



Citation for this collection:

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Mr. Emerson C. Johnson

[0:00:00]

Interviewer: I just to test it a little. Test, test, test. Were you or your family hurt by the stock market crash?

Mr. Johnson: Well, we didn't have too much money to invest but what we did have why we were hurt, we practically lost what we did have, which wasn't too much. You couldn't borrow any money. It was just tough that's all.

Interviewer: Okay. Following the stock market crash have a bad effect on your family or yourself?

Mr. Johnson: Following the market crash?

Interviewer: Yeah, the early '30s.

Mr. Johnson: What do...

Interviewer: Maybe if you put the microphone...

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. In the early '30s, Newark was not hit as bad as some towns. See I work for Dr. Rhodes in Rhodes Drugstore, which had a lot of customers who worked at the university, and teachers and students who -- their salaries really weren't cut too much. So it has affected us but not like it did some industrial town. And I was able to build this house in 1936 without much money. And the reason we are able to do that was there was a lot of people out of work who wanted to work and the contractor himself did most of the work on this house.

We got along very well. We didn't have much money but nobody had much money. So, everybody was on an equal.

Interviewer: Were there any people that you knew that were hit really badly by the crash?

Mr. Johnson: Well, everybody was hit but I really didn't know anybody who was seriously hurt. As I say, in Newark, it was fortunate in that a lot of the employees in our business -- the drug business, our customers were university people. Now, the people who worked at the fiber mills, they were health and that affected us, too because we had a lot of customers who were there.

And then again, I can remember that Harter Hall only had 40 students living in it. And I believe there were only about 400 students in the university. In fact, Rhodes Drugstore was the bookstore for the university and it just used to be a place to hang out.

Interviewer: I've heard a couple of stories many people were in these -- other people were very helpful. There was a lot of cooperation.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, yes, yes. I think people help each other more in time of need than when there is plenty around. We all got along.

Interviewer: What was Newark like if anything?

Mr. Johnson: It just seems as though you just made your own entertainment. You enjoyed each other's company. Very few people had money to take trips or anything like that -- at least my friends anyway. And there were more parties like the women, my wife had and her friends, they had more bridge parties. Just made your own entertainment.

[0:05:00]

And life was a little easier really.

Interviewer: Does the town itself look different? Was the town itself look different?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, it's much smaller. Well, a lot of these houses weren't -- oh, my house was one of the first built down there. That was in '36. The house across the street had already been built but my neighbor's house, all these other houses weren't built then. This is was a field. And I was one of the first standing here. But we've enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Did you hear very much about the other -- the way things were in the parts of the country, maybe you...

Mr. Johnson: Only what we read. I had no -- well, I had a brother-in-law who was a stockbroker and it hit him. So I know he got hurt pretty bad. That was in Rochester, New York. And I think everybody all over the country was hurt. It was a worldwide depression and it -- it's just one of those things. It comes and goes.

Interviewer: People have been saying that, when they heard that Hoover was president, things weren't as good as it seems when Roosevelt became president. But there seems to be a change when Roosevelt came.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, there was. Arguments are both ways on that. Hoover was a very brilliant man and I'm glad he lived to see that it was proven. They call it the Hoover Depression -- you know a lot of people, but some of the things that he was ready to start, he couldn't get started. But Roosevelt got in there and he closed the banks and got things on a going basis and did a very good job.

But you wondered when they closed the banks, what was going to happen. And a lot of banks failed. And we were fortunate here that these banks didn't fail. In fact, the State of Delaware, as you probably know, didn't have any banks fail. But I know friends in Pennsylvania who lost all their money. It was tough. Roosevelt got it moving again.

Interviewer: Were there any of the projects like WPA or *[inaudible]* **[0:08:31]** that involved Newark?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yes. They had WPA. Men working -- doing work around the university. I don't know what their project was but I know I used to see them out there digging and stuff like that, mostly labor work.

Interviewer: I though Newark was a Republican area and therefore, it would have *[inaudible]* **[0:08:59]**.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, in times like that you forget politics. [Laughter] When you need something to eat, you're not going to worry whether you're a Democrat or Republican.

Interviewer: The impression I've been getting is that there were a couple of people who, even though, they needed spending, they needed food, they needed clothing for their children, they were too proud to go and ask, go and ask the government for these things.

Mr. Johnson: There were some here in Newark who were that way. They wouldn't ask for it but I guess they made out to their relatives or so fort. But there weren't too many like that because everybody knew that the other person didn't have any money, so -- or not a lot of money I would say.

[0:10:00]

Interviewer: Was there any church work done to help you?

Mr. Johnson: Not that I know of. Maybe there was, I don't know.

