

Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with
E.B. (Erma) Johnson

December 21, 2005
North Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Mary Palevsky

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Table of Contents

Introduction: birth, early life, marriage, move to Las Vegas, Jim Crow in 1950s Las Vegas	1
Recalls experiences working at Area 51, observations of tests	5
Recounts deaths of friends who worked at the NTS	8
Discrimination issues with working at Area 51	9
Health dangers of testing versus well-paying jobs at NTS	10
Leaves NTS, returns to construction work, is appointed by Governor Grant Sawyer to State Highway Department	11
Works as an activist to open more state jobs for African-Americans in Nevada	12
Talks about discrimination and segregation in the South and in Las Vegas, and personal and religious philosophy as an activist against racial discrimination	15
Recalls conversion experiences that led him to his religious ministry, people's reaction to his ministry, and his work with people in church and community	21
Details family background: parents, wife, and children	27
Conclusion: recounts career as boxing lightweight champion of Las Vegas and California, and why he quit fighting	31

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Mary Palevsky: *Maybe you can start by telling me your full name and where you were born and what date you were born.*

E.B. Johnson: OK, my full name is Erma Johnson, and I was born in Racine, Wisconsin in 1933. Then my parents, they moved from there to Arkansas and that is where I grew up, in Arkansas. After I got grown, I went back to my home in Wisconsin and I stayed there until I got married and I had a child. I had some difficulties with my family, so I left and came to Las Vegas in 1952.

You would've been how old then?

Maybe I think I was around nineteen or twenty, somewhere like that. So then I went back. I didn't like it here; it wasn't nothing but gopher bushes. There wasn't nothing out here for me. I saw all this stuff here and, oh no, I'm going back. So I went back and I stayed until 1955. And I left again and came back here.

What brought you back? Was it for work?

Well, I still had difficulty with my family and so I couldn't stay there. I said, well, it's my wish to get away from this place, and so I came back to Las Vegas and I lived with my sister and I started working at the Frontier Hotel. When I first came here in '52, let me see, they had the El Morocco and they had—what hotel was it? Was it the Golden Nugget? I think it was. But it was only about three or four hotels. They had the Desert Inn here and they had the Sands here, New Frontier, and the El Morocco. It was just a very few. And I started working out on the Strip and I didn't know that it was so tough and they didn't even allow blacks anyplace. You could work at

the hotel, but you never could go back. You couldn't go there and you could not gamble. All the way downtown it was the same way. And we had a place—that's right, the Sand Dance. We had a place, the Sand Dance: that's where we'd go cash all our checks. A friend of mine—no, he wasn't a friend, he's just an old guy named Mr. Johnson—he owned the place, they were black people. They mostly owned all of down where you see downtown now; right there by the post office, he owned all of that part there, a black guy. We had to come across the tracks and what they used to call the Old Spanish Trail, right through here now. They said it was over across town, but what we called the Old Spanish Trail was right down to about One Street and the Indian reservation. I've seen all of this stuff. When I came here, there wasn't nothing. The first contractor that I saw here was a Japanese. He used to have a tractor and he did all of the contracting and leveling off, for the houses for the land and all that. And there used to be a farm right over there, he raised watermelons and hay and all that stuff. And it's just amazing how this town grew from that. And the place, a lot of people say that it was the Mormon history or this, it wasn't like that. I was right here to see it. I lived it. I walked it. I knew. The Indians, they used to come over here, dance and all this kind of stuff. We had the Brown Derby. We used to have a strip over here on Jackson Street because we had, let me see what that was, the El Morocco, we had about three or four clubs: Cotton Club, Louisiana Club. We just had a strip. Had high-rise hotels right on the corner of D and Jackson [Streets]. And we had another hotel—just like downtown. Then the Moulin Rouge came later, later on.

I've stayed here. I've seen it all grow. I've seen it grow from gopher bushes to—. And it used to didn't even rain here, when I first came here. They had windstorms, sandstorms, and they would beat you down and you couldn't get out of them. That sand would cut you up. You'd have to run and hide, you know, and it would blow, blow, blow.

[00:05:00] And it's just amazing what happened in this city. I would've never known that Las Vegas would ever be the Jim Crow, that the black and white could not associate together. And I was here through all of that stuff. When we first got for black people to go downtown and gamble, we marched. They threw rocks at us. But we went on this trip and did the same thing, and finally they went to Carson City marching and stuff, to get this place to where it was.

Now let me ask you a question about that because you're saying you were surprised when you got here that Jim Crow was so strong here compared to Wisconsin?

Oh, yes, it wouldn't compare with that. Now we had Jim Crow in Wisconsin but it was against the Puerto Ricans. See, I was brought up with Puerto Ricans and things, you know, and Jewish people. That's what I came up with, and what was obvious for me is to see this type of thing here. And these people out here, whoa! I just can't believe that. So it's a different kind of people.

Do you have an example of something that happened to you that really surprised you that it happened, or was it just a general—?

What surprised me, I didn't think that people would be that cruel. Because to me, in Wisconsin, we could go anywhere, you know. We didn't have no problem there. The only thing that we just stayed with—we just had gangs and we would fight. It wasn't the whole thing, like you couldn't go here, you can't go there. We didn't have that. But here, when you came here, there was only certain places you could go. If I could work in a place, looked like I could gamble at the place—we even had Sammy Davis, Jr. and he couldn't even go back to the hotel. When he came here and did his thing, he had to find some other places to go. It was so amazing to me because I'd never been in that environment before. Another thing was that you couldn't get the good jobs, black people couldn't get jobs. They didn't allow you to be—you couldn't be a dealer. You couldn't get the top jobs working. They wouldn't allow you to get up there, no way.

