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Iron Hill School Oral History Project

Interview with Lois May Johnson

Date of Interview: April 11, 2007
Interviewer: Roberta Perkins
Transcriber: Marcia Adams

Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins, todays date is Wednesday, April 11th, 2007 and I am here at the Hockessin Community Center in Hockessin, Delaware with Lois May Johnson and Mrs. Johnson, while she did not attend Iron Hill she did attend a one-room school in Hockessin and she has a very interesting history story also to tell us about her involvement with the integration at the Hockessin School. Mrs. Johnson thank you so very much.

Mrs. Johnson: Oh you are quite welcome, thank you for asking me.

Roberta: We feel like it would be some kind of information that we could use in the museum and in our exhibits.

Mrs. Johnson: I'm glad to share.

Roberta: Let me start with asking you for the record, your full name and your date of birth.

Mrs. Johnson: Lois May Johnson, Williams is my maiden name, January 13th 1940.

Roberta: Where were you born?

Mrs. Johnson: I was born on Circle Road here in Hockessin, Delaware.

Roberta: How do you spell that?

Mrs. Johnson: Circle.

Roberta: Oh, okay, Circle Road. Who were your parents?

Mrs. Johnson: My parents were Lillian and George King.

Roberta: Were they from Delaware?

Mrs. Johnson: My father I think came from out of Pennsylvania then migrated down here in Delaware.

Roberta: Okay, what about siblings?

Mrs. Johnson: I have eight. There are eight of us. I am the third oldest. I have two sisters and five brothers.

Roberta: Do you care to name them for us?

Mrs. Johnson: Well there is (inaudible) she is the oldest and George, and then its myself, Lois May and Lorraine and Ronald, Kenneth, Walter and Stephen.

Roberta: Are they still all in this area?

Mrs. Johnson: Well there is only three of us left now, that's Kenneth, Lorraine and myself. They have all deceased.

Roberta: Tell me a little bit about...let's start with the school. What was the name of the school at the time?

Mrs. Johnson: Well 107 Colored School.

Roberta: And the Community Center was once...

Mrs. Johnson: Yes the Community Center right now was the Hockessin, well 107 Colored School. I started in first grade, I was six years old, my mother and my uncles and aunts, everyone went here.

Roberta: Is that right?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes they all went here to the 107 Colored. It's been quite a family tradition.

Roberta: Tell me about it, anything that you care to share as I am asking you questions, please do. So you started in first grade?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes.

Roberta: And what year was that?

Mrs. Johnson: That was in 1946. Yes, and well then they didn't have kindergarten or pre-school or anything so you came at six years old because there was only two rooms in this school and eight grades. One time there was just one teacher and that was Miss Beaujon.

Roberta: Would you spell that?

Mrs. Johnson: B-e-a-u-j-o-n. She was French. Roberta: Was she African-American?

Mrs. Johnson: She was French, her name was Beatrice.

Roberta: So then all of the schools that taught black children at that time did not always have black teachers?

Mrs. Johnson: No, not really, we didn't have another teacher, Mrs. Russum she came later to help Miss Beaujon but she was African-American. But for a while it was just like I said Miss Beaujon and the eight grades but she was a very good teacher. Very strict disciplinarian, made sure that you did what you were supposed to do. You know, scholastically and we loved her. We loved her very much but it was hard. I often wondered did we get the one hundred percent which we didn't in a lot of ways because we didn't have materials to substantiate our learning. We got books from the Hockessin school up on the hill which was all white at

that point but by the time we got them they were dog-eared and raggedy and some of the pages were missing or they were all written in so that we couldn't put our own ideas and answers down in the workbook so it was a struggle there for a while but Miss Beaujon made sure that we geared ourselves accordingly and I was really pleased with that. Now that I am grown up I appreciate what she did for us and how much she sacrificed to make sure that us little black children at that point get as much of an education as we could out of what we had. It was gratifying. It is gratifying now to know that we got the best that she had.

Roberta: Interesting.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes.

Roberta: Did she live in the area?

Mrs. Johnson: No, she lived in Wilmington.

Roberta: In Wilmington? Did she have her own transportation?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, she drove herself. She commuted every day, snow or whatever, you know, she was right here for us children.

Roberta: Do you know how she came to be assigned?

Mrs. Johnson: No I don't. That's funny because I never thought about that. I have no idea unless it was through the school board or the Board of Education or something like that. I really don't know but I'm really glad we had her.

Roberta: You mentioned workbooks. Did you have textbooks and workbooks?

Mrs. Johnson: We had textbooks and some workbooks, you know, and they were so sparse and few that it was like passing around the torch. We all had to take turns and you can't get very much out of that because the words

and the work was already done so that's not beneficial to you because the answers were there and it didn't give you a chance to apply your own personal answers whether yes or no, or right or wrong.

Roberta: That is interesting because I know I had heard about the books themselves but I have never heard anyone talk about workbooks.

Mrs. Johnson: It was quite a feat for her to work around, learning for ourselves in lieu of seeing what is right in front of us.

Roberta: So would she have maybe a separate page or how would she work around the answers...

