

MSS 587, Iron Hill Museum oral history recordings and transcripts, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware.

Special Collections Department, University of Delaware Library / Newark, Delaware

19717-5267 / Phone: 302-831-2229 / Fax: 302-831-6003 / URL:

<http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/>

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction

Use of materials from this collection beyond the exceptions provided for in the Fair Use and Educational Use clauses of the U.S. Copyright Law may violate federal law. Permission to publish or reproduce is required from the copyright holder. Please contact Special Collections Department, University of Delaware Library, <http://www.lib.udel.edu/cgi-bin/askspec.cgi>

Iron Hill School Oral History Project

Interview with Lois May Johnson

Date of Interview: January 17, 2008
Interviewer: Roberta Perkins
Transcriber: Marcia Adams

Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins and today's date is Thursday, January the 17th, 2008 and I am here with Mrs. Lois Johnson at the Chippey Chapel. We are outside of the sanctuary and I am interviewing her again toward a continuation of her memories of going to a one room school in Hockessin and I want to thank you for coming back.

Lois: You're welcome.

Roberta: I looked at my notes and the notes said two weeks later so it's been quite a few two weeks. It was April I am ashamed to say but anyway we'll get it together. Here we go. What do you want me to call you – Lois? Or Mrs. Johnson?

Lois: Lois is fine.

Roberta: Okay, Lois I am going to start with an observation asking you if you ever had an observation, because you spoke so highly and lovingly of your teacher, Mrs. Beaujon and her coming from another country, being French, and being in the country at that time and I wonder, at that time when education for African-Americans was so unequal. Do you recall that she ever expressed dismay or just an observation? Did she every express an observation about the inequality?

Lois: Well not verbally. Sometimes at the end of the year or the beginning of the year when they bring down the boxes of frayed books from the other

schools I detect a little consternation in her demeanor of not being pleased with what they allocated to us but otherwise she kept, if she had any feelings she kept them to herself and did not portray them to us students.

Roberta: What about the conditions and treatment of African-Americans in Delaware? I'm going to say with Delaware in particular because that's your point of reference with her.

Lois: As to what?

Roberta: Did she every express, did you ever see her comment about how she felt about the way African-Americans were treated?

Lois: Well she expounded on us that we will be treated different as we go along in life because we will be going into different sectors you know and even from Hockessin to Wilmington there is a difference and there was as far as us being treated by our own African-American students because we were country and they were city. So she you know sort of gave us like heads-up as to what we could look for. At that point in time it wasn't a white/black factor because it hadn't come into play at that time. So I think she pretty well got us acclimated with knowledge about the difference.

Roberta: Let me ask you about testing. Did, at the time you went to the Hockessin school were there testing?

Lois: You mean Hockessin consolidated?

Roberta: The, no...

Lois: Oh, 107

Roberta: Like did the Board of Education have annual exams.

Lois: Yes they did at the end of the year. All grades have a test period.

- Roberta: Now did Mrs. Beaujon give that or did someone from the Board of Education...
- Lois:** Mrs. Beaujon was there but it was either a lady or a man that came in and set down with the different classes with I guess a transcript of testing, whatever, I don't know how to call it at this point, but each group had their separate day to come and do their testing. Each grade. And there was always someone from the Board of Education present.
- Roberta: And that determined whether you went to the next grade?
- Lois:** To the next grade, right. It was kind of a nice time too because we got a chance to stay home.
- Roberta: Oh, you said you got a chance to stay home?
- Lois:** Yes because each grade, you know...
- Roberta: Tested separately?
- Lois:** Yes. Now like 1, 2, 3 because that's like the level – 1, 2, 3 and then on up like that. It was kind of a fun time we had a chance to stay home.
- Roberta: So that was like one day was it?
- Lois:** Yes, one day.
- Roberta: Let me go back and try to fill in some gaps and I am trying to reconstruct what we may not have talked about the last time as far as how the maintenance of the school was handled.
- Lois:** Well Mr. D. Peterson, he did, well I wouldn't say most of the – he did all of the maintenance in the school at that time. He is the only one I remember. I'll say it that way. You know he maintained the bathrooms and the stove and you know and the lights and different things.