So I've seen it all. And I remember when the airport was out there, just a little airport, it was so small. Where the airport is used to be cotton, where you raised cotton. A black guy had a place out there. He tried to sell me some property, right out there where the airport is, back in there. All of that back in there was not anything. He had a cotton field there and he tried to sell me some property out there. Oh, no, I can't stay here, no, not in this place, nothing out here. But I finally kind of began to wake up, so I bought property here, back in that time. I should've even bought more, but I didn't. I'm OK, you know, I bought a lot of property and still have a lot of property.

And that's where I came from and doing my thing, working in Mercury [Nevada Test Site, NTS], going up there. A friend introduced me to going up to Mercury. I told him, no, I ain't going there. At that time, there was no time limit, you could work as long as you want to. At that time in 1959, I used to work almost forty hours round the clock because you make money.

Right. Now you had been doing what? You'd been working at a hotel first, you said?

I worked at the hotel first.

What did you do at the hotel?

Well, at the hotel I went from a dishwasher to a cook. I left the hotel, I said, I'm tired of this. So then I went back to construction, and I started working construction, and then I left there and I said, well, I might as well go back. It got so hot, so I guess I'll go back to cooking again. So I went up to Area 51 and started back there cooking.

OK, so they hired you there to cook.

They hired me there and I cooked there. They had a café up there, yes, a big place, you know, and I cooked for all the presidents and all those kinds of places. They would eat in that mess hall up there, that was the only place that they came and ate up there.

Now tell me a little bit about how it was, you're working in the hotel, the casino industry, and this friend tells you about Mercury and Area 51, you said?

[00:10:00] Yes, he just said, Man, he said, why don't you go up there? You'll make more money. I said OK.

So he worked up there?

Oh, yes, he worked up there. And so I did it, I went up there and started working up there and I stayed for about a year, year-and-a-half.

You say you had a Q-clearance, you told me.

Yes, you couldn't get there without that, not in there. You don't go in Area 51 unless you strain out.

So what was that about and did you think anything of it? You're pretty young at the time. What did you think?

Well, I wanted to know but you see now there's just some things they did. I've seen some things out there. The first time I ever seen a skip, they called it, an airplane, I never seen a plane like that. And that thing, it was in then, and now you don't see them anymore. But it was so fast. It was just a blink of an eye, this thing would take off so fast, you couldn't see it in a second. First time I'd ever seen that. I've seen a lot of planes and everything, but I've never seen one like that, how fast that thing moved. In seconds it was out of sight. And so there are some other things I've seen but I wouldn't care to talk about it. It's just amazing up there. A lot of people really don't know what's up there and nobody's going to tell what's up there.

So I stayed up there, and it was interesting to me. But one of the things I didn't like, I didn't like all of the stuff that, you know, when they exploded those bombs. I didn't like that.

You could feel heat for weeks up there. They make you stay off three days, but it still would be hot when you go back in.

So you were in Area 51, and could you see the explosions from where you were—or did they tell you to leave?

Oh, no, you can see it. No, you had to get out of there. They wouldn't let no one in there. When they do the explosion, only thing you could feel, when you were in Vegas, you could feel the ground shake. That's all you could feel, you know. No one was in that area up there. They had another area up there and there ain't nobody going to get up there. That was my experience with that place.

Now you said you worked long hours, so you're living in Las Vegas? Did you drive up every day or would you stay overnight there?

Well, before I found out that I could stay up there, I stayed. Of course they had rooms and everything up there. You could do it. I said, hey, I'll stop driving. So I just stayed on up there, stayed on my job, you know, that's why I do it.

And would you be cooking like twenty-four hours?

No. I'd do about twelve hours. I mean I'd never take off, I used to go straight through. I never would take off. So I'd work eight hours here and they'd say, well, could you come back tonight if we got something going tonight? And I'd come back tonight. Early in the morning, I'd go back in the morning. Just steady going. Now, I have worked twenty-fours, yes, started to cook, twenty-four.

What kinds of stuff did you cook up there?

Well, normal food that we cook here, but it just was a little—you know how with the President they had special things; they wasn't like us, they had special stuff. You had to fix it special. They had bacon and eggs, but they had the best of that stuff.

You mean the President of the United States or the president of the company when you say "the President"?

No, the President of the United States. I saw him come there.

Which one?

In 1959, who was the president? It wasn't Nixon.

It was Eisenhower until '60, I think, and then [John F.] Kennedy.

President Eisenhower. That's who I saw.

Really! Wow!

Oh, yeah, I've seen some of the congressmen and all of that. It's amazing what you—it's just a beautiful city, up there in those places; it's nice up there. And like I say, you have Q-clearance and there was just certain people could go in, nobody else could go in [00:15:00] there but you. If you didn't have a Q-clearance, ain't no way you'll get through the gate, never. And we would stay up there and we had a ball.

Now to go through there, because as I said to you before we started to record, I've only been to the test site. I've never—

Oh, you just went to [Area] 12. You just went to the main thing. Yes, OK.

You keep going?

Oh, yes, you got to go back—some places you can go back sixty or seventy miles. And I think Area 12, where we were, I think we was around thirty, forty miles, something right along in there. That's how far we was up. They had so many areas.

I know. So you went through the regular test site to get to—

Yes, you'd have to go straight through the gate, right at the main gate, and then you had to go—well, you had your Q [badge] on and then you had to go way on up. Yes, it's way up.

But you were saying that you knew some guys that worked at the test site itself, too, in the tunnels?