Mrs. Johnson: I vaguely remember her blocking out areas that would give us the answer blatantly right there. She did a wonderful job with us children. She really did. I appreciate it now.

Roberta: Give us an idea, as you can remember, it doesn't matter which grade, what the day was it like for you coming to school. Did you walk to school? Were you close enough to walk?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, I lived right down this road on Grant Avenue, we walked to school every day.

Roberta: What are we looking at now?

Mrs. Johnson: We are looking out the back window. This is all grown in. Go down this little road here, well it's paved now but there was one little dirt path, go down the hill, across a plank creek, up the hill and across the field. That was our exit and entrance, arriving at the school.

Roberta: So the area was, I'm looking out the back window here and I see this little house so was that house there? Was it more wooded?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, very much so. Very much so, in fact it was wooded and an open

field, like a cornfield. Two little planks that came down the hill and these two little planks you crossed to get up on the next hill to come to school.

Roberta: And so when you came in to school, how was the room set up? You came in the front door...

Mrs. Johnson: You came in the front door there was a pole that sat not directly in the door but just like inside the door on the right hand side is where Miss Beaujon and the higher grades and on the left hand side were the lower grades, like you were gradual down you know and we had I remember this old wood stove and everybody would try to gather around that wood stove. Can you imagine us coming in out of the snow and getting near that stove and all you can see is the permeating of the tendrils of the smoke going up from your clothing, trying to heat yourself up. Once in a while, it was treacherous in the wintertime and by the time we got here at school I mean we were like frozen! So we were allowed to just kind of like congregate, for a minute or two, around the stove. Around the little stove so we could un-thaw before class. And then coming in and she would give us a few minutes outside and then she would ring this bell, I mean this large bell and when we heard the clinkety clink clink we knew we had to get inside immediately. She was a wonderful teacher.

Roberta: That's interesting because you went to a two-room school and the teacher was on the right hand side, her main office and desk was on the right?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes and it's just a marvel how she separated her mind for the class, you know, as far as academics but she did. I mean she taught from eight to first grade in this one or two little room school. Yes, marvelous teacher. Marvelous, and to know that my mother and my aunts and uncles, everyone went here, yes indeed.

Roberta: Did she teach any of your relatives or was she like new when you started?

Mrs. Johnson: Any of my relatives? Uhm let me see who was here. I'm not quite sure about my mother and my father because that would be you know but my older brothers and sisters, yes. She taught them, my two older brothers and sisters.

Roberta: About how old a woman?

Mrs. Johnson: Oh, gee whiz I think then, oh dear goodness sakes Miss Beaujon would have been may about in her late thirties or forties or something like that. She wasn't quite, I don't want to say „old,' up in age when we went out of here in the fifth grade and then she taught what, five or six years after that but coming to school she seemed old to us anyway.

Roberta: Yes, when you're young kids. You were talking about the stove, that uhm heated you, you know when you came in, was it a wood burning stove?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, a wood burning stove.

Roberta: Who had to take care of that?

Mrs. Johnson: Pete Peterson.

Roberta: Pete Peterson?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, he took care of just about everything you know around here on the community well Hockessin 107 at that point. He took care of it.

Roberta: Was he like the custodian?

Mrs. Johnson: In a sort, yes. He was a great man.

Roberta: Was he paid by the state or...

Mrs. Johnson: I don't know, I don't know if he was paid or not.

Roberta: I interrupted you let me let you go back to your school day and kind of walk us through if you can remember as much as you can do. When you came in what was the first event of the day and then go on to the classes and special activities.

Mrs. Johnson: Right, when we came in we stood for the Pledge of Allegiance and then we would sing a song, America the Beautiful or something very patriotic and then we would be assigned to our classroom activities for the day and we would spend maybe three hours doing things academically and then we would have recess. We would go out here in the backyard and we would have a Maypole and we would play that and the swings and we didn't have very many things to play with you know but we made our fun. We played dodgeball and kick-the-can and jacks and it was just a wonderful time. A wonderful time and then after half an hour the bell would ring and she would be out there in the front and she would ring the bell and then we would come in and get into our different directions or sections of the room and then she would start again. What she instilled in us was respect for others. That means when she was working with the higher grades we are to respect their space as to being quiet until our turn and that's what we did. When she was working with us then of course the older ones would have their work to do and all that and they would also respect other times. It was just such a wonderful, wonderful thing. It taught us a lot. Unbeknownst to us at that time that everything had its place in life and that was our time and our place but children didn't hold too much store in things like that because it doesn't mean anything to you at that point. But as you grow older and in the older part of your life you appreciate the sacrifice and she sacrificed a lot to make sure that us little colored children got what we could of an education in life. It was hard and I know it was hard on her.

Roberta: Do you remember any special, maybe events or situations that might address what you just said?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, we used to do plays and we would have little skits and we had a May Day every May and we would have a ceremony and go out in the yard, dress up our Maypole with streamers and we would do the May dance and my sister and I were very vocal in singing and so we would do the songs for the May Day, the oh what was that, something about Spring Day in May, it was a little song that we used to do and it was just so nice because we got a chance to dress up in our little frilly dresses. We didn't have much because I was the third of eight children and I mean we were like sparse but what we did have we appreciated. We truly did and Miss Beaujon, she made sure that everyone had a sense of awareness of self as to what you think you should be and what you think you want to be and what you ought to be. You know, she made you aware, even with all of the eight grades in this building it was almost like she individualized you vocabulary.

