

INTERVIEWER: I'm interviewing Ms. Doris B. Johnson at her home, March 17, 2009. Her address is 1612 Concord Street, New Bern. We'll begin. Could you please give me your full name?

MRS. JOHNSON: I am Doris Becton, Johnson.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born and when?

MRS. JOHNSON: I was born in New Bern on Pavie Avenue, April 5, 1925.

INTERVIEWER: Could you give us some information about yourself, your parents, brothers and sisters, children and family life?

MRS. JOHNSON: Of course. I am the second child of Willis Becton and Minnie Becton. The other daughter, Grace Becton Dove, my sister, is the elder of the two of us. We were both born on Pavie Ave but now it is 1022 Craven Avenue. The homestead was built by my grandfather (Elijah Becton) and grandmother (Catherine Becton). Now it is no longer there but there is an apartment home there now at the present time. I had cousins who were my generation, the third generation of Becton's, who lived in that house, who were born there also. They had two sisters that were twins that were not born there. But I am going to give the names of those who were born in that house. They are Francena Becton Holmes, Velma Becton Fleming, Charles Becton, Jr., Ernestine Becton Richardson, who is the youngest that were born in that house, of the third generation.

INTERVIEWER: Did you all live there at the same time?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes, we did, for a long time they lived there. But as their family grew, they moved next door in one of the family houses.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember that you all were doing when you were younger?

MRS. JOHNSON: We had good times, playing in the yard: Hop Scotch, Blind Man's Bluff, Taking Steps, Jump Board, Jump Rope. We had a lot of games to play. We went out on the street and played, too, because there were no cars coming through because few people owned cars. So we could stay out in the street and play games.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about your family and their involvement in the community, community activities?

MRS. JOHNSON: You know, at that time families did a lot of helping each other and going around when you needed something, when you needed someone to help them to cook various times; something for the church, they would do that, and of course, they did a lot of visiting because they didn't have a lot of transportation except to visit. So that's how our family did. And of course, we attended church.

INTERVIEWER: How many communities have you lived in?

MRS. JOHNSON: Just this one.

INTERVIEWER: So, when you were growing up, that area was called... what was that called?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, I have been in various locations in New Bern; first of all, Pavie Avenue. And of course, I have lived on an area on West Street. I've lived in Pembroke. Now I live in Colony Estates. But I want to talk some about Pavie Town; because that seems to be the nucleus I think the black community because so many areas were surrounding Pavie Avenue and different places would lead to Pavie Avenue; so I guess that's why it's called Pavie Town, possibly. Pavie Town was also adjacent to what is called Duffyfield, where they have Duffyfield School. We attended that school from the primary grade through the 5th grade. When I got in the 5th grade, that is where we left in the middle of the year to go to the school on West Street Elementary. From there on, there were no longer 5th grade in Duffyfield; just primary through 4th. And of course, attending West Street meant at that time, since there was only West Street Elementary and West Street High located there so of course we got to West Street as 5th graders and went all the way through the 11th grade, when we graduated from West Street High School. And of course, we had a large auditorium where we held our graduation ceremony. I graduated in 1943.

INTERVIEWER: How has the community changed over the years?

MRS. JOHNSON: Quite a bit; quite a bit. I can't even begin to name all the ways but what seems to be in my memory so vividly is the fact that when I was growing up in Pavie Town, we didn't have any paved streets, no sewers, no lights, for quite a while. But thank goodness, we did get all of that before I got to high school. Sometimes, during elementary school, we got lights, electricity there, and also, we got the paved streets. I thought it was a highlight in my life time, to see paved streets and electricity.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other ways that you want to mention how the community has changed?

MRS. JOHNSON: Quite a bit of ways; the church, homes, there were quite a few changes in the areas all around because the city started saying that we had trash being picked up and we couldn't have trash lying around; homes were being taken care of, things were better that way.

INTERVIEWER: You were born after the great fire. Was anyone in your family affected by that fire, close relatives?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, I don't think any of those were connected in any ways with that fire so far as affecting them where they lived. But everybody knew about it and talked about that fire.

INTERVIEWER: You talked about the schools you attended. What were the building like, and the teachers, and how did you get to school?