Yes, but, well, all of the guys that I knew that worked the tunnels, they passed away. One of my friends, I couldn't believe how his skin was. He worked in that tunnel, and he died and he never drew one penny. Still he started work on it. But he was really messed up. And then the other friend of mine, [Reverend] C.C. Smith, he passed away about three years ago with the same thing. Earl McDowell, he did the same thing. They passed away and he just passed away. It's coming more and more that they are passing away. Yes, they are saying that they weren't effected, and so I guess, I don't know. Well, we was all there. I'm not going to say I'm not out of it, we probably would never—anything would happen to us. But I have some more friends that worked up there, they haven't been too long retired either, and so I don't know. It's pretty—

Yes. And in the news lately, there's been more about it.

It's terrifying. And to me, I just don't scare easy. I mean people's lives are lives. It's not right, you know. Tell the truth. If things happened and if this is causing you to have this, causing you to have that, why hold it back? Well, we do the best we can.

When you said that your friend, something happened to his skin, was it like skin cancer, are you saying, or do you think?

I really don't know what it was, I just know he turned—he was yellow. Yes, the color of his skin was just yellow. Hands were yellow, arms, you know, there wasn't nothing he could do about it. And he was steady going to the doctor and that was—and so he passed away. Earl was the same

way, Earl McDowell. Jimmy. Reverend Smith. Oh, I don't know how many others that I know that passed away. But they worked there a long time after I got out of there. Yes, they retired. I said, no, it's too far for me to travel and I don't like the atmosphere up here and I got out.

So explain to me a little. It was too far and what else about it didn't you like?

I didn't like the atmosphere. I didn't like the air. I didn't like to breathe in—that's when I got out of there. No, I didn't like that, so that's the reason I left.

Now when you were there—you talked about discrimination issues in Las Vegas itself. What was it like when you were up there for your work at Area 51? Was it the same or was it different?

It was sort of the same. There was jobs there that the black people just couldn't get into, not until, you know, it came down with affirmative action. You never would get to be a supervisor.

But after so long, after affirmative action came in, that kind of kicked it over because it went

[00:20:00] nationwide. But before then, no.

Now what company did you work for when you worked up at the test site?

I worked for Culinary at that time. I worked out of the Culinary Union.

Because I know some stuff up in Area 51, like down at Mercury, was REECo: Reynolds

Electric—

Yes, REECo, yes. Well, see, Culinary had all contracted out of there, you know, and they had those cafeterias up there And so that's when I say I went back to cooking when they, you know, because I said, OK, I got cooking background, well say hey, I'm making this kind of money, I'm gone, you know. I left the Strip and went up there. And when I got out there and they started shooting all those bombs and all of this stuff, wait a minute, you're coming in so hot sometimes you go up there, whoa, no, no, no, no, I can't stay here.

So you had a feeling about it even then.

Oh, yes. Yes. I really—I couldn't stay there.

Now at the time, do you remember at that time if there was other people worrying about it or talking about it, that it was not safe, or was that something that you just—?

Well, we had a lot of people talking about it, but they said, heck, away with it, you know, I can make the money. You know, we talked about it all the time. Yes, we'd just sit down and discuss it. Man, why stay up here? A lot of people said, Man, well, I'd like to get out of here but you know, he says, we've got to take care of our families. We don't make the money down there. So most of the people just stayed there. But I said, well, heck, away with it. I said, my life is more to me than money, and so I left. Yes, I could have stayed up there but no way.

Now at this time, did you have a wife and children here?

Yes. At the time I only had the one kid, my baby girl. My wife and I, we just had recently got married, so we had the one baby. And so that's what I did, I worked up there, I traveled back and forth. And it wasn't too good, you know. You'd drive up there—I would leave home in the morning at two o'clock—I had to go to work at eight. Just think about how far you had to drive to get to your work at eight o'clock. That's the way it was, and I did that every morning. We used to have pools, guys would have cars, you know, and that's what we did, how we had to get back and forth to work. But when I found out that I could stay up there cheaper than I could drive back and forth, I spent the week, two weeks, or whatever. And my wife is young, beautiful, and everything. I mean I'm losing—I thought no, huh-uh, I got to go home. So I finally put up with a year or so there and I said huh-uh, I'm gone. I quit.

And I came back here and I went back into construction again, and I did well. I went from there to carpenter, from a carpenter I used to do electrician, and from there I went into

drywall for a while. And then—I still worked construction, worked two jobs—I cut loose in 1961. In fact, Governor [Grant] Sawyer, he called me. I met him and I know him real well and he said, I want you to go to the Highway Department.

I said, What you mean, Highway Department?

He said, Yes, he said, we don't have no blacks there.

So I was the first black man that appointed and put in the State Highway Department. I didn't have to go through all the—he appointed and put me there.

Now how did you know him?

I just ran into him, in fact when he was running for governor. I used to do the campaign for him. And so a friend of mine, very close friend, Reverend Prentice Walker—I know you've heard of Prentice Walker, one of the top black men that ever been in the state of Nevada. He and Sawyer were very close friends, so I knew him through there—he said, You go to work up there. And they put me down to the State Highway Department and I stayed with the [00:25:00] state from 1961 until 1983, That's twenty-one years. And then I finally, I said, oh well. I got hurt there, I got hurt real bad; I'm 100 percent disabled.

What happened?

Well, my back. I was in an area down there where I wasn't supposed to be and they had those big tires, they're kind of like big tires, they're huge, and so we stooped down and I caught myself in the right position and when I did, my back popped and my disc went a half-an-inch off. The doctor said I would never walk anymore. And so I never could go back to work.