Roberta: Very interesting.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, she was much aware of who you were and what to expect of yourself. I loved her for that.

Roberta: Did you want to continue on with that story?

Mrs. Johnson: I would just like to expound a little on her discipline.

Roberta: Please, yes, anything that would give us a picture of your day.

Mrs. Johnson: If you did something that you weren't supposed to do she had this ruler and when she called your name you knew immediately do not be a reluctant debutante, go and get your punishment that was being meted out. So you just walked right on over and you turn your hands up and you would take whatever you rightly deserved. Whether you thought

you did or not but that was her way of discipline. First of all she would tell you what you did and it wasn't all the time being smacked in the palm of your hand with a ruler. She would tell you, 'do you think that your actions hurt you or somebody else and if they hurt someone else what do you think you need to do about the situation? You need to go to that person and apologize and never repeat that infraction.' Like I said with the eight grades in here I'm still in awe as to how she would almost individualize each student. She just had that way about her. My sister and I were like, they called us twins, we are two years apart but we were so connected, even now, that we were inseparable and we would feed on each other. You know what I am saying and every time she called Lois May she would call Lorraine or if she called Lorraine she would call Lois May. It was, I don't know, I just think about the input. The instilment and the pride and the self-awareness and self-assurance that she gave those children and it made a difference. We didn't think of it then but now that it was implanted and it was something no one could take away and then later in life you feed off of that and we have. We truly have and I was always a person that would store things. I mean I have always been a pack rat as far as older things. I loved older people, always and what she said to us, my sister always said, my sister is a very intelligent person and she is always also a storehouse of wanting to learn and to store things and we didn't realize the deal, I say warehouse of information, until we got older and we could see how it arrived in our lives in the course of our lives that what she taught us was not something that she just said it was something that she wanted to instill so that we can use this in our endeavors and I've always loved old things and this building, oh my God, I loved it especially because my grandfather died right up there in that room. We were having a meeting and he fell across our neighbor's lap and he passed in here and I don't know why, you know how children are at one point my sister and I were very much aware of him dying in here and it

held sort of a spirituality for us, coming in and knowing that oh, this is where our grandfather died and as children – oh his spirit still running around in here? You know children act, I don't know we just felt a part of it because of his demise in that room. It's a funny thing.

Roberta: Interesting.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes.

Roberta: Very interesting, you constantly feel the ties.

Mrs. Johnson: Absolutely and a good one, a good one – oh boy, my grandfather died in here and we also his spirit is still running around.

Roberta: What a wonderful way to look at it. How did Miss Beaujon's ability to install that sense of self in you, how did that serve you in your classes, learning your lessons?

Mrs. Johnson: Academically?

Roberta: Yes.

Mrs. Johnson: To learn? Everything. My sister and I both were always well read, we started reading at five years old, my mother always started us, we didn't have the books that the children have now but we would read the Sears & Roebuck catalogs and anything that we could get our hands on. One time we snuck in the outhouse with her *Modern Romance*.

Roberta: Now this is during school?

Mrs. Johnson: This was when we were in school and like I said we were always well read.

Roberta: So when did you have time to take your *Modern Romance* and go...was this like a free time.

Mrs. Johnson: No, no that was after school.

Roberta: Oh, after school.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, after school but like I said we were always well read, my sister more so than me because I was a tomboy and I would rather be out there jumping the creek and playing football or whatever but I still was well read and so we were like a couple of steps ahead of certain children, you know what I mean and our awareness of literacy was a little more brighter.

Roberta: Did that happen a lot at home? I mean did you see family members or parents read a lot?

Mrs. Johnson: My mother, she loved to read and my older sister, in fact we all loved to read even my brothers we all loved to read because reading is not only academic, reading is a source of awareness of other people and other places and you know being aware that you can take yourself out of yourself through a book made us all that much more avid readers because like I said I was the third of eight, we didn't have very much but that reading took us through some lives that we might not have led, well you know what I am saying but it made us aware that there are other people and other places and exciting places. I didn't know a thing about Timbuktu until a book. I didn't know anything about Turkey, Greece or anything through the *National Geographic*, we wore the covers off the *National Geographic* and we really got just almost another life.

Roberta: Were the *National Geographics* in your home or in school?

Mrs. Johnson: Well at home because my mother did domestic work and she would bring the issue home and oh man, what a joy. Like I said we have been to Casablanca, but to talk, Miss Beaujon knew that we were well read and she would often times draw attention. Now my sister was very shy

about it but I was always the mouthy one, to impart information about things that we had read.

Roberta: So how did she use that in class work? Did she just have you share it or did she somehow make a lesson out of it?

Mrs. Johnson: No this is like she and I. She never really got it out in the classroom or made them aware of how ‘intelligent’ my sister and I were literacy you know but she was aware that we were both very involved in (inaudible) literature. She never brought us out front and I’m glad but she was aware of it. We had a wonderful time. Wonderful.