MRS. JOHNSON: We had to walk to school from all the way from the time I started school until the time I graduated. We walked from Pavie Avenue right on through Main Street on to West Street, every day. And all of the kids in Duffyfield, they had to walk further than we did. And of course, we were used to it. It was nothing to us. In fact, we enjoyed it. We got together and walked and talked together and it was fun.

INTERVIEWER: What about the school? Was it one building or many buildings?

MRS. JOHNSON: The elementary school just had the main building and then there was the high school next to that, in another area of the school. And of course, there was an extra, looked like a house, some classes were taught in that building. Later on, I believe that building was used by the band for rehearsing.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of your favorite teachers?

MRS. JOHNSON: As I look over, I loved them all but I will never forget my primary teacher, Mrs. Samuel K. Pickett. I thought she was the greatest lady in the world. I used to think about her and how nice she was and we would just write her notes, letting her know how much we loved her. She was a great teacher. As I said before, I liked all my teachers, but I just had to mention my primary teacher because she had so much patience with us. And of course, I liked to read and tried to read as well as everybody in class and she would let us take books and read as

long as you wanted to and of course, when someone else was reading, and I saw how much she read, I decided I wanted to read as much as she did. She let me read. And of course, I was stumbling over some of those words but she didn't tell me to stop. She let me read as far as I wanted to read. I really thought she had the greatest patience, patience of Job in the classroom.

INTERVIEWER: What did you like, what was your favorite subject?

MRS. JOHNSON: You know, I liked all of my subjects, pretty much. I really did, but I guess reading was one of my favorite subjects. But I liked my Math in high school. Once I made the highest grade on the exam you had in high school, first semester. I was pleased about that.

INTERVIEWER: Did the education you received at the school here prepare you for life and work?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say it did?

MRS. JOHNSON: Because I was quite pleased with my high school teachers, too. They were very patient and taught us well. Mrs. Vance Willis, she was a great teacher. Loretta Smith, two of my high school teachers. Mr. F.R. Danyus was my high school teacher, also, that I enjoyed. So, anyway, when I graduated, I think we did very well in high school. And there were six people running neck in neck and there was a one-point difference in our averages. So when I went to college, I didn't have to worry about picking any remedial subjects.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you attend college?

MRS. JOHNSON: I attended Winston-Salem State University, Winston-Salem Teachers College at that time. Now it's Winston-Salem State University, in Winston-Salem, of course.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about your time there?

MRS. JOHNSON: I enjoyed my time there in Winston-Salem.

INTERVIEWER: What was your major? Well, it was a teacher's college then.

MRS. JOHNSON: Elementary Education; grammar grades.

INTERVIEWER: And, you went into teaching, where did you teach after you finished college?

MRS. JOHNSON: I taught two years outside of New Bern and the other 30 years I taught right here in New Bern. As a matter of fact, my teacher, F.R. Danyus, hired me to work.

INTERVIEWER: We talked about how it's changed here. Do you remember some of the African-American owned businesses here that were in New Bern?

MRS. JOHNSON: I remember out in Five Points area, which is now where we have the hotel, Days Inn, I remember Mr. Steve Roberts who had a nice vegetable market out there. There was Mr. George Downing, a business in Five Points. Later on, he had another business down in the area of what we called the Frog Pond, in the same area where Barbara Lee has her business today. And of course, there was Ershell Murphy who had a café out there. Dr. Hill's drug store was out there. And of course we would like to go to the drug store on Sundays and sit and talk and eat ice cream, drink sodas.

INTERVIEWER: What church did your family belong to?

MRS. JOHNSON: We are AME African-American Episcopal denomination. Our Christian name is Ruth's Chapel AME Zion Church and of course most of the churches here are Methodist. We are the only AME Zion Church in New Bern. At one time, Ruth's Chapel was a very, very popular church with a large membership and one of the greatest choirs in the city. Many people talked about how good Ruth's Chapel choir was. []

INTERVIEWER: And what about today?

MRS. JOHNSON: Today we wish that it were like it was a long time ago in some ways because we need more visitors. We hope and pray that one day we will have a greater congregation than what they have now.