And that's the reason I'm out here now, you know. I did a lot of things in the state of Nevada. I've caused a lot of black people to get top jobs today. They wouldn't have been there if it hadn't have been for me, because I fought there until—I was blackmailed through by the

governors or nothing. Why would you fight for these people? I said, *Because you need jobs.* I have to tell you, what I really did, when they had me recruiting. I recruited for all of the black people that got top jobs with the State Highway Department. They couldn't be civil engineering, they wouldn't hire civil engineers, not blacks, when I was there. They didn't hire foremen, they didn't hire them there. They wouldn't hire technicians, inspectors, they wouldn't do that. So I fought for that stuff. I went all the way to Carson City and I filed a complaint against the state. You'd be surprised how I was threatened, my family was threatened that if I didn't get out—I said, oh, well, I said, just have to go. These guys need jobs. You wouldn't believe all the people that I got jobs for, they sold me down. But I still hung in there. And right today, they have good jobs. Some of them have retired from inspectors. Some of them have retired from civil engineers. Big, big, big money, through me. So that's most of the thing that happened with me in this city.

So that's really interesting. And Sawyer asked you to go in there to do that?

Oh, yes. Yes, he just told me to go down and I went down there and they said, this, and I said, The governor told me to come down here. They just give me some form, I filled it out, filled out the application, and that was it.

So you start working there doing what?

When I first started there, I started picking up cans on the highway.

So how were you able to really be an activist for other black people?

Well, my thing is he sent me there to be a recruiter—I didn't know that—because there wasn't no black people there, none at all, when I worked for the Highway Department. So after I'd gotten there and I've seen different things that I would like to get into, I said, well, wait a minute, I'm not going to pick up cans all my life. And so I started to—they didn't have any applications, so I would sometimes get with the guys [and] I'd say, hey, I would like to do this, I would like to

do that, and so if they allowed me, then the next thing I went to is truck driver. So I started driving trucks, and I used to drive those ten-wheelers, those big ones. I already had been, mostly all my life I used to drive bulldozers. I did that from way on up. And then I went from that, then they wanted me to go to—they had a guy down there that could nobody get along with. He was a German guy, couldn't nobody work for him. They just railroaded me into a shop with him. And then they said, *You've got to go in here and work for a few days.* And after I'd gotten in there—he was a sign painter—he taught me how to paint signs. So I went from that—we called it fabricating—I went from that to a sign—and the first ladybug, if you've seen the little spiders, look like a little grasshopper, they [00:30:00] used to be ladybug. I was the one who invented that. A guy came down from Carson City and he seen it because he was a sign painter up there, and he'd taken the talent, and he was the one that got the recognition for it. I drew it up right here at the State Highway Department down there. I drew the bug. And it's statewide.

So explain this to me because I'm not from Nevada. So that was something that was like a symbol on the—?

Yes, just on the symbol, on the thing. They just taken it off maybe ten or twelve—maybe, I don't know, about twenty—it stayed there for years, the little ladybug.

OK. I'm going to look for that in some old pictures.

Look, and it's in there. It's the ladybug. And if you see it, looks like a little beetle, and I was the one that drew it.

You invented it?

I drew it.

You drew it.

Yes. I don't know when it was invented, but the guy had taken it and up there in Carson City, because he was in the sign shop, he got it, and then he got all the recognition for it, you know.

No big thing. It didn't make any—and so I said, well, hey, I won't ever do that anymore.

So it's just amazing, some things that happened here in this city that black people, what they went through. I've seen it all through here, just like I saw it back in the southern part of the States. I saw that, and it was right here. And right now, it's worse now than it was then. Only thing they done do—what they don't do here, they do it economically. I'm so thankful that I don't. I was a contractor here; I had my own business.

So this is after you left the State?

Yes. But in fact, the business I had during the State, I was working my contract then and I mean licensing contractor. I was doing that. I built many houses and many complexes for the governor.

And now, it's terrible.

So you saw it get better, and now you're seeing it get worse?

Well, I've seen it get better, but to me it was worse.

So there was that era during when you're doing this thing, it sounds like you really did give more opportunity to more black people in the city.

Oh, yes, yes. I did. I opened up the doors for them in 1961, we really did it. It was just amazing how we used to march, you know. And we'd get rocks throwed at us, and balls, and all this kind of stuff. But we did that for our people to get where they are now, you know, because it wasn't here. You couldn't do that here. I said, wait, whoa, I'd rather be back there, you know, because at least those people had gotten together. They had some things that they could do.

Yes, I think it's surprising. Well, I'm not from here, as I said, so it's surprising to come to Las Vegas and hear these stories about the sixties because from an outsider, it sounds more like what was happening in the South.

Oh, yes. I'd like to say, I lived *Roots* back there. I saw guys killed and friends of mine be hung on a line. They did that, I saw that.

Where?

Back in Arkansas. Yes, I saw that. And you couldn't walk on the side of a street up there. If a white lady be coming down the street, you had to get off. The black had to get off. We weren't even allowed that way. I saw that and I said, well, I can't live this way. I have to leave there. And then I came out here, and I almost left from here, you know. I said, well, where can I keep running? What can I do? I got to start somewhere. I got to start doing something. And I just started from there and came on up. It was terrible. Where are you from?

I'm from New York.

Oh, OK.

Yes, so, you know, I was born in '49 and I was a young teenager during the civil rights movement, so you saw all those things happening and all the injustices, but you know I never lived in a segregated place.

Oh, I tell you, it was—maybe not. Maybe you should've lived there. Then you'd probably have been a lot different.

Yes. No, don't get me wrong, there was racial discrimination, there's no question about it. There still is. But the kind of thing you're talking about where you couldn't go in, and what [00:35:00] you're describing so vividly is what it was like here and that you really lived through some major changes in this state.