Roberta: This is the end of tape 1, side 1.

Roberta: This is Roberta Perkins this is tape 1, side 2 and the question I wanted to ask Mrs. Johnson was do you remember whether the school had its own little library, a collection of books, over and above the textbooks?

Mrs. Johnson: Well we had some, I was never, I can’t say interested, I didn’t delve too much in books outside of the textbooks but there was a collection, a small collection of books, as far as books of poetry, and a music book, I do remember them. We did have a Bible but nothing that we could take out and take home or anything like that. I wish we did but we didn’t.

Roberta: Was the Bible part of the beginning school?

Mrs. Johnson: Well if I am remembering correctly...

Roberta: The beginning of the school day.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes she did a Scripture because we always did the Pledge of Allegiance and we sang like I say a patriotic song and if I remember correctly she did indulge several times on the scripture. I know Miss Russum did. Mostly like when we had plays or something like that it was scripturally

inbound and spiritually.

Roberta: What about arts and crafts? Did she get involved in that with the students?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, oh my most favorite activity was woodcarving. She would give us a block of wood and this little kit with the woodcarving tools and tell us to do whatever we wanted to do. That was the most memorable of ever because it was something that you could keep for years and years and years and I remember one day I was trying to do this rooster. I think that I chopped off his cock comb five times and had to use the liquid wood glue to put it back on. I couldn't get that doggone thing to go my way at all so finally I did and with the help of the liquid wood glue or whatever you call that stuff I finally got it done and got it shellacked and I often wonder what happened to it because right now that would have been a...

Roberta: Such a memory.

Mrs. Johnson: Oh my God wouldn't that have been. Yes, it would have been and then we did potholders one time. I wasn't very apt at that because I wasn't interested, I was looking out the window at the guys playing football and that's where I would like to have been instead of doing my little whatever I was supposed to do but the older guys they did a lot of wood crafting also and they did some very beautiful pieces so I wish now that we had thought to keep. But you know when you are young like that those things don't mean a hill of beans.

Roberta: Did she give you any basic idea of how to start with the carving or she just gave you the wood and gave you the...

Mrs. Johnson: Yes she showed us how, ok first of all you gather all your materials – what is it that you want to do and you would say well okay I want to do a dog, okay you draw the outline of the dog onto the wood and then you

take this little anvil and then you chip the outline out and that's fine and then you take another larger blade and then you chip out all the wood on the outline to make it like a three dimensional object. She was very good at that.

Roberta: Were there kits for everybody or just a few of the children at a time?

Mrs. Johnson: Well you know it depends on the grade. Each grade had a choice of what they wanted to do. They weren't really kits they were just pieces of old wood. I don't know where she acquired them unless they were like hand-me-downs from another school possibly because I know the tools certainly were but they were castoffs but they were okay. They were fundamental to us and we used them (inaudible) we really did. She made sure that you knew what you were doing. It wasn't a hodge podge, if you wanted a boat then it was a boat you made or – anything that if you put your mind to it, she made sure that that subject was indelved on that piece of wood. She didn't like that's okay, no it wasn't okay. This is a flower, this is a daisy, it has a stem, it has the leaves out it has a certain amount of shape and the color and everything. She made sure that you were perfect in what you were doing. It was wonderful, wonderful. I loved it. We did a lot of painting, a lot of like water coloring. She was just so great. I just loved coming in here. Oh, the worst thing was when your punishment was doing the blackboards, oh my word, oh my gosh I got in a little altercation out in the school yard with my best friend (inaudible) that was I had stayed over and to clean all the blackboards and the erasers now you see me out there hitting those erasers together getting it all up in your nose, getting you all pre-white so to speak and you had to do it right, if you didn't do it right you stayed there until you did. She was a stickler on...

Roberta: Now when you say do it right, you mean how clean you got them?

Mrs. Johnson: Absolutely, how clean and the blackboards also because you erase

everything and then you take clear water and a rag and you wash the whole blackboard and if there is any little white streaks you clean the whole blackboard. That was a form of punishment that we thought was the most awful thing in the world.

Roberta: Was it a deterrent?

Mrs. Johnson: Uhm well anyway it taught a lesson and that was the important factor, a lesson being taught that you paid for your infraction and it seemed like a little thing to us, I mean they were infractions but her method of discipline was like, oh my God I have to say after school today and you look out the window and see everybody still on the playground you know running around and getting on the seesaws and all of that and you're in here sneezing and blowing your heart out over beating these erasers standing in the back door because you know it was – you were beating these together and everybody's laughing at you because that was your discipline for what you did. It was okay, right now I find it so wonderful. That's minor to what the world is today.

Roberta: Do you think her approach to teaching had any bearing on making you a good citizen?