Roberta: And he was the only one who did the maintenance?

Lois: He's the only one I remember.

Roberta: That you remember.

Lois: Right. Right.

Roberta: What about activities, were there separate activities more like a recess kind of thing for boys and girls or did you all have the same recess?

Lois: We all had the same recess. Once you say recess we – out the door and see who could get on the swings first.

Roberta: I think I remember you did talk about that, yes. In the classroom I remember also you talked about the carpentry and arts and crafts Mrs. Beaujon taught you folks. Were there any other activities like music, that kind of thing?

Lois: Yes, we did plays. Every holiday we did a play and it was just wonderful. She taught us a lot about portraying reality theatrically. You know what I'm trying to say. Being in someone else's shoes.

Roberta: Oh, tell me about that.

Lois: Well you know Martha Washington was not black but she took us through that whole sequence of Betsy Ross and Martha Washington and George Washington and all of the like the presidents and important people at that time. There was very little if I can understand that we ever portrayed any one black. Now there was something I remember about an Absalom Jones, I remember the name but I can't remember in what context that we used him and his name but oh yes we put on plays, lots of plays, and we sang and oh she so loved to teach us singing and it was just was a wonderful time.

Roberta: Was there costumes and props?

Lois: Oh yes, done by the students, yes. She showed the guys how to make George Washington hats out of newspaper. That was such a fun time just getting ready for to do a play for our parents. That was so neat and the girls you know made the ruffled hats like for Betsy Ross and Martha Washington and the aprons. Yes, we did a lot.

Roberta: Now when you were preparing for the plays, was this in addition to your school day, to your school work or was this instead of ...

Lois: Of everything was incorporated. I mean you know we would get our work done and but she would take out time in the school day for us to prepare ourselves for the plays and dramas.

Roberta: Cool. Were they well attended by the parents?

Lois: Oh my goodness, yes! Oh well attended especially. They were so proud you know of just being a part. It was just so little for us to do because we had no resources or limited resources to do a lot of things and so this was just one of those heartfelt things that oh, hey we are getting together with our children, we're seeing what they are learning. We're seeing that they are happy at school you know so a happy child is a well attentive child as far as the academic standard but oh yes we really couldn't wait for the holidays to come around to do something like that.

Roberta: When you had those, were there refreshments?

Lois: Yes, well the parents usually did that. We had to have cookies and Kool-aid. Oh yes indeed. Halloween we had cider and gingerbread cookies and stuff. Christmas we had a candy cane and an orange. Oh yes I remember that well. Maybe I remember that too well.

Roberta: How big a community was it when you were going to the 107C?

- Lois:** I am visualizing how it was. Oh good grief I couldn't say. There was like five houses down this way, six, seven, eight, nine, ten back this way. If I were to hazard a guess I would think about 15 to 18 black families lived in this general area. As to how many, I can't hazard a guess.
- Roberta:** Would you roughly say each family if you were to guess each family had two parents, two adults and maybe a minimum of three children, that kind of thing?
- Lois:** Well there were several families that just had, three families I know that had just one child, and then there was a family across there that had five and another had six, my mother had eight, you know.
- Roberta:** So there could be anywhere from 50 to 100...
- Lois:** Absolutely, I would say that.
- Roberta:** So it was probably a pretty tight-knit community.
- Lois:** Very. Mostly the families. Mostly family oriented and yes, very tight. Wonderful community to grow up in.
- Roberta:** So if something happened to one person did people pitch in?
- Lois:** If something happened to one person, you wouldn't even have to answer that question because every, I'm not saying everybody's business was everybody's business but so to speak. You know what I'm saying? If we have, now I remember when I was in the schoolyard and I was going around the May Pole you know and I fell. I don't remember falling but all of a sudden everybody was around carrying me home. Well then I didn't know I had heart trouble and well I almost died, at eleven. And the whole community, I'm saying the whole as a whole and they came in and they helped mother take care of me and they would sit with me and then I got too bad and I had to be hospitalized but yes, the community came in, they put clean gowns on me and just took care of me like I was their own.