Yes. Right here. I remember the time the black police couldn't arrest the white people. He couldn't do that. And they would beat you, you know, they'll catch you in a certain area, they'll beat you. You've got to be careful. North Town was one of the baddest places there was. They would do that to you down there. I've seen all of this stuff, you know, but I lived through it, and I never was afraid, you know. I just don't understand how it could have been, but it really was. I've seen it all. And they just lie so much, the system lies. They know all of this stuff happened, but the way they put it to you, well, it's the history here. I've seen it, I know where it came from.

Now when you said you "lived Roots," you're talking about what you saw in the South?

Well, the way they did it on *Roots*: I've seen the white man take the whip and beat the black man, and I've seen him take it and beat and rape the black woman. I've seen that, and you couldn't say anything about it. She couldn't tell her husband that the man had sex with her, she couldn't tell her husband because what he would do is he would kill him. I've seen all of this stuff, and it was just hard for me to shake it off, hard for me to live with it, to look at people, look at white people, and say, how cruel could you be to do like that? I used to be a hater. I didn't like white people because they treated us so bad; I said I had to get away. Then I said, wait a minute. And then it come, we've got black people doing the same things to us. Our own people would do the same thing. I said, OK, let me get out. I said, now let me see what I can do better. So I got out and my thing was to try to help my black people to get up. So if you be intelligent, maybe you can sit in the place and have some power. It's to change the situation. But it would never be because you can't get enough—most of the time, when we do that, that's like going up to Mercury. When the black man would get into the power, get into these things, what they would do is they would pull him out of there and put him up higher, and he'd never get where we was. And then he never associated and tried to get somebody else, one at a time. And so that's

the way the system is right now. What do you think all the schools were integrated for? What would you do if they give you \$100,000 and they tell you to get off the Westside; you cannot live over there with a \$100,000 job. What would you do?

You had to leave?

Thank you. They move you up and pull you out of the community. You cannot live in the community because if you stay in the community and you be doing all that in the community, where all the black is, how many educated black folks you take—will be educated? Everybody become educated. They're not going to stay down here and, you know, wash dishes and everything. Well, hey, if you keep a-pounding it into their head, what they going to do? And so that's the way the system is. If you know how to pick one and give him money, you'll never make—if you never had money before in your life, and you can make money, where do you think you're going?

So you've seen that happen in this community?

Oh, sure, it's happening day by day right now, still is happening. From back in the day, this has been happening. Every time. And how hard is it? It's just like where you have your job right now, how many young ladies where you are? How many can you take up and get them to do what you're doing now? How many have you been a mentor for? Most of the time—you're getting yourself set now to retire—what time do you have to train somebody else to do what you're doing? So this is what they did with the black people. And that's always happened. The same thing up there when I was working in Mercury. I saw it all. Yes, you just couldn't get there. My thing was I just have a strong determination. I never believed in being poor. I've *seen* that [00:40:00] and I refused to be poor, and that's the reason I did what I did. I didn't get all of those degrees, I did not finish high school. What I did is after I grew up and got grown and I watched

the experience and I watched the whites doing this; you're not going to do it to me. It was always my sense that I would be the one that gives the person what I want them to have.

It's such a really strong attitude that you have, I'm curious, is that something that you think you got from your parents or something you came up with yourself or, wow, you think about it?

My father [Stevenson Johnson], he was strong. He had a strong thing, but he never would do it.

My dad, he was really strong. My dad was 100 years old and he just passed away a few years

back, and what was strong with him, he always worked hard. He said, *Don't nobody owe you anything*. What you do, you get it, and you get it yourself, see, and you get it into the back of

your mind, can't nobody take it away from you. And so that's the way that he was. We were

poor, poor, poor. Sometime we didn't have shoes to wear. We'd wear the same thing over and

over. I just refused to do that, I learnt that from him. I saw that happen; it was a hurting, shocking

thing to me. I'll never forget when I was twelve years old, I think it was when I was twelve years

old, we was living on a plantation, and so we were what they called sharecropping. We'd pick all

of the cotton and we'd take it to the gin and the guy would say, *OK, you're going to get*

your half and you give me my half. Well, what he would do, when we go to what they call

the lay-by, when you go get to Selma and get your money, what he would do—and I went with

my father, we did twelve bales of cotton and my dad, he worked for a sawmill at the time, and

my mom [Octavia Johnson] and I, we picked all of that cotton, and he sold it, went to the man

and sold it. And when my dad came on that weekend, he used to come in, he'd never worked in

the field, my dad, just me and my mother—when he go up there to get his money, the white guy

told him, said, *You broke even*. And that one day that's the time I really worked so hard: I

was twelve years old, I wanted a bicycle, and I just knew I was going to get that bicycle, with all

that money because my mom, she had a little education, she had had an eighth grade education,

and I mean that was like a college education and she knew how to figure. And so half of the twelve bales of cotton, and they were getting forty-five. I'll never forget it, this is in my mind just like I'm looking at you writing with that pencil, it was forty-five cent a pound, so we had 500 pounds a bale, and we had 501, 503, all twelve of them was like that—and so if you split that down the middle and figured it out, half of those twelve—no, twenty-one, it was twenty-one bales, twenty-one bales. We picked twenty-one bales of cotton. So half of that, what you get?

Ten-and-a-half, right?

How much money you have?

I don't know. How much a bale, did you say?

Forty-five cents a pound. And there's 500 pounds, 503, 506. So 500 pounds, that was about \$250.00, wouldn't it [be]?

That's right.