Mrs. Johnson: Absolutely, yes because like I said she taught us awareness of self and where she didn't really you know go in depth as far as adulthood she taught us the things that we are learning now what transpired in our course of living into our adulthood and that what we do now makes all the difference in the world of our life and our livelihood, yes. One connects with the other. Oh we didn't pay attention to it then of course you know but during the course of our lives we saw what she tried to instill in us as far as being all you can, she really did. She was a wonderful teacher. Wonderful and this was my calling, coming to school, this was my call, when I was eleven I got struck down with rheumatic fever. I was on the playground and we were going around the

Maypole and I don't know how I got on the ground. All I remember after that was that someone was carrying me home, I was in the hospital three months and they had brought all the family in because they thought I was going to expire and with the grace of God I didn't but I still lost a whole year of school so by the time I came back to school that September my sister and I were in the same grade. But I don't know it was just, the school was my solace because at home, like I was like the third of the like I said and uhm it was a lot of brothers and sister siblings, we never fought. We did not fight each other but just the, the uhm how can I say it, not having your private space and when we came to school everybody had their own little nook you know? Oh this is my time, this is my desk, these are my little 'raggedy books' and uhm this is mine, not literally but you know the little individualities there and I loved school and I loved learning and I used to write my little poems and my sister and I used to sing all the while in the little programs and all of that and yes and Christmas oh the most wonderful time we had when we had the Christmas programs. Oh my gosh I mean some of the costumes and things were made of paper or made of little pieces of rags but the portrayal of what we tried to get across was the meaningful part of it you know. That was just the most marvelous time when we did plays and you know you learn a lot from plays. We learned about Jesus Christ of course his birth and his death and we had Easter programs. Each holiday we had a program and it was just marvelous and as vivid as my sister and my's imagination and our awareness, well it was all that much more meaningful because we kind of like got the sense of what was trying to be portrayed to other people in the audience. It was just a marvelous time. I loved my time here. Great time, great. I don't think that I would trade it some little incidents I thought I would because, only because of my own misbehavior, nothing to hurt anybody else basically you do things to yourself. I remember one time my girlfriend Dee and I, we had recess we were running around for the

same swing and of course I thought I got there first, I really didn't, but I was going to stand my ground so we got into this confrontation and we were brought inside and we were talked to about sharing well of course like I said I was always voiceful and I said well you know Miss Beaujon I think I should get it because I was there first and Romaine said no you wasn't Lois I was there first and I saidhmm okay lets compromise, I'm thinking in my little mind, because at thatpoint I was well aware of how not – manipulations – but how to compromise, having eight others you had to learn that in order to gain certain things that you okay so she said okay girls go back out and you work it out. So we went back out and we worked it out. We heard the school bell ring, we came barreling around, the last two on the playground, we come barreling around the building, Romaine went to go up on the steps and she straddled them and oh I thought that was the most hilarious thing in the world. I stood out there just laughing my heart out, didn't have any idea that she really did hurt herself permanently and I had no idea this was happening, oh I thought it was so funny, when we were brought inside and her parents came to get her and Miss Beaujon said to me, 'Lois you laughed at your classmate she hurt herself severely.' I had no idea, the way she landed was comical to me and I just started laughing. Boy when I got home I felt so bad, I truly did and well Romaine lived right up the across the little field, from the house up and I wanted to go up there and see her but I was afraid she would be angry with me so when we got back to school I said are you okay Dee and she said well what do you care, you laughed, you laughed at me. I said well the way you landed it was funny to me but I said now that I know that you hurt yourself I was sad and I was upset the whole time honest to God knows I surely was because I had no idea she had hurt herself so severely. Well we became friends again and Miss Beaujon she let us work it out. (Inaudible) let us work it out. Bless her heart. Wonderful time, wonderful.

Roberta:

Did she ever give you guys homework?

Mrs. Johnson: You know I can't remember truly having homework, I can't. Most of the time we did, oh let me back up on that we had 'Dick and Jane.' Yes we did and we had these little books, 'Dick and Jane and Spot' and yes we did we had to take these books home and read certain passages and be ready for orations the next day. Yes I do remember taking Jane and Spot.

Roberta: What about tests? Do you remember tests?

Mrs. Johnson: I do remember tests slightly, in fact like at the end of the year each grade did a testing and everybody would have their – I remember I think it was like a three and four pages of things to do. Someone from the Board of Education came if I remember correctly and gave us the tests – pamphlets– and we had to do the tests, yes I do remember especially the older ones because they would be transporting themselves into Wilmington you know and of course they had to be academically to pass on to the grades to go to Howard.

Roberta: From eighth grade here they went to Howard?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, I never went because by that time you know, 1954, they had started the Brown vs. The Board of Education and I never got a chance to go to Howard.

Roberta: What was that time like, I want to come back but so what, we are going to have to divert a little bit, Brown vs. The Board of Education, I understand that that was a time for you.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes it was. During the course of our lives we played with black, white, purple, green, we had a lot of Cubans and Italians around at that time and so we played with everybody and there was no mention of black or white or purple or green or you were this or that. But when we started, of course you know with the Bulah (the name of Bulah is how it appeared in the media) and the Gebhardt case and how Mrs. Bulah