That's how we operated. If a mother was in need of something she would go. If anybody around the community needed anything from anybody everybody was on hand.

Roberta: Just as a point of reference, this was roughly 19 what?

Lois: It was like 1953 or something in that area. It was a wonderful time. A wonderful community. Like they say it takes a whole village to raise a child, we were raised. Believe me, anytime you had to run past your house to get a whipping, we were raised. I remember that so vividly. My cousin and I were fighting over a roller-skate key. Remember those skates that you got that you had to have the key? Okay, well I put fingernail polish underneath of one of the wheels so we could identify mine from hers. Well lo and behold she had my skates on and she was going up and down, we called in Washboard Alley at that point, and I said, "Carol you have my skates." "No, I don't." "Yes you do. Could I have my skates?" "Well no because you didn't ask politely." "Well may I have my skates please?" And my neighbor cousin came by and said "you girls stop fighting, I'm telling Aunt Ethel." On no, well we kept (inaudible) at each other so I climbed up in the mulberry tree and I set up there, Aunt Ethel came, she was back there and she said "Lois May?" and I didn't want to answer, she said "Lois May?" "Yes?" She said, "I'd like to see you for a minute" and I said oh boy I know this is it. Carol had gone home crying like it was my fault that she had my skates. So I went down out of the tree and I walked up the lane. I walked past my house to get to Aunt Ethel's. I knew she was angry because she had the long handle wooden brush and I knew this was my time. Nevertheless I still had a living. It was a lesson taught. She taught us in the first place that we were becoming young ladies and it was unseemly to cross the other yelling and screaming at each other in the public. Nobody wasn't really around but the crickets and the dogs until Jean came walking by. Oh my God, that was just – its funny now but it was hurtful then but it taught me a lesson that I shouldn't be

loud and boisterous. That you can get your point across without being loud but that didn't stop us because we were kids but we did it out of her hearing, I'll put it that way. Oh God those were the days I'm telling you and we were being taught a lot too with the elders in our community about the difference between black and white. At the time as children you know you really don't pay attention but they had seen a lot and when we hear from them that oh wow I can't imagine anybody treating us like that and as you know progressively we did find out that they were in the same shoes that we were at that time. That they had their share of heartaches, that they had their share of being called out of their names, of being pushed back and not enjoying the privileges that were given to the white surrounding families even though by law we were entitled but they did not give us the knowledge to gain access.

Roberta: Knowledge is so important.

Lois: It is, it really is.

Roberta: How did you all handle lunches? I'm trying to remember, I don't remember if we asked that or not.

Lois: Well the children would come from afar now like the Peterson children lived all the way down almost to Brackenville Road, now there were some children that came that far. There were some that came from Johnson's Market you know? Well they would bring their lunch. Now myself, I am only two minutes down the road, we walked home for lunch. There wasn't any lunches that I can remember ever being given out in school.

Roberta: In the wintertime I guess I'm thinking were there times that lunches might have been prepared in the school?

Lois: I can't remember ever.

Roberta: Where did Mrs. Beaujon live?

