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Geneva Elizabeth Johnson (September 17, 1972)

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Oral History Interview

with

MISS GENEVA ELIZABETH JOHNSON

September 17, 1972
Ottumwa, Iowa

By Dr. C. Richard Arena

For the Richard Nixon Oral History Project

ARENA: This is interview #1 with Geneva Elizabeth Johnson in Ottumwa, Iowa. Today's date is September 17, 1972, Arena interviewing. Geneva, from the standpoint of getting some idea of your own background, would you mind stating where you were born and your formal educational background?

JOHNSON: I was born in Chariton, Iowa, which is about fifty miles west of Ottumwa and finished high school, of course, and went to Augustana College in Illinois, majored in music.

ARENA: Would this be the Norwegian founded or is it preeminently Norwegian?

JOHNSON: Swedish.

ARENA: Swedish. Thank you. I knew it was one of the Scandanavian schools. A friend of mine graduated from there.

JOHNSON: Well, I didn't finish. I went there about two years and that's all the formal education. I studied the organ and I have been organist at the First Lutheran Church in Ottumwa for about thirty-some years. I am retired now.

ARENA: This was the First Lutheran Church of Ottumwa. If it isn't too personal, would this be the Missouri Synod or . . .

JOHNSON: The Augustana Synod. We have had two famous ministers here, Rev. [P.O.] Dr. Bersell and Dr. [Malvin] Lundeen, who have both been head of the Lutheran Church of America. They were both outstanding.

ARENA: Have you had any special training from the standpoint of your commercial profession as a secretary? Had you gone on to any business school or taken any business courses?

JOHNSON: Well, yes, in Chariton. After finishing high school I went to a business school for about six months I believe.

ARENA: It was six months, I see.

JOHNSON: I worked in the bank for Mr. von Schrader, secretary.

ARENA: Now this Mr. von Schrader is the man I interviewed and his full name is Max von Schrader.

JOHNSON: I believe I started in the bank, I'm not quite sure, in '36 and that's a long time ago.

ARENA: Is there any particular reason why it was banks, just simply because you started there and you enjoyed it.

JOHNSON: I was asked to come and be the organist at the First Lutheran Church and I had to have something to do otherwise, so I just fell in that way, that was all.

ARENA: Now, if this isn't too personal, was your position as organist a professional one, in the sense that you were compensated?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, definitely.

ARENA: If this is not too personal, was that your main compensation?

JOHNSON: No, at that time. It would be now, but at that time no.

ARENA: I see.

JOHNSON: Do you want me to add to that the reason I came to Ottumwa?

ARENA: Yes, please do.

JOHNSON: Well, my brother is a physician and he came to Ottumwa and opened an office.

ARENA: About when was this?

JOHNSON: That was before I came to Ottumwa and that was the reason I was interested in Ottumwa and came to Ottumwa.

ARENA: May I ask you for your brother's full name?

JOHNSON: Well, he's retired. Dr. G. Raymond Johnson.

ARENA: About when was it that you first saw any of the Nixons either the President or his wife, Mrs. Richard Nixon, from your personal recollection?

JOHNSON: Well, I met her when she first came into the bank. As Mr. von Schrader's secretary, I was introduced to her, and then you always go out of your way to be friendly to somebody new, and I suppose I asked her to go to lunch with me. And we happened to have the same lunch hour and so from then on we almost went every day.

ARENA: From your best recollection, about what period was that dateline? I realize you don't have any notes, but I was just wondering if it does stand out in your mind, the month and the year?

JOHNSON: No, I couldn't tell you.

ARENA: Well, I do happen to know that it was part of 1942 and 1943 and that does sound correct to you?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ARENA: Fine. May I ask you before we do go into your direct contact with Mrs. Nixon, if you ever met the President directly, either in coming into the bank to pick up Mrs. Nixon or anything like that?

JOHNSON: Strangely to say, I don't believe I ever met him until they came through on a plane when he was running as Vice President, and I just happened--I wasn't even going out to the airport, but some friends said, "Oh, come on, we're going out to the airport to meet the Nixons." So I went along and I happened to be right up by the ropes. It was all roped off and Pat came off the plane first and she happened to see me for some reason or other and she said, "Oh, Dick, come over here. I want you to meet Geneva." Well, it didn't mean too much to me at that time but since then it has. And that is the first time that I met him. He came over and shook hands.