fought for her daughter Shirley to go the Hockessin Consolidated on the hill and after that transpired my mother decided that Lorraine and I would benefit from that 'quality' education and so in the fifth grade we went sent up on top of the hill. When we got there as God as my witness, the first day we walked into the room they were reading 'Little Black Sambo.' That was the first time in our reading or our lives that we ever saw the word black or a black face depicted in a school book and we were astounded because like I said my sister and I were both in the same room and the same grade and Lorraine and I, well we've always been connected and we kind of looked at each other and she held her head down and I just (inaudible) 'Little Black Sambo' who is Little Black Sambo, you know, and that was the first awareness that we were something other than what we are, Lorraine and Lois Williams. Just two little colored girls who played with everybody around in the community, black, white and whoever and what really was the hurting time when the ones that we played with, the white children, were no longer our friends. We found out the difference of being black and being white. I know that one young man that lived down the road, Ernest Thompson I'll never forget it, his mother sent a letter to our principal, Mrs. Moore was the principal and our teacher, this was up at the Hockessin Consolidated up on top of the hill up on Old Lancaster Pike and she read the letter out to us in the class saying that the black children, nigger children, should go to their own school, that she refused to have her son be in school with us. We thought that was the most degrading thing, I mean we were like dumbfound at this grownup saying such a thing. It was the most hurtful time.

Roberta: Why would the teacher read it?

Mrs. Johnson: She read it in class, she said to us she didn't read it out in class as to embarrass or humiliate us, she read it out in class so that everyone would know that that kind of action or letter would not be tolerated in

her school because we were there to be taught on an equal basis just as the white children. So it was not like uhm like I said she apologized because she was not doing it for humiliation or embarrassment toward the black children because it was my sister and the two Peterson boys and myself were black.

Roberta: The two Peterson boys?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes but it was a source of humiliation, it truly was.

Roberta: When you said that that was a time that you realized, that there was this realization there was a difference in how you interacted with the children that you had always played with and it happened at that school so other than what you just told me what were the things that happened that made you realize that made them change, they seemed to change (inaudible)?

Mrs. Johnson: Well they really did because we used to play with some children up here the Keatings and the Greens and when we went to school it was a whole different atmosphere. They got in their own little group and we weren't— well we played together all these years and we played together all of these days, what's the separation now? But we didn't understand that it wasn't them or their doing it was the in-house and the parents that made the separation. We didn't understand that, we thought oh well my God we played with you all these years why now am I not your friend? What happened? Because we were not fully aware of the integration rules you know and what it entailed as far as separatism and it really made a dent in our life because we saw it different then. Then it was hey, you're black and I am white and there is a separate and we became very much aware of two factors and it was not a happy time.

Roberta: How many years did you go to that school?

Mrs. Johnson: I went from until, just two years because we went like midway and then

graduated from sixth grade and went down to Absalom Jones but during my tenure up there I don't know if you are aware of Ethel Cheney? She was a teacher up there well anyway before we even got there and during the course of deseg she had put an article in the 'Redbook' about how she would not teach black children and how she did not want us to come up to the school. I am paraphrasing because it's in the black book and, the 'Redbook', it was called the 'Redbook' to do remember that book?

Roberta: No, I was going to as you.

Mrs. Johnson: It was a book called the 'Redbook' and it had a lot of educational things you know, I don't know if it was basically scholastic or whatever but I remember the 'Redbook' but it was on the market and it was a well renowned book that everybody read and like I said Lorraine and I were well read and when we read that article we just couldn't understand how a grownup could not want to teach everybody but she wrote that article and it was a very heartbreaking article. We were aware of it before we started school up there. When we got there we didn't find her any different from anybody but we were afraid to approach her, she was unapproachable because of her article and so one day she caught me out in the hall and she said, 'Lois I want to tell you something. I have enjoyed teaching the children that I did and I wish I had a chance to have taught you and your sister because you two have been by far some of the fly-by-nights that I have taught,' and I am thinking this is the woman that wrote all of that in the 'Redbook' of how she didn't want to teach the black children and how she would never teach us and we should be in our school and be taught by our own kind 'our own kind' you know this is the teacher, from that point on she always made us aware that she was on our side. I don't know what changed her, I you know or uhm as I grew up I am thinking did she say that just to uhm put uhm a balm on the wound of what she said in the 'Redbook' you know

or to cover up her real heart or her real thoughts you know but as a professional (inaudible?) I was always a professional person. I was in this assembly and we didn't have any black people to portray, I know there were some but they didn't do it so I had to take on the part of Amelia Earhart. I am on the stage with about six or seven others, just us two blacks, the Peterson boy and myself, and the rest are white and I am on the stage and I am looking out in the audience and out of maybe fifty people I see about three black parents and you know it was my time and I went to the mike and I said, 'good morning, my name is Amelia Earhart and I was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean' and you know the date of course and I went back and I mean they just clapped and everything and I am thinking oh wow you know, I made a hit. So I got rewarded by a trip to New York to see Radio Music Hall to see Vivian Leigh in the 'Swan Song' and I mean that was the highlight of my life. Okay that was fine and good but getting back to the school I was still that little black girl, still the one that my little white friends that I grew up and played with had a different attitude to my being there or being my friends. It was still there. The awareness never shed itself until I went to Absalom Jones but I think it still was embedded in here you know but it was a terrible time up there. It really was, it really was and the parents I never knew or felt how a child was a child black, white or green but the older white persons, the ones that we used to see in Gormley's store, oh, hi Lois how you doing today and blah, blah, were so hateful. I didn't know that we were the focal point of their dislike.