Interviewer: Did you have a radio in the '30s?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, had a radio.

Interviewer: Do you remember what...

Mr. Johnson: Hmm?

Interviewer: Do you remember the program that you listen to?

Mr. Johnson: Well, Amos and Andy. And that -- they were so popular that a lot of movie houses wouldn't start their picture until after that program was off. The Canadians, we used to listen to them. We enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Did you get to the movies at all right across the street?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. We used to go and see some movies but neither one of us cared too much for movies. If they had a good picture on, we would go see it. Of course, that was a time that when they were -- every now and then come out with a big production picture you know. It was very good. We enjoyed it.

Interviewer: Have the students changed over the years that you've seen -- students at the university?

Mr. Johnson: Well, in those years, I wasn't much older than the students. And of course, that made the difference. Now, I'm a lot older than they are and I don't look at things the way I did then. We never had any trouble with the students. As far as I could see, they're always been about the same. At least, we always thought they were and I believe they were.

Interviewer: You mean long hair doesn't matter?

Mr. Johnson: Well, it doesn't matter to me if they keep it clean. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Well, some people feel that there have been changes. They feel that if there was, let's say, another depression like the one in the '30s that the youths, the young people of today wouldn't do as good as the young people of those days. Do you think?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. I don't believe they would do as good because the youth of that time worked and a lot of youth today don't work, as far as I can see. I don't mean all the youths but there's a certain group. And there's too

much of this welfare, the government has got to keep me and things like that.

I just came back from Scandinavian countries. We were gone two months and they were all welfare countries. Then they're taught that the state will keep them whether they work or whether they don't work. Of course, in the communist countries, it was different. They all had to work but they never were allowed to own anything. They just worked.

Interviewer: Why is work so important?

Mr. Johnson: What?

Interviewer: Why do you feel that work is so important?

Mr. Johnson: Well, you got to live and to me the way our generation was brought up, you got to work to eat. Of course, today, I don't know.

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That's what I meant by that. That's what I mean by work. Doesn't matter what kind of work but the only way I know that you can earn money is by working or investing.

Interviewer: I was wondering -- yeah, does work build character, does work make a person better -- a better person.

Mr. Johnson: Oh, I think so. Yes. At least it doesn't matter what kind of work, I think that it expresses what's in it whether he works with his hands or mental work.

Interviewer: Are you a native in Delaware?

Mr. Johnson: Well, I was born in New Jersey but I came to Newark in the last month of 1925. So practically a native.

Interviewer: Do you think that we might have another depression?

Mr. Johnson: I don't -- not like that. I don't think -- no.

Interviewer: Why?

Mr. Johnson: Well, because with that depression, there was no stuff gap. You got out of work, you were out of work. There were no unemployment

compensations which we have now. And I believe in welfare if it's properly handled, and I think the government tries to handle it right but it's the people who take advantage of it.

In those days, when you lost your job, you were out and there was no way to get a job. There are no -- and if there is another depression, I don't think it will be nearly like that. No.

Interviewer: You think that the country has learned the lesson from the depression?

Mr. Johnson: Well, how many youths are there are going to vote this time? You don't know? Well of course, they don't remember the depression. So it's hard to answer that question.

Interviewer: I mean the parents, your generation that grew up in the depression. Has your generation learned a lesson from it?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, I think so. I think we saw the reforms and well, you just went on and on. We couldn't stop and think of -- now the other part of the country, as you know, out west, all those farms are lost, banks were closed but Newark was not hit as hard in my opinion as a lot of places.

Interviewer: I've been hearing Delaware as a state wasn't hit as hard.

Mr. Johnson: No, no. We all ate, we all lived. Yeah.

Interviewer: If we could change the subject a little bit, perhaps talk about the changes in Newark since 1925. What's happened in Newark, what's changed?

Mr. Johnson: Well, when we came to Newark, the population was 4,500 people. And as you know what it is now, 20,000 or something like that. The town has expanded several times. When we came to Newark the southern boundary was at Kells Avenue. You know that's right below here. And there were no supermarkets -- well, there was American store and an AMT. There are no shopping centers or anything like that.

[0:20:00]

A lot of the business -- there were a lot of farmers around here. Saturday was a busy day for the merchants because the farmers supposedly came to town Saturdays. But it has changed. It has expanded. That's as near as I can put it.

Interviewer: What about the industry?

Mr. Johnson: Well, in the industry, we had the two fiber mills and the Curtis Paper Mill. That was practically all the industry that was here. And of course, as you know now, we have Chrysler and this industrial park and a lot of industry around here now. It was what the people called just a college town when I came here.

Interviewer: Do you think that the changes are for the better for Newark?