ARENA: Were you aware when you knew Pat, Mrs. [Patricia Ryan] Nixon, that he was with the Navy? That that is why they were in the city?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: This came out in your conversations. Is there anything you would like to say about the overall relations between the U.S. Naval Air Station and the community? I am thinking frankly of the personal or human relations. Did the town get along with the people on the base and vice versa? Did the people on the base seem to enjoy being stationed here and so forth?

JOHNSON: Very definitely. It was quite a social. . . . Well, I don't know the words to use but I think the people of Ottumwa went all out to be friendly to the men out at the Navy base.

ARENA: Do you recall that you ever met Mrs. Nixon in any community situation outside of the bank? I am wondering, for example, in any of the civic or religious functions, either formally in a church, or some either civic or church social gatherings, possibly in volunteer work with the Red Cross or anything like that?

JOHNSON: No, I would say not. My impression of her was and is now that she was rather retiring and concerned with her work and she talked about when her husband would come and join her here and . . .

ARENA: She preceded his coming to Ottumwa?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ARENA: Do you recall about how long that was, say, a month or so that you were with her while this was taking place?

JOHNSON: No, I really couldn't say because I don't remember.

ARENA: Do you recall the question of her residency and that coming up? Did she have a home, an apartment and did she discuss that subject with you, their residency in the community?

JOHNSON: I can't remember where she lived when she first came, but I do remember when she rented an apartment in the Tisdale Apartments. She was quite interested in making it attractive, buying new things for the apartment. That's when she expected her husband to come.

ARENA: In your position in the bank did you have an opportunity to see her so to speak on the job, what her functions were, her relations with fellow workers, we'll say, on an equal basis, where she was receiving equal pay more or less and with her superiors?

JOHNSON: Well, she was in the savings department and she had something to do with food stamps, all kinds of different stamps that the bank had to process and that was, as you said, about the lowliest position in the bank. But her place was in the savings department and Gertrude Clemens was in the savings department and also Greenleaf Merrill, Jr.

ARENA: Just by the way, was Mr. Greenleaf a Quaker? As you know there is a John Greenleaf Whittier.

JOHNSON: I don't believe so, but they were a very old Ottumwa family. Mrs. Clemens passed away a long time ago. Incidentally, when the Nixons came through when he was running for the Vice-Presidency, Mrs. [Gertrude] Clemens and I went with Pat Nixon on the special train to Cedar Rapids [Iowa]. Now the three of us chatted quite a long while and had a nice time. One thing I remember about that though, and I couldn't have realized when we were talking that the conversation was being monitored--I don't know why I realized that all of a sudden--by somebody on the train. I can't remember how it happened, but anyway it was suddenly ended abruptly and they asked her to go and rest. There were a lot of people along with the Nixon party and they were looking after Pat, I'm sure.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, have you ever been engaged in politics or working for any candidate yourself before this time?

JOHNSON: Well, I worked casually with the Republican Party.

ARENA: The thing I was interested in, I was wondering if this was a completely new experience, to be caught up, so to speak, in a campaign with such a famous person?

JOHNSON: We were just asked because we were probably her best friends in the bank and knew her, not because we were politically a party at all.

ARENA: Going back to your description of Mrs. Nixon as reserved, I wonder if I could explore that a bit further; for example, reserved in the sense of shy, fearful, quiet, but self-assured quiet?

JOHNSON: Self-assured quiet.

ARENA: I see.

JOHNSON: And I'd say she was poised and knew what she wanted and where she was going. Really, I think that Pat Nixon had a great sense of the true value of things. I know that

she did and I think she had an aim and an ambition as to where they were going, whether it was financially or otherwise, I don't know. I know that her stay in Ottumwa was transitory and she had other things--goals.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you what things did she say, what things did she do that would tend to make you feel and believe that? Thinking back to some conversations, to her actions, does anything in particular come to mind?

JOHNSON: You know there was a clique in town, very cocktail-minded. Well, I don't know how to say it, but I would say Pat was not interested. She was a little bit more the serious type. She really was.

ARENA: From the standpoint of association with other employees, fellow employees, in a way, were there such things as showers or collections for someone's birthday or departure in which you all did things together, and did she take a part?

JOHNSON: Well, I suppose so, although I can't remember anything definitely.

ARENA: What do you recall about her eating habits from the standpoint of: where did you eat; did she tend to select over and over again the same food; did she have any particular favorites in the way of beverage, in the way of amounts--anything that comes to mind in that regard?

JOHNSON: Well, I can remember the homemade pies at the lunch counter in Hofmann's Drug Store.

