sometimes a person and maybe that's the way I grew up or felt that I had to build my own strength and go on that until I was so dizzy trying to build mine until I didn't pay others any mind. I didn't ignore it but I just didn't look up to it. I knew right. I knew wrong. It's just odd to look back over your life, very odd.

225. **Mawhood**: You've told me a lot about your life Mrs. Johnson. I appreciate it very much.

226. **Johnson**: I have a little sketch that a guy who wrote articles on a paper did some years back. I said I didn't know that. (Laughter) You know you get to telling something and these things come back and you can hardly recognize it.

227. **Mawhood**: Is that because you've changed or because times have changed?

228. **Johnson**: I think it's the time. You live in a different time frame.

229. **Mawhood**: Do you look back over your life very much these days Mrs. Johnson?

230. **Johnson**: Yeah, yeah. I take time and look back. I reckon that's what you do when you get older. You have time to sort of go back, to go back. Somebody said do you talk to yourself? I say yes I talk to myself. Do you answer yourself? I said no. Said well don't get to that part because you'll be gone. Your mind could go, you know, if you start answering. Talking is okay but don't answer. Ask yourself something but don't answer it. (Laughter) I said wait...
a minute, I don't know whether I'm doing that or not. Living by yourself a lot you are subject to.

231. **Mawhood:** If you were going to give advice to young people today, like maybe people my age, maybe a bit younger, I'm twenty-six, white and black or black, which ever you'd like, what would you tell us?

232. **Johnson:** Good question, good question.

233. **Mawhood:** Because you have so many years and so much experience.

234. **Johnson:** Well the first thing I'd say to anybody, try to be prepared. The door is open but the path that you tread or walk is narrow that leads in. And don't look back. Opportunity is amazing. I have a grandson, my daughter's son, he finished at UNC his four years in college and he went to work four years. His daddy wanted him to keep on because he wanted to be a doctor. He's twenty-nine as of last January. So he worked four years, two in Raleigh and two in Atlanta, Georgia as health and safety inspector. Then he decided he'd go to school so he's gone back to UNC on a nine week program. After that he will go back regular for whatever needs. So he called me the other day and said Grandma, since his mother has passed, he said I've got to tell you because I haven't talked to you in a good while. Said sometime I'll call you and I won't say nothing, I'll just call you. I said don't do that. He said I had the privilege in this class to bisect a forty-eight year old heart victim yesterday. Said it's amazing, he's going to go in heart study, it's amazing what's inside of a person. He knew I have this flat heart valve and I go to a heart doctor. He said it's amazing what's inside of a
person, amazing. He kept saying amazing. I said hold it because I don't want you to fall out. (Laughter) It's amazing. So it's amazing what you can do at your age and live ain't through with you yet, to anybody. My best work and years were between thirty and seventy when I could see and move around and was able to drive. So it's amazing to see what's inside of a person. I don't say cut them open to see.

235. Mawhood: Thank you Mrs. Johnson. I have some forms maybe you could help me fill out if that's okay. It's biographical information and some family history. Would that be already ma'am? It shouldn't take too long. Just so we can get on the record who your family is and where you live. Your last name is Johnson. I think you had two.

236. Johnson: Well I had two but I use my maiden name, Stewart, on every document.

237. Mawhood: And your first name is Ruth?

238. Johnson: Yes.

239. Mawhood: And your address is Route 1, Box 87?


241. Mawhood: What's your zip Mrs. Johnson?


243. Mawhood: And how do you want your name to appear on this interview Mrs. Johnson?
244. **Johnson**: Just like that since I carry it on all my medical history and all my papers and social security number and whatnot.

245. **Mawhood**: Can you tell me your date of birth Mrs. Johnson?


247. **Mawhood**: Were you born in Hertford County?

248. **Johnson**: Yes I was. Murfreesboro Township.

249. **Mawhood**: What was your husband's name?

250. **Johnson**: Louis J. Johnson.

251. **Mawhood**: Do you know your husband's date of birth?

252. **Johnson**: Yes. February 14, 1914.

253. **Mawhood**: And you told me he died in 1989?

254. **Johnson**: Yes. April 3.

255. **Mawhood**: He was born in Halifax County?

256. **Johnson**: Yes.

257. **Mawhood**: And he was a farmer?
258. **Johnson:** Yes.

259. **Mawhood:** Your mother's name?

260. **Johnson:** Rosa B. Stewart.

261. **Mawhood:** Her maiden name?

262. **Johnson:** Hawkins, Rosa Bell Hawkins.

263. **Mawhood:** Do you know when your mother was born Mrs. Johnson?

264. **Johnson:** Yes. She was born May 11, 1885.

265. **Mawhood:** She died when she was eighty-two I think you said. So she died in the fifties.

266. **Johnson:** Let me get that right. She was eighty-two when she passed that May. Mama passed in 1967. She passed in 1967 at eighty-two. I just haven't thought about it in a long time but it's in my Bible. I should have got that.