Roberta: This ends tape 1, side 2.

Roberta: This is tape 2, side 1, Roberta Perkins and I am speaking with Lois Johnson and she is continuing her experiences at the Hockessin Consolidated School.

Mrs. Johnson: Well like I said the awareness of black and white was so blatant to us

that it was not a joy going to that school, not like coming here with our own black siblings and school friends. I did gain some friends but it was always I guess a stigma there as far as our friendship could go. We didn't feel free to run in and out of the houses like we used to. Oh we used to be in and out of the white houses all the while and their kids would come to our house but that stopped because of this feeling that was uhm how can I say that after the beginning of integration. The feeling of being part of the friendship diminished even though in the summer friends we kept in good contact with. But it was a heart-wrenching thing; it really was heart-wrenching to become aware of the hatred.

Roberta: How many black students went there at the time you did?

Mrs. Johnson: There was my sister, the two Peterson boys, Shirley Bulah (Bulah was how the name appeared in the media) and myself. There was five of us.

Roberta: Five students. So going from there to Absalom Jones what did you take, I've got several things going on in my head, from that experience what was going to Absalom Jones like for you?

Mrs. Johnson: Going to Absalom Jones was another experience altogether because coming from that period from the white school it was totally different. I'm not saying that we were any smarter but the quality was a little more in depth in us, maybe I'm saying that incorrect but going to an all-black school again was a little different because we had learned an awful in that tenure of going to the white school that differed from going to the all-black school again. I don't want to say quality but there was a different quality as toward the teaching. Yes. My sister she left after a half a year at Absalom Jones because she went to Clovis with my older sisters, I was there alone by myself.

- Roberta: Your sister went where?
- Mrs. Johnson:** To Clovis, New Mexico with my older sister, she and her husband were in the service.
- Roberta: So you were there at Absalom Jones?
- Mrs. Johnson:** Yes.
- Roberta: By yourself?
- Mrs. Johnson:** By myself, yes, meaning my sister and I had gotten separated. I liked Absalom Jones, I had some good teachers and it was quite different than being taught by Mrs. Moore because I had different teachers for different subjects and that made you know...
- Roberta: What grade was that?
- Mrs. Johnson:** We went to Absalom Jones going in the sixth grade.
- Roberta: So did you go to different classrooms? Did you move around?
- Mrs. Johnson:** Yes, no we had like English and music and math and home economics, work shop so there was maybe like five or six different classes with different teachers which kind of stymied me because I was used to one teacher for a year or two and then one teacher up on top of the hill you know and then to all of a sudden be thrown into a situation where you are going to three or four or five different teachers kind of like stymied me. It took me a while to adapt.
- Roberta: How long did you go to Absalom?
- Mrs. Johnson:** I went there until tenth grade.
- Roberta: Okay and then you went to?
- Mrs. Johnson:** Well I came out of school because I thought I was grown, grown, okay

but then well of course I went back and finished my education and did some college. Those were the times.

Roberta: Do you think, as harsh as it was, that that experience at the Hockessin Consolidated School did that give you a more realistic, did it give you a foundation for dealing with what you had to deal with as an adult, even though it was harsh?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, yes because well it taught us that even though we went through that period there was a lesson lost, not lost but we lost some of our oh gosh, I want to say embraceable situations because we embraced life like black and white was an everyday thing. That everybody would be happy and jolly and we could just live life going through that. What the hard part of the separatism of knowing that you are black and you are white and you can't do the same things. You are not equal, we did not have, it was the realization that the books that we were studying out of were hand-me-downs.

Roberta: And what that meant?

Mrs. Johnson: That meant that we were second class, in life and academically because my mother was fired from a domestic job because she put us in Hockessin School. My mother was almost penalized from the Welfare Department and losing all her benefits because of her sending us to the Hockessin School. So it was a hurtful time for her also to want us to have a higher education but to lose so it was not really our total loss it was a devastation to my mother also you know, that they could be so cruel as to hold her wanting us to have an education against her and her losing her work, her job.

Roberta: So did her employers themselves make that decision or do you think pressure was put on them?

Mrs. Johnson: Well I'm sure that pressure was put on them I really did. I mean they

probably had some thought of course but I think the application of pressure was the main thing, I really do and as far as my mother losing, or almost losing the benefit of the support system was largely of them just wanting to punish her for wanting to be better educated and going into the white system. My mother persevered, she taught us whatever it is you do it for you. You can't let anything stand in your way. She took a lot of pressure. When she lost that job that was like taking half of our groceries out of our mouths you know because she solely depended on that domesticity to feed us kids, to clothe us, put shoes on our feet you know, that was her staple, her livelihood and when she lost that one job it meant a lot because she geared herself according you know to her domestic work taking care of us children.

Roberta: Did she get a job after that and how long did it...

Mrs. Johnson: Well there was never a want for housekeeping it was always you know a very open market as far as housekeeping was concerned so it wasn't long before she got a job but what she had to deal with was another factor. They weren't as kind as they were but they needed their house cleaned, okay and they gave her a very hard time but they knew that she had to do this to keep us fed and clothed and housed. It was a must for her to take some of their sly remarks or some of their meanness and disregard of her feeling as a human being.