Or a little more. And he was to split this down the middle, but he'd taken it all. Wouldn't give us one penny. Told my dad to leave there, get out of the store. And that hurt me so bad, I cried, you know, I couldn't *believe* this. How could you be that cruel? And that was with me a long time. I've seen it, I worked for a guy back in the South, I worked for him all the week, he finally wouldn't pay me. And what could I do? And so those things grew up and I said, no, I got to do something about this. So I came out here, and I saw the same thing here, and that's when I went overbearing, to try to get my black people to know one thing, that they could do it. And you're **[00:45:00]** not going to get it by fighting. You'll get it by getting an education and you'll get it by, in your mind, doing things. Always do something. And so that's the way I came all the way, from '52 up until now. And I just look at it, seems to me that the young people are in the worst

thing they ever could be. Sometime I hate that they *are* educated. Sometime I hate that they *did* immigrate. It was such a disaster to black folks.

Thank you for telling me that. That's really an overwhelming story, that story you told, so I really appreciate it.

I wanted to ask you, when you're here and the things started happening with the civil rights movement, with Martin Luther King and those other kinds of things, what are you thinking about those things at the time?

Fantastic.

Are you seeing related things here and so you become active here in similar ways?

Yes, that's what I did. Really, I'd taken it up from that. I was with Martin Luther King in some of the things, I met him with and some of the marches that he was in then. It spread nationwide. I said, OK, this is some things I need to be doing. And so then that's when I started taking off—that was with Reverend Prentice Walker. I was taking off, we went through some stuff here to get those people where they are now. So now it's beginning to backfire. They're doing it different ways. They have turned it; we're back around. In fact, there be education of the black person now, and I teach them in church. I teach just what I'm teaching you, or what I'm saying to you: look, if their system can't get you one way, they get you the other. I tell them all, I said, you know, the system doesn't care anything about your body. You're white. They don't care about you're white. What they going to pick on? What do they want of you? If they could take your mind away from you, they got you, you handicapped. And so that's what they'll do with this where, what we can we do? How can we get the mind? Oh, OK, there's a chemical we can make. Oh, yeah, OK. Let's get them to smoking cigarettes. They get you hooked on cigarettes, what you going to do? So they turn around, they're using a drug now. Most of black people are

on drugs. And then that comes down through the genes of the baby. When the girl get pregnant, she doesn't just have some dude. So what are you doing? They're stealing the mind! Your mind is what the system is after.

Now you're a reverend in this church, so explain to me how, I'm curious just how your own religious upbringing and then your life, to be a guide to people in this religious way, was that something that was always true or did you have some kind of conversion or what was that about?

It was a conversion. The same thing that I use—and a lot of people can't believe that—is the same thing that Christ used. It's the same thing. Here's what you live, you've got to live a thing before you can talk that, and so I had a conversion of what Christ went through. You see, Christ never fought nobody. What he did, he was educated enough, is to pull people out of the things what he was in, and so that's what I did, you know. I used this physical things, and that was the basis of all of things about—you look, if you're going to be something, you're going to have to suffer for it. What did you have to go through to get where you are? How much sacrifice you had to put in? Did you fight to get there? Were you rude to get there? What did you do? And those are the things you have to do. And it's not too many people can do that. Everybody's not born to do that. And so that's the way we does these things. Become strong in spite of what it was. I didn't care where they knocked me down, no, I can rise up. And I'm not going to have to fight, I'm not going to use a gun; I'm going to use my mind. I'm not going to let you trick my mind and say I'm poor when I'm not. So those are the things you got to do.

[00:50:00] *Now there's some point that you became a preacher and had a church? How does that happen?*

You might not understand it. I can tell you exactly what happened to me and then maybe I can use some philosophical things with you. When I was a child coming up, I always saw myself standing before people, and I never—the first time I saw it when I was twelve years old, a vision, I was in a vision, and I saw all these people, I saw—and you might not believe the story—
I believe you.

I was in the world and the whole universe burnt up. Everything there was, documents, burnt up and the only thing that was left was me. And I wasn't asleep. What I did, when I looked around, everything pitch black, I looked down, pitch black, and what I saw, I was standing on a white little four-cornered rock, that's where I was standing. And after then, well, I came and there was nothing, but as far as I could see, people in white, people, so many people in white. And I said, oh, no, this is crazy. Oh no way, this couldn't be. And then I saw it again in 1944. No, I was in Wisconsin when I saw it again. I was eighteen or nineteen years old. And there it go, it came again, that same way. Uh, no, I can't believe that. And so 1973, when I was here, I was in the church and saw—I was working for the State Highway Department, and I fell, and I had a high-powered gun, I was painting, and when I fell, this thing was a high-pressure gun. When I fell—this is my hand, this is the sign of it here—it shot my hand with the thing. When I hit the trigger, it just blew my hand up. All that stuff went in my finger, in my hand, all that stuff, and I mean, what they call it, acetone. That stuff is dangerous. And it went in there, and they take me to the hospital and they got that all straightened out, and about a year later I was there. I was over in my department working, so, well, the superintendent come over and told me, he says, Look, I want you go over here and hold this ladder for me. He was up about fourteen feet, he was up on top of the ladder. No, he didn't have any business up there because he was scared of

height. Here I am, down on the bottom, he dropped a fourteen-inch wrench, and when I woke up—

A fourteen-inch wrench?

Yes. You know what a fourteen-inch pipe wrench is? Hit me right on top; if my head hadn't have been this way, I would've been dead, it would've killed me right on the spot. And so I had a brain fracture. And you know I couldn't believe that and I was sick and from then I just got headaches. Never could stop them. So finally, I went to so many docs and what they told me, it was psychological. They said I was this, you know, my mind, I was crazy. That's what they told me.