267. **Mawhood:** And your mother was born in Hertford County?

268. **Johnson:** Yes.

269. **Mawhood:** And for your mother's occupation should I put farmer and seamstress?

270. **Johnson:** Yes.
271. **Mawhood:** And your father's name?

272. **Johnson:** Richard D. Stewart.

273. **Mawhood:** Do you know his birthdate?

274. **Johnson:** I never recorded his in the Bible. My sister told me. She had the big Bible and I had the little one.

275. **Mawhood:** You said you moved to Tillery in 1936 and your father had died.

276. **Johnson:** Yes he died in 1934 at fifty-five years old. He was fifty-five in 1934.

277. **Mawhood:** He was born in 1879.

278. **Johnson:** He was much older than my mother.

279. **Mawhood:** I think you told me where your father was born in Florida. Was he born in Florida Mrs. Johnson?

280. **Johnson:** I'm trying to think. Did they bring him here from Florida or was he born? His mother was a Virginia lady and was he born over in Virginia.

281. **Mawhood:** You were telling me your father was a logger?

282. **Johnson:** Yes.

283. **Mawhood:** And also a farmer?
284. **Johnson:** No he didn't farm. He on the skeeters on the water. (Difficult to hear with fan going.) ...all up and down the Chowan River. fisher and a hunter. He was really a hunter and fisherman.

285. **Mawhood:** Can you tell me the names of your sisters and brothers please?


287. **Mawhood:** And you were the fifth child?

288. **Johnson:** Yes.

289. **Mawhood:** Could you give me the names and dates of birth of your own children?


291. **Mawhood:** How many grandchildren do you have Mrs. Johnson?

292. **Johnson:** Four. children. Skinny boys. One back there and one across there and two in Raleigh.
293. **Mawhood**: You had given me the name of the schools. Was the first school you went to the Waters Training School?

294. **Johnson**: No. Gatling Schoolhouse. It was around an area called Gatling. Gatling School.

295. **Mawhood**: That was in Hertford County?

296. **Johnson**: Yes. At the school we had the church adjoined called Harper's Grove because everybody around that area was Harpers.

297. **Mawhood**: And after the Gatling Schoolhouse where did you go then Mrs. Johnson?

298. **Johnson**: I attended a school in Murfreesboro one year. That's when I was staying with my grandmother when I was much older because my parents had moved to another area so I lived with her. Then back to Waters Training School.

299. End of Tape 2 - Side A

300. **Johnson**: ( ) Must have been entering my thirteenth year I guess.

301. **Mawhood**: And you stayed there until 1936 I guess when you moved here.

302. **Johnson**: Well I came here in 1935 and went to school and finished in 1936.

303. **Mawhood**: And that was Weldon High School?

304. **Johnson**: Yes. That's what it was called at that time. ( )
305. **Mawhood:**  That was in Halifax?

306. **Johnson:**  It was in Weldon ( ).

307. **Mawhood:**  And for your work history, you were a substitute teacher for a little while.  In Halifax County?

308. **Johnson:**  Yes.  For three years under ESEA. That was elementary education act as a teacher's aid. That's was just ( ). I was working with slow learners ( ) aiding the teachers.

309. **Mawhood:**  That's also in Halifax?

310. **Johnson:**  Yes.  Right here in Tillery.

311. **Mawhood:**  You were working as a substitute teacher from the time you graduated in 1936?

312. **Johnson:**  Off and on.  And then 1967 to 1970 I did ESEA work. Then I went back subbing again to many more schools in between ( ), a sewing plant.

313. **Mawhood:**  Do you remember the name of that plant?

314. **Johnson:**  Enfield Apparel.  I think about two years I was there.

315. **Mawhood:**  Around when was that?
Johnson: I went there after the teacher's aid work. I came out of the school in 1970 in ESEA work. Must have been 1971, 1972 or 1973. It was somewhere in the early seventies. It was between 1967 and 1970 or something like that.

Mawhood: Then you farmed your own farm with your husband from 1943 did you tell me?

Johnson: Yes. Twenty years. We stopped in the sixties with that.

Mawhood: Any other jobs that you want me to list here Mrs. Johnson? I have substitute teacher, teacher's aid, seamstress and farmer.

Johnson: Well I did work working for the blind. I worked for the blind two years, a blind lady, under the blind program.

Mawhood: So you were a helper to her?

Johnson: Yes. I did everything. Take them to the doctor, shop for groceries, cleaned the house, wait on them, anything that needed to be done daily. Division of the Blind in Raleigh paid me. I need to sit down and rest.

Mawhood: Oh yes. I'll be out of here in a minute.

Johnson: No I meant from...

Mawhood: Oh from all that? I'm sorry. From all this work. (Laughter)
326. **Johnson:** That's all I've been doing. I've been going to the doctor and eye doctor and resting.

327. **Mawhood:** There's a section here where I have to list offices you've held and any awards or honors you might have received. You were president of the PTA for this area.