- Lois:** In Wilmington if I'm not, yes. In Wilmington.
- Roberta: She had her own car?
- Lois:** Yes.
- Roberta: So anything that resembled phys ed, physical education, was recess time, was that right? You know what I mean by physical ed?
- Lois:** Yes, no I can't remember having anything like that. Like I said recess was the only way that we shook off our cobwebs in-between classes you know.
- Roberta: Was there anything like Field Day? Do you remember anything like that?
- Lois:** Oh, we had a May Day.
- Roberta: Okay.
- Lois:** Yes you mean like relay races and things like that?
- Roberta: Yes.
- Lois:** I think the older group had something in that order. I can't remember it perfectly. I know the guys played a lot of ball. We had a May Day.
- Roberta: Most schools had a May Day.
- Lois:** We had a May Day you know.
- Roberta: Most schools had May Day. How did you prepare for that?
- Lois:** Well I really can't remember but I do remember the May Pole we used to stream it with ribbons you know and there was a certain little dance we did around, we intertwined the May Pole ribbons but I do remember that part.
- Roberta: Was that one of the activities that students prepared costumes, if there were costumes or the ribbons themselves?

- Lois:** Just the ribbons I can remember as far as that was concerned. I think we got a chance to dress up in pretty little dresses and everything. It was really nice and colorful. She made it was such a joy, something memorable you know. We dressed up in our little frilly dresses and dance around the May Pole with its ribbons.
- Roberta: Was that a celebration of Spring? Was that what that was?
- Lois:** I can't remember what it commemorated but we did it every May, every May and my sister and I got a chance to sing the song In The Green Month of May. We did a duet every year for a couple of years. Yeah we remembered, that was so neat. There were two twins that sang together, Bernice and Berna Johnson and they had a beautiful voice too and they sang...
- Roberta: Bernice and Berna...B-e-r-n-a?
- Lois:** Yes, Johnson and they used to sing a lot and we always wanted to sing like them, my sister and I [**inaudible**] and we sounded really neat and Mrs. Beaujon had us to sing as the younger siblings you know, behind the older ones and it was so neat. It was quite a privilege really.
- Roberta: It was really a swell time.
- Lois:** Oh it was a wonderful time of our lives. You know these kids have no concept. None at all. What they're seeing is what is in the history books, you know what I'm saying, and I'm sure they still have their, there's still different kinds of prejudices towards them also but for us and like my parents and us and our generation to come up under such an oppressive time you know and I know we are not the only ones but for it to relate to you its different than reading it in a book and you know they just have no idea of the struggle. Really. Like I tell my kids, you know, you're up high but you just remember it's the smaller person's back that you are stepping

on to keep you up there, that led you to that place of where you are now you know. We've really come through a lot.

Roberta: I think unless a parent or some family member or even a neighbor talks to and exposes a child to that they don't get it.

Lois: Yes.

Roberta: And because its not pressing, because its not a pressing issue the way it was in the 30s and 40s and 50s and 60s it doesn't get talked about.

Lois: That's right and that's why I have been very adamant about telling my children that they are not exempt just because it was back then and here and now it still lives and I always talk to them about the difference in nationalities, we are not all bad, they are not all bad but learn the difference, you know, learn the difference about how it can affect you in your life because it can. It can really tear you down. It can leave you with low self esteem because of the superior lifted attitude you know and we have always been aware. Like I said my sister and I were always well read and I tried to teach my kids to be mindful of their background, our background, their grandparents background because it stems all up into one.

Roberta: Do you feel that the closeness, obviously there was a closeness in the rural community that you grew up in and so people from that kind of an environment interact with others differently and they interact with the, when they get into a city, differently and do you think city life does not offer or do you think city life also offers that same kind of support and closeness?

Lois: You mean as far as...

Roberta: Let me back off I tend to get a little wordy. My observations have been that people who grew up in a rural background where the communities

were small and close knit, there is a different quality about them than folks who grew up in the city and who may not have had that kind of strong supportive foundation. Has that been your observation?

Lois: Yes.

Roberta: Do you think that that has a bearing on how strong people are or are not, from those two different environments?

Lois: Yes I do because I am not taken away from the city people but their lives are so much more active and so much more busy, so much more different in aspects whereas up here in this community are like kind you know, we share basically the same thing. I mean we all have our different attributes but we share basically the same thing as far as community.

Roberta: Sure, gotcha. Lois let me ask you about health care for students, you know was there dental or a doctor that would come out?