And so I went there in 1983, I got so sick, I couldn't work hardly. So that's when this thing happened to me, when I fell and got hurt. And you wouldn't believe it, I was laying in my bed and I told my wife and my children, she could tell you the same thing right today, I said, I just want to die. I don't want to live. I'm so sick. I just wished I could die. And there was a minister, well, he came over and I called him over to pray with me. He came over there and he looked at me and he laughed and went back. He said, Well, you have a job to do for the Lord, so you do it. He said, If you don't do it, you ain't going to make it. I didn't pay him any attention, so I went to the hospital and I stayed in the hospital thirteen days. They gave me all kind of, what they call it, Novocain and all [00:55:00] this kind of stuff. Never could help me. I was steady hurt. So when I came back home, one night my wife was working for the Sahara Hotel, and she said, Why I don't go into work tonight? She said, I know I don't have no off-time. [And I said], I got sick here. We've got to make it. She left out the door. She said, You want me to stay here? I said, No. You've got to go. And that night is when the Lord spoke to me and asked me would I do what I'm

doing now, preach. A lot of people don't believe that's real, but from the minute I did it—I been doing this ever since, thirty-some years—I mean I don't have no pains. I walks every morning, I used to run seven miles, but now I walks five miles every morning. And don't have arthritis, I don't have any of that. I don't go to the doctor. And so this is—I know what I had to do. That's the reason I say I had to do this for people. I have to do things for people. I went through with all of this. And that's the way it is.

Well, thank you for telling me that. I'm just so curious about this. So you realize what you have to do?

Yes.

Then do you find a church? How do you start your ministry? How does that work?

Well, my ministry when I started, it's just like a business, that's what you do. When the Lord said, *You do this*, I didn't know anything about doing it. What do I do?

That's what I'm asking, yeah, how do you go about doing it?

What do I do? Well, OK, first of all they ordained me and sent me to a church. I went to that church, I didn't know anything to do, I didn't know how to talk to people. What am I going to talk to people about?

So you went to—

I went to a church. They called me to a church they called New Light. They called me to pastor over there. So I went over there to pastor these people.

And this is a Baptist church, is that right?

Yes. I went there to pastor those people. And when I'd gotten over there and was pastoring those people, then I started doing the things, trying to get them educated what they were supposed to

do and how they're supposed to grow and how you're supposed to look. They got very upset and they put me out of that congregation.

What upset them, do you think?

They didn't want to do right, they didn't think I was right. They thought I was just telling them something that was not right. You know how you can tell they don't believe this. When somebody tells you, you say, OK. What'd you say your name was?

Mary.

Mary, don't go there because you're going to run into a pit. I'm driving there all the time. I've been doing this all— [And they say], what are you going to tell me what to do? [And I say], No, Mary, don't do that, don't go. I cannot make you not go, only thing is I can tell you. And so people [are] going to get upset when you're telling them those things, and then boom! And so that's what they got very upset with me about, because I was telling them: You don't tell a lie on a person, you don't cheat, you don't—and so you've got to tell it. That's kind of rough in a congregation, you can't do that at a congregation; you not supposed to. That's what Jesus got killed about. And so that's what I have to do. It's not easy for you to tell somebody that, that is going to take care of you. These people giving you something, you going to tell them something like that? So that was my mission, that's what God told me to do. I went there, tried to evaluate these people, they got mad, and put me out. I said, that's it, thank you, I'm not going to do it anymore. I'm going on now, I'm going back to, you know, and I can—but he got me again. These people came, some people came out of the congregation, they said, We need a leader. Will you do this? And I wanted to say no, but I said OK. I started in '78. And so all this stuff that is happening. From '78 up until now. This little building here was brought over here and put on this piece of property; just out of four

people, we brought this all the way from across town. I don't know whether you know Hacienda Street? Maryland Parkway and Hacienda. This building used to be there. And the Lord said, Go out there and claim the building. I went. And I'd be [thinking], where we going to get the money? But you know that man sold his place to us so cheap and brought it over here to sit it down on this lot. I don't know where the money come from. We didn't have money. And everything just come right into place. So now we own all this. Just a few people. And all of those [01:00:00] that listen to me or people been under my leadership, they have great business, because I teach them business. That's what you do. You have a business. Don't tell your children, when you get through, get an education, I'm going to put you out, you're going to get you a job. No. You have a job for your children to go to. That's my teaching. That's the way I teach it.

So like a family business, you're saying.

No, for everybody. Why would you tell your child to go to school and get an education, he go all there and he go through high school, he go through college, and here you sit back and you just own a house and you're going to tell him, go get a job. You got me now?

I understand. Yes.

Well, see, that's what I teach my people here. And there was some taking business, some of them, they're in great business. I have one I brought up here, he have his own pest control business; seventy or eighty guys working for him. But the minute he got big, he left the church. But still, I don't care. Long as he is doing—and so he can put this into his children. He have three children. And I'd tell him when I'd see him, you teach those children how to do this. That's what we're here for.

So you do this practical work in the church.

Yes. I teach them business and then the spiritual part. Anybody can be nothing. And it costs something to be something, and that's the way it is. You've got to go through a lot of stuff just to be the greatest. The Tuskegee Airmen, they had to go through a lot to be what they was. They had to go through a suffering and they had to go through sacrifice. It's to get to be where you are. And so these are the things that everybody have to do. And you will never get there unless you do that. Nobody owes you anything. And that's the way I see it, and that's why I teach my people. Don't nobody owe you anything. My children—I have a doctor, my daughter, she's a doctor, and one of my boys, he's an entertainer, and then I have two boys, policemen, and then I have one boy, he's a principal of a school here.