328. **Johnson:** Yes I was the president. I don't know how many years. I'm trying to think. We left the old school ( ). Probably three years. I don't remember how long but it was quite a while.

329. **Mawhood:** And you were secretary of the NAACP.

330. **Johnson:** Yes.

331. **Mawhood:** In this area?

332. **Johnson:** Yes Tillery. All this is Tillery.

333. **Mawhood:** When was that Mrs. Johnson approximately?

334. **Johnson:** I would say we started about 1942 organizing, maybe 1945 because in 1947 we went to the conference in New Jersey and ours was very new at that time. Maybe about three years. I don't think I was secretary too long. I do remember the other lady that came in.

335. **Mawhood:** You were secretary in the 1940's?

336. **Johnson:** Yes. 1945 or whenever we started. I was the first one.
337. **Mawhood:** And you've been an usher in your church.

338. **Johnson:** Yes for thirty-five years been diddling in and out there. And the church secretary about seventeen years.

339. **Mawhood:** And is that just recently Mrs. Johnson?

340. **Johnson:** I just stopped last year on account of my eyes.

341. **Mawhood:** And you were the chairperson for the 4-H club?

342. **Johnson:** Yeah I worked with 4-H twelve years. I got a 4-H award, a fifty year extension homemakers award. I was with the club in the early days with my mother and then with the younger group from 1938 up until ( ). This is when we raised money for to start the kitchen at the center. And I forgot I'm a notary.

343. **Mawhood:** You're a notary public.

344. **Johnson:** For fifteen years been working on that so my door stays open all the time.

345. **Mawhood:** You've been a notary public for fifteen years ma'am?

346. **Johnson:** It runs every five years. I just had it renewed again. Seems like they are scarce so one lady and myself and Mr. Cook is the only one so it's very convenient for the people because right now we've been doing wills and other things. I'm on the legal service board in Ahoskie but we don't do nothing but vote. Legal service board in Ahoskie, the legal aid for

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Ruth Johnso
the poverty people. We sort of act as the grass roots to the lawyers to inform them of clients in need. This is my daughter.

347. **Mawhood:** She's beautiful. Beautiful picture. She looks like you.

348. **Johnson:** This is my sister. She's the one dead now, Lula. And this is my granddaughter, her daughter. That write-up a fellow did that in Scotland Neck some years back.

349. **Mawhood:** You've been working in rural development for a long time haven't you?

350. **Johnson:** I think so.

351. **Mawhood:** That's very nice. Is this a picture of your sister? When was this picture taken?

352. **Johnson:** That was way back there when they had the contest on this look alike and she favored Martin Luther King's wife so much.

353. **Mawhood:** For a minute I thought that's who it was.

354. **Johnson:** She got something for the look alike. She looked just like Martin's wife. It was way back there. I don't know what year it was but it was a long time ago. She had that nose and mouth and everything.

355. **Mawhood:** Well that's a very nice article about you Mrs. Johnson. It shows how much you've done. Thank you for showing it to me. Are there any hobbies that you want me to list for the record? Any other interests that you haven't mentioned to me yet?

Ruth Johnson
356. **Johnson:** I have done a lot of crafts, embroidery and macrame but it ain't around here. It's done gone. Somebody's got it. I've done hanging baskets and odds and ins from twine and I embroidery.

357. **Mawhood:** You did that wall hanging over there?

358. **Johnson:** Yes.

359. **Mawhood:** That's beautiful.

360. **Johnson:** I've got another piece of macrame. I did a lot of these hangings out of thread and they fill them with flowers. I made a wheelchair out of this thread. They put the greenery in it and it went as far as Raleigh from the district and some person's rug went all the way to Mexico. But it competed with it until it got to Raleigh and it had to stop in Raleigh. But I made a lot of odds and ins. I just stopped on account of my eyes. I stopped sewing.

361. **Mawhood:** Mrs. Johnson you gave me some good advice when I asked you about advice for young people. Is there another saying, maybe a quote that you like or a Bible verse or a hymn that's a favorite of yours that you would like to have on the record here that you'd like to be known by?

362. **Johnson:** Well I've always been enthused by this saying and I don't know whether I can even repeat it or not. If I could help somebody as I travel along this way, if I could help somebody with a word... Now I've almost forgotten it but I often hear it and it just sticks with me...then my living would not be in vain. I don't even know whether I can repeat it all.

Ruth Johns
363. **Mawhood:** That certainly gives the meaning that you're conveying. ...then all my living will not be in vain. That's very nice. That's the end of those questions. Now I have to show you a little form that I brought with me. In order for us to use these tapes to be able to put them in the library so that teachers and students can use them and learn from them, we have to get your permission. So I brought along a form which we ask people to sign. I can read it for you if you'd like. It's an interview agreement.

364. **Johnson:** You don't have to go through reading it.

365. **Mawhood:** I don't mind just so you'll hear what it is. (Reads interview agreement, etc. to Mrs. Johnson.)