Lois: Oh we had a dentist oh my God. His name was Mr. Blackburn. He came once a year. He would kill us. I am sure that he was prolific professionally but I felt that he had very little feelings for us children only because there were so many of us and he had to get through you know a lot of us in like maybe a day or a couple of days or something you know so it that was a traumatizing time, it really was.

Roberta: Mr. Blackburn?

Lois: Yes.

Roberta: He was there for how many days?

Lois: Well I'm saying two or three days because but he had to get things done quickly you know what I'm saying so that means that in my eyesight he wasn't taking enough time to really take care of us children. It jus seemed

like it was so hurtful because he had to work in a time limit across the state. I think the state, yes probably the state.

Roberta: Was he a black or white?

Lois: He was a black.

Roberta: Did he take care of the students in the school itself?

Lois: Yes in the school.

Roberta: So there we a place set aside?

Lois: Right.

Roberta: So was there like a screen, like a folding.

Lois: There was like one room there was a sliding door that would separate each you know, make two school rooms out of it with the partitions.

Roberta: What about medical if somebody got ill I mean did a doctor come?

Lois: I can't ever remember.

Roberta: Okay.

Lois: I can't remember, perhaps oh but we did get vaccinations. I do remember that. That's the only thing I can remember, the vaccinations.

Roberta: What if somebody got a scrape in the schoolyard?

Lois: Well some things Mrs. Beaujon could take care of. Basically we would be sent home if it was anything really serious.

Roberta: When you went there can you remember what the inside of the school looked like. Like if you came in the front door.

Lois: When we came in the front door there was a

End of Tape 1, side 1.

Begin side 2 of Tape 1.

Roberta: This is side 2, tape 1 of today's interview with Mrs. Lois Johnson. Let me ask you this question about use of the school for other than classes. Did the school ever get used for community activities, a meeting place?

Lois: Yes, they used to have like I guess community meetings. I remember mother saying grandfather was a very political person and they would have community meetings there at 107. In fact my grandfather, he died there at a meeting. It was in good use as far as our community meetings. They had a lot of meetings there.

Roberta: What was the politics like or the involvement of the community members in politics in this area? One thing in particular that I keep hearing a lot about is vote buying. Do you remember hearing your parents talking about vote buying?

Lois: Yes, oh I do in fact I witnessed several. There was one gentleman that used to come around in his car and stop at different houses and offer the man of the family a bottle of whiskey to come and vote for him. Oh I remember that very much. Yes I did. They would maybe give out cigars or specifically the liquor. I do remember that, yes and we knew around voting time they would come, they would infiltrate our little black community like flies you know, trying to get the black vote and most of them generally they paid for it like I said by either giving out cigars or cigarettes but specifically I remember the liquor. I do remember those brown bottles with the stuff.

Roberta: These same people, politicians, before and after the election, did you see them?

- Lois:** Only if you saw them at the stores you know or something but otherwise they didn't come in our community. Only on election time when they wanted that vote.
- Roberta: If you had a problem or a concern were they responsive to it?
- Lois:** No to be perfectly honest, no. After the election and the voting period and so forth we never saw them again. Never.
- Roberta: Did the school have a baseball team, or even the community?
- Lois:** Well later on the older folks did have a baseball team. What did they call it, the yellow jackets – the hornets? I think they were called the Hockessin Hornets. Yes and they would play the surrounding areas like in Kennett Square and Wilmington. Yes the Hockessin Hornets, yes there was. We had one real good player it was Uncle Nip Winters in fact he played for the Baltimore Orioles and he was very prolific in his baseball, he was a pitcher. Yes, Uncle Nip Winters.
- Roberta: Nick?
- Lois:** Nip, I don't know his surname.
- Roberta: A lot of people had nicknames.
- Lois:** He played with the Baltimore Orioles. He pitched for them and then he came back here, home. He died here.
- Roberta: How long did he play for them?
- Lois:** I can't remember but there were several articles in the paper about him. I'd like to see if I could secure those one of these days. I would love to.
- Roberta: So you think he knew Judy Johnson?