Mr. Johnson: Well, that's debatable for a lot of people.

Interviewer: What's your opinion?

Mr. Johnson: Well, I like progress, being in business or was in business. But it's like every other places, it's just getting big all over the country. And you're not going to stop population growth and things like that and you just have to live with it, live with the change, to go with it. That's all you can do. I firstly, enjoyed myself when it was small even though I didn't have as much money. I don't know.

Interviewer: Have the relations between the university and the town been on a good label -- a good relationship between the two. We hear that...

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, about the pros and cons. While I was in town council, the Newark Town Council for six years and we never had any trouble with the university. They were very cooperative. But still, you would find people -- I don't know whether you call it jealousy. I don't like to use the word. People that worked at the mills will say. They were more or less jealous of the university people. And you would hear remarks but there was never any trouble. We all got along all right.

The town supplied the university with *[inaudible] [0:23:29]* and they were one of the best customers we had. No. We didn't have any trouble.

Interviewer: Did the expansion of the university bother the people in the *[inaudible] [0:23:45]*?

Mr. Johnson: When the university started to buy up houses right up on Dollar Avenue, up on the hill, it bothered some people. They wondered what they were going to do. But it all worked out all right, yeah.

Interviewer: Have relations changed between the black population in Newark and the white population? Is there...

Mr. Johnson: I think they had more freedom now, which I'm glad they do. But I was the first businessman to hire a colored person in Delaware -- not in Delaware, in Newark.

[0:25:00]

I got criticisms from some people and other people said that I was a good man to do it, but she's still working at Rhodes Drugstore. That's Elizabeth. She's been there 28 years, I think. But we had no trouble with the colored -- we never had any trouble with the colored people in Newark.

Interviewer: Never any violence.

Mr. Johnson: No, except when Chrysler moved in, they brought quite a few from Detroit. Of course, they couldn't fit into Newark, so they spread out. But some of them caused trouble amongst the other colored people, not Newark people.

Interviewer: Has the drug business changed?

Mr. Johnson: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: How?

Mr. Johnson: Well, everything is chemistry now. It used to be when I studied, it was all pharmacognosy with the roots in -- you made a lot of your own medicine but today you buy everything, everything is in pill form. [Laughter] All you had to do is know how to count and read.

Interviewer: How was the road -- how this part about this change -- I don't remember the old drugstore. What was it like where people come in friendlier...?

Mr. Johnson: Have you lived here very long?

Interviewer: No.

Mr. Johnson: Well, that store originally started in 1856. Not a dislocation. The center of Newark east coming down where the Saint John's Catholic Church is on Main Street. That was the center of the town then. And it wasn't Rhodes Drugstore then, it -- I forget. I got it all down at the office. But the drug business has changed like any other business.

Interviewer: When did the town moved down to this part of Main Street?

Mr. Johnson: The town here?

Interviewer: Yes.

Mr. Johnson: Well, this used to be an apple orchard. That's the reason it's called Orchard Road. And over here, it used to be the farmhouse where that fraternity -- they have a kindergarten over there now. And this part was not in Newark at that time but Mr. J.P. Wright and George Townsend developed this area. They built this Orchard Road first and then Townsend Road and then across, and then the town took it in, I guess. I forgot just when all that happened but it was in the '30s I think.

Interviewer: How did Rhodes Drugstore, get the name Rhodes? Was it bought by Mr. Rhodes.

Mr. Johnson: Yeah. George W. Rhodes. He bought it from Dr. Butler. I forget just when but that's -- and I bought it from Dr. Rhodes in 1942. I worked for him for 17 years and those when the depression came in because I was making a living but you couldn't accumulate any money, so you just had to keep on working. But we had an arrangement where he would make it possible for me to buy the store on like an installment payment.

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And I always can carry that on in Rhodes' name. And I have sold it now to this fellow Grant with the understanding that he not changed the name.

Interviewer: What kind of work did you do in the drugstore?

Mr. Johnson: Well, I was the manager, pharmacist.

Interviewer: Did you mix a lot of prescription?

Mr. Johnson: Oh yeah. I graduated from Philadelphia College of Pharmacy in 1920. In fact, I attended the 50th anniversary of the class [laughter] in 1970. I don't know anything else.

Interviewer: Well, that's okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Johnson: In Newark, there wasn't any place for the students to get their breakfast if they missed the dining hall over at the university. And we didn't serve anything hot at Rhodes Drugstore, I found, but we served milkshakes and crackers. And many, including Senator Boggs, and Judge Wright and all

those fellows, I see them now, they say, "Emerson, if it hadn't been for Rhodes' milkshakes, I wouldn't be here." Well...

[0:31:53]

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