Roberta: How long did this period last for your mother so it would be lasting for the rest of the family too when there you know, did, when you would have seen a time that this kind of ill-treatment of your mother would have passed?

Mrs. Johnson: Well it took quite a while because people are not prone to forget how they have to move over and give you that little inch of life such as equality so uhm I really can't say exactly when but during the course of the years, you know, two or three or four years you see a little

diminishing of some of the wall of bigotry being torn down or being resolved you know. It took a while, it really did. But it was still there under the surface all it did was you know they sugar-coated so that life could go on meaningfully for them of course and but it left a scab it really did. It wouldn't have taken much to scratch that scab and the source there but it did, it diminished some but it was still in the presence of my mind and heart that its there, that's something that can never be taken away.

Roberta: So do you feel that you know the strength that you got from your family and that sense of self that your teacher instilled in you do you think that was helpful in you and your sister weathering?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes I do because she made us aware that we, we and only us, can guide our destiny. It was up to us to get what we can out of life to maintain a better life for ourself. It was up to us, that nobody couldn't do it for you and not to deviate from your plan for yourself because people have a way of saying oh look at that. Look at that little black girl she needs to be taken down a peg or two because she is getting too up there and too equal, but you have to differentiate yourself from your friendships to what you know is good for you. She made us much aware that the only way blacks can get what they need is to persevere and not let anyone deter you from what you know you need for yourself and that's an important factor. Yes indeed.

Roberta: Do you feel that integrating schools improved your education? Do you think that Supreme Court decision uhm exposed you to a better education?

Mrs. Johnson: Yes I do. Very much so because what we were learning here I embraced dearly, yes I do but there are certain avenues that it stopped and going to the white schools it was a whole different level that we could expound on because uhm the quality, the quality of the education

material. Don't misunderstand me. What we got here was life-lasting, believe me I would not have asked for a better tenure of education than what Miss Beaujon and Mrs. Russum gave us here but it opened up a whole different avenue as far as the English and mathematics and all the other academic standards that we needed to learn for life to sustain. It's kind a like oh well justlike a whole new life to be exact, a whole new awareness of the world itself that we were thrown back and not I guess allowed to indulge in because it wasn't for us, it was for 'the white population' you know. I don't know I mean – not only for me but poor Shirley Bulah she was the forerunner and God knows that poor girl really had to absorb some shocks and hurts in her life. Now I mean we can't forget that she was our forerunner you know in all of this and we got our bumps and scraps yes, but she got I mean the onslaught because of her and her parents being the first to uhm you know to get this uhm educational thing.

Roberta: I understand her parent's employment suffered, is that correct?

Mrs. Johnson: Oh absolutely, absolutely up on Valley Road they had like a little produce stand and they had eggs and all of that. When they started with this segregation you know with her busing her whole clientele just petered off and that was their livelihood so you know it was like okay so you want your child to go up to our white school then we don't need to patronize you because you are trying to steal some of our thunder so to speak and make your child equal to our children and yes they suffered an awful lot. They really did. God bless, they persevered though. They did not let anything deter them. They persevered and thank the Lord for it because we, myself and the children after us benefited royally out of their hurt and devastation. Yes we did and I will never forget them, never, never.

Roberta: Are any of her family still in the

area?

Mrs. Johnson: Shirley herself passed.

Roberta: Right.

Mrs. Johnson: And of course her parents have been gone but I think she has some children, I don't know where they are but they had like a little memorial service last year? I don't know where any of them are.

Roberta: It's all there in the history books, the history of the state.

Mrs. Johnson: Yes, I think it is wonderful, I am so glad, I am really glad because if you don't make sure about documentation these things will never, never be known because they don't want it known you know, that's why it is important that if you have anything that will benefit yours, then and theirs, get it out, get in down in documentation. Know where you come from to know where you are going because I never in this world thought I would ever go to a white school. That I would ever be called a nigger by people that I played with every day, all day. Never in this world because this is our little corner. This is our little corner and then when we were thrown out of it into desegregation oh my God what a revelation. I mean a true revelation, the awareness was astounding. Yes.

Roberta: Mrs. Johnson I do have, actually I have a few more things I wanted to ask you but we can stop and we can do it another time.

Mrs. Johnson: Okay.

Roberta: It's up to you.

Mrs. Johnson: Oh I would love to talk to you again, yes.

Roberta: Why don't we do that?

Mrs. Johnson: Okay.

Roberta: Then we will just take a break now.

Mrs. Johnson: That's fine.

Roberta: We'll set up a time a couple of weeks from now.

Mrs. Johnson: Oh I would love it, yes.

Roberta: Because this is just so very interesting and I have a few more things I want to go back to Iron Hill School itself and ask about, be more specific about, you know day-to-day activities. Okay that sounds great. Do you have anything else that you wanted to say today?

Mrs. Johnson: Let's table it. Just to talk about it is gratifying.

Roberta: It seemed like it.

Mrs. Johnson: It is.

Roberta: This is the end of the interview for today, this ends tape 2, side 1.