Lois: Oh absolutely, absolutely. Judy Johnson used to drive my school bus. I don't know if I told you about that.

Roberta: No, what was that like?

Lois: He was a wonderful person, in fact I was always like I said I was always an old person's person and one day we were coming from school and we were boarding the bus at Absalom Jones so a girlfriend and I had had words and so, do you remember me telling you about this?

Roberta: Go ahead, I'm not sure.

Lois: And I turned around and I put my hands on my hips and I was standing akimbo and I was giving her words and he said, "young lady I would not like to see that again. Young ladies do not do that" and he taught me a lot about selfness because I was a perky kid. I really was. Like I said my sister went to New Mexico so I had to put on that kind of hardened veneer to protect myself from people and you know but he was such a wonderful person. He loved the children and he always tried to teach you things that were going to be beneficial to you and I really appreciated him. In fact I loved him very, very much. Those were the good times. People I don't know if they really knew or just entertained the value of older people. A lot of the children thought oh well, he's old, he doesn't know what he's talking about or she's old she doesn't know what she's talking about but listen, listen I mean there is a lot of life in those old folks that have lived back then that if they share it with you will bring you up to know and you will say oh boy okay I am not going to go that route because I learned it back then, progressively during your life time that you wouldn't entertain some of the things are happening now that are running you into a heartbreak. You have to listen.

Roberta: I think I have exhausted everything that I wanted to ask you.

Lois: Okay. Oh this has been wonderful Roberta.

Roberta: Well it has been a joy for me. Thank you so much for sharing.

Lois: You are surely welcome. Any time. I think my little pea brain has really...

Roberta: Worn you out

Lois: But that's okay that's okay because its good sharing because if we don't document these things they'll just be lost, be lost and I am aware, in fact on the 22nd I am going to share my experiences with this young man that is being what they call, home taught?

Roberta: Home schooled?

Lois: Home schooled, he is twelve years old and he is doing a documentary on the one room schools and his mother, his father is Nigerian, I think he is Nigerian so when she called me she said, "oh Mrs. Johnson I am so glad that" she called and I returned her call, she said, "oh I am so glad that you responded so quickly," she said "because we are really eager to get a chance to meet you. We were looking around in books and we found you in the newspaper and we called the Community Center." Who in turn called me and gave me her number. She said her son is just thrilled. They wanted to take me to lunch but I told them I would rather meet down here at the church and then I got to thinking, that poor kid would he be comfortable? I don't know what their religion is or anything but she agreed she said fine that they would love to do that. But it just goes to show me that whatever little bit I have done has not gone unnoticed you know and its not a bragful thing it's a practical thing but I am proud that I could contribute to any little thing that will help understand what has transpired back then, I really do. Last year I don't know if I told you about this student from Berkley called me. I'm thinking, Berkley? Berkley College? She said yes ma'm I am doing our thesis on one room schools and your name I got from the Historical Society in Topeka, Kansas. I said

oh my God. I was so thrilled because there too again it was whatever little I can do to oh well you know what I am saying, to contribute to knowledge about what happened. I feel good and I thank the Lord that oh I know what I want to say Roberta, I do but I thank the Lord that he gave me a little insight to open my mouth, you know, and gave me the strength and the insight or knowledge to open my mouth to know that what little I say is important to other persons you know. That I can be an asset to be contributing to our black culture. I really do. My mother used to say I can talk the black off a pot.

Roberta: You're part of history. You live long enough you become history.

Lois: And it's important that we preserve our history especially getting it documented you know and in the long run all the little dots, they will connect. I don't care if you are from New York to Virginia all of them will connect into a wholeness for us you know. Its, oh boy here I am running off at the jib.

Roberta: Let me take your picture. Thank you so very much.

Lois: You are welcome.

End side 2 of Tape 1.