Well, let's go through that again and maybe you can tell me your children's names. So is your oldest daughter a doctor?

Yes.

What is her name?

Queenie Renee [sp]. She's in Hampton, Virginia. That's where she's at.

What kind of medicine does she do?

Well, she does something with the blood. She's an expert in blood technician or something like that, and she's taken a medical course in that. And then my son in Wisconsin, he's an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] cop. He's a cop.

What's his name?

His name is Edwin Johnson. And then I have a boy here that went to school here. He's a policeman here. He's been with them for about twenty years.

And his name is?

His name is Curtis Johnson. And then I have Charles Johnson, he's one of the entertainers; you see him all the time. He be on soaps, he's on *General Hospital* and *As the World Turns*. He's an actor. And then I have another son, Carl Johnson, he's the principal of Gray School up there.

Yes.

This is in Las Vegas?

Right, in Las Vegas. Then I have my other boy, he is an accountant, Calvin Johnson. All of my children, they're OK. I had some, they went away, but they came back. So I was blessed.

So how many children do you have?

I have seven kids.

And your wife's name is?

Clarisse Johnson.

And I wanted to ask you what your parents' names were, too.

My father was Stevenson Johnson, and my mother was Octavia.

This is all because what you said about Roots? Do you know history of the family back to the early times?

Well, on my father's side, we have ten generations. And my father, [01:05:00] he's a Jamaican; his parents come out of Jamaica, and that was years and years back. The history of those people is just so devastating. Some of my people I don't even know. We just began about seven years ago, we started having family reunions, and that's when we went back to the family tree, and we traced them all the way back to Jamaica. And then my grandmother, she's an Indian, he's Choctaw on both sides.

You have Indian on both sides.

On both sides, yes. My dad's mother, she was Indian, and my mom's mother, she's Indian. Yes, right out of Oklahoma. All her people are there, and they owned all of the oil and all of that stuff there, and that's the way—well, my whole background is like that. And so, like I say, I don't think I ever knew all of my people.

But now you said you have grandchildren and great-grandchildren?

Yes, let me see, how many grandchildren do I have? I don't know, twenty-one, twenty-two? And then I have about six or seven great [grandchildren]. And my grandchildren, they are about the same. My grandson, he was drafted to the New York Yankees as a baseball player. And the other one, he is a teacher. You might know him. His name is Carnell Johnson [sp]. He teaches music. He majors in music. He's an entertainer, too.

He's an entertainer here in town?

Yes, he just stays right in town here because this is his last year before he get his doctor's [doctorate]. Mostly they're doing real good. My granddaughter, she's a special ed teacher. And then my one grandson, he's a civil engineer.

So that changes from when you first started talking to me, that African-Americans couldn't be engineers or anything like that. You've seen those changes.

Yes. Well, I told them that they had to be, you know, you can't stay here unless you have an education, and that's the way I pumped it into my children. My wife never did work, you know, until all of my children got out of school. I didn't allow that. I said they have to be taught how to do it. So that's the way we did. I don't see too many like that. Maybe there's a few of them like that, but I believe heartily in education. I didn't get it, but I made sure my children got it, you know. And they didn't have time to do nothing but to get it, you know. The only thing my children did, they had to go to church and they had to study books. Well, there's three things—

they have to work. And they worked for me. All my children worked for me, my daughter and everything, in my business. They didn't go. They started doing the work until they got married and left.

And this was your contracting business that they worked in?

Yes. I was a building contractor. Anything else?

You've told me a whole lot of stuff. Well, I'm sure you have more to tell, but it's been over an hour, so unless there's anything else, you know, to bring it back around to the test site, if there's anything else you can think of as you look back on that era, if there's anything else you can think of that you think would be useful for me to know.

Well, I think I covered everything that I can cover.

I think you did

Yes, I can go into these other things, but I wouldn't dare.

So there's other things that you remember, but you just can't talk about them?

Yes. No, I wouldn't dare say. I don't think it would be appropriate to do it.

Yes. OK. Well, that's good to know.

OK. Yes, indeed. Well, Mary, I appreciate it.

Thank you very much.

OK.

[01:10:00] *One more thing. You were the lightweight champion—*

The lightweight champion of Las Vegas and California.

You're kidding. What years was this?

Nineteen and sixty-one. Nineteen sixty and sixty-one. Yes.

Wow! So you boxed—?

I fought. Yes.

You fought professionally?

Yes.

That's hard, isn't it? Boxing.

Well, yes, it's very hard, very hard. I got out of it. A friend of mine, Freddy Perkins, we were sparring for—I was going for the junior lightweight championship of California. I was going to fight that championship. And so at that particular time, we was working in the gym in Henderson; we were sparring for the fight, so I hit him, and he had a brain concussion, and that eliminated everything. I had to nurse him like a baby for years. We lived next door. And it hurt me. For six months he had a tumor on his brain. And I used to go out every day and sit right there by his side. And I'm looking at him dying and I thought about it. I says, you know, the fight is not worth it. And you know what? He's the only man in history that lived, when they sent to Germany and got a doctor, they operated on his brain, and he lived until four years ago. Only one in history that ever lived with a tumor on his brain. It was the size of an egg. And I hung my gloves up in 1961. They didn't like it, but I said no way. Because of that, I quit fighting. And all his children, they grew right up with my children, right today, and they're school teachers, and some of them in real estate. Oh, it's just amazing, these children. And that's the way we are rooted together.

OK. Thank you.

OK.

[01:12:13] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[End of interview]