INTERVIEWER: Was the church always located where it is now?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, it wasn't. Of course, it had 3 locations. The first location was down in the fire area. That way people of our church was affected by the fire. We were right down there in the heart of the fire. When the membership moved and built another church, it was built on Elm Street. That was the second location. I remember the Elm Street location because I attended that church from the first

time that my mother started taking us to church until I got through high school. Ruth's Chapel had to be moved to another location because of the Housing Project that came through. That was Craven Terrace, right in that area. Ruth's Chapel was a huge church at that time. But they moved to the third location, at the sight where it is right now, of course. The Housing Project came through and of course, they paid for the church to be moved. The place that we called the parsonage, they left that for us to have for the church. It's on Oak Street.

INTERVIEWER: Was anybody in your family in the military?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. My daddy was in the military for about a few of years, I don't know how many. I think between 5 and 10 years.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the events that happened while he was in the service? Did he serve during war time?

MRS. JOHNSON: No. As far as I know, I husband was talking about my daddy being in the service; I think it was during the war, during World War I because he wasn't in town. I have to ask my sister about that.

INTERVIEWER: Does anything stand out to you about the forty's or fifties ... 1940 or 1950?

MRS. JOHNSON: The 1940's ... that was when I was coming out of college, 1947; maybe later on, like in the sixties.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the elected officials?

MRS. JOHNSON: For the Government, for the city Government?

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MRS. JOHNSON: I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I know during that time segregation was legal. What kind of facilities do you remember that you could not go into earlier in your life?

MRS. JOHNSON: We had to go into separate areas. When we went downtown shopping, we knew we couldn't go into those lunch counters to eat. They had the bathrooms, of course, that were segregated.

INTERVIEWER: Were there some establishments that would not let you go in at all? I know some you had to go in the back way, but were there some that would not let you enter at all?

MRS. JOHNSON: Not downtown. There were stores that you could come in and buy; they were courteous and friendly. So, down there, shopping, there was no problem at all. Everyone was okay with it. I didn't have problems about segregation, going into stores shopping. Of course, you know that we missed being able to just go in a store freely. We knew that there were certain places that we didn't go into, so we didn't go into them. But we knew they were segregated so we didn't bother. There were some places that I really did not like to idea of wanting to go in there and buy whatever you wanted to eat. But we couldn't go in there. We had to go to the window. I did not like it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the election of the first black President of the United States?

MRS. JOHNSON: I think it's great. I think it's quite pleasing the fact that he was elected because it really said a whole lot; that people are changing their attitudes; they really voted for whom they thought was capable and could do the job. It really showed that peoples' attitudes had changed and I was pleased, quite pleased about that. You know that it took everybody to vote for Obama; wasn't just black; wasn't just white. It was whites and blacks together. Quite a few whites went that way.

INTERVIEWER: And for North Carolina having the first female governor ... ?

MRS. JOHNSON: That was basically quite notable. I'm glad for Beverly. I hope they treat Beverly as a First Lady.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned you were a teacher. When did you retire from teaching?

MRS. JOHNSON: In 1981. I retired one year too soon, because the year after I retired, they decided to give the teachers a high salary. They kept increasing the salary for the next five years, so I regret it. I retired one year too soon.

INTERVIEWER: What have you done since your retirement?

MRS. JOHNSON: I have traveled; many places that I was never able to do while I was teaching, of course. I went to Europe; touched base in Switzerland, France, Italy, Hawaii, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico.

INTERVIEWER: You've traveled quite a few places.

MRS. JOHNSON: And of course, within the 50 States, I've hit quite a few of them, but I have not gotten to California. I hope that before I get too old, I will be able to get there for a while.

INTERVIEWER: And what else have you done since retirement?

MRS. JOHNSON: I have done a little bit of community work. I have helped by doing the Senior Citizens Board; worked with some organizations ... voluntary work with the community.

INTERVIEWER: So, you have enjoyed your retirement?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes, I have

INTERVIEWER: What does New Bern's 300th celebration mean to you?

MRS. JOHNSON: I'm just looking forward to it and looking forward to seeing how it will be carried out.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything that we have not discussed during this interview?

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't know anything right now. I know after you leave there will be a whole lot of things. But, anyway, I may not have mentioned enough about other community things that I do, like cooperating with these other organizations that help the community, by giving my cooperation along that line, and try to do missionary work such as visiting people in the community that are sick, can't get out, and of course, being accommodating to those who need rides to doctors and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I want to thank you for sharing your recollection of your life here in New Bern and your voice will be added to this project. Thank you.

This is the end of this interview.