ARENA: Would that still be in town and would the gentleman still be in town?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. [Richard M.] Dick Hofmann is the owner and his brother--what is his name--I believe he is president of Johnson and Johnson.

ARENA: Would he possibly recall Mrs. Nixon as a customer?

JOHNSON: It could be.

ARENA: I didn't mean to cut you off but as I said, we are interested in continuing research as well as having you recall these past events.

JOHNSON: Well, one thing, you asked me how I knew she was more serious minded and ambition-wise. I can remember her

admonishing me for staying in the bank. She thought the salaries were low. There was no future really for a girl. And she said, "Geneva, why don't you break loose and go to Alaska or some place like that." I can remember that so well. And I believe that is what she would have done in my circumstance. She wouldn't have stayed in the bank like I did. That was my impression of her.

ARENA: Would you say she, well, she was obviously positive, I am just wondering how did this advice come? Were you mutually exchanging advice? Did you in any way take offense in the way this was done or anything like that?

JOHNSON: No, no.

ARENA: She was just very frank and friendly and she could say that to you without your being offended?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

ARENA: If this isn't too personal, may I ask you, did you consider that advice?

JOHNSON: No, not in the slightest. I'm just not that brave to start out. No, I didn't.

ARENA: But at that time it was your impression that--not thinking back--but at that time you thought that she would do that sort of thing?

JOHNSON: Yes, I think so and I believe that I wished that I would do something like that but I didn't ever really consider it.

ARENA: Did you feel that your recent trip to California was a bit along those lines?

JOHNSON: No, that was just a pleasure trip.

ARENA: You have taken trips like that over the years?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ARENA: I think we were going back to her favorite pie, and you were discussing the question of her favorite, or her routine luncheon selections.

JOHNSON: Well, they always had perhaps a soup for the day and homemade pie. Their soup was delicious. And as I can remember it, we usually had a bowl of soup and a piece of pie. We didn't either one of us have a heavy lunch.

ARENA: Was there any particular reason why you or maybe why she herself did not bring your lunch to the bank, your so-called brown bag brigade?

JOHNSON: We just never did, never thought about it, when there was such a nice place a block away. Well, at that time the Union Bank was next to the hotel, which was practically across the street from the Hofmann Drug Store, so there would be no reason for not going over there.

ARENA: I did ask you if the gentlemen were still living, the Hofmanns, and I should be more specific. How about the drug store itself? Does the drug store still serve lunch?

JOHNSON: Oh, no.

ARENA: About when did that go out of business?

JOHNSON: Well, they changed the lunch counter years ago, and then they had a coffee counter in the back, but about three years ago now they discontinued that entirely. And they discontinued it--and you are not interested in this--but they discontinued it because the high school youngsters came down from the high school and would just take over and it would prevent the customers and the women downtown who would stop in for a cup of coffee or something; it just didn't work out.

ARENA: And from the standpoint of contrasts, it would be interesting now that you have raised that point--things like that did or did not take place at that time, '42-'43 when the Nixons were living here. That did or did not take place, students taking over the drug store?

JOHNSON: No. no.

ARENA: Do you think that's due to the simple fact of increase in population or more complicated factors?

JOHNSON: More complicated factors, youngsters hanging around downtown. Well, just different, that's all.

ARENA: Did Mrs. Nixon seem to have any favorite sandwich or seem to discuss such things with you as diet or the question of being trim?

JOHNSON: No, I can't remember anything.

ARENA: The listener does not have the advantage, of course, that I have. I can see you as well as listen to you, and I would say you are almost about the same build as Mrs. Nixon.

JOHNSON: I think so.

ARENA: Do you mind if I ask you if you work at it or is it just a part of your natural system?

JOHNSON: I'm just naturally that way.

ARENA: And you don't remember Mrs. Nixon saying anything about diets . . .

JOHNSON: No.

ARENA: Or whether or not she maintained her trimness through diet?

JOHNSON: No. As I remember she was rather thin.

ARENA: And seeing her later on, and would I be correct in assuming that when she visited this area as the Vice President's wife, that was the last time you saw her face to face.

JOHNSON: Yes.

ARENA: This very recent dedication, I understand, of a dam, you were not present then?

JOHNSON: No. She wasn't along.

ARENA: And she was not along for that occasion. I see. Going back to that idea when you did see her during the period of the Vice-Presidency between '53 and '61--that was the precise period--do you recall the exact year, maybe, when she came through? But at any rate it was quite a few years after '42 and '43.

JOHNSON: Yes.

ARENA: How would you describe the changes, if any, between her in appearance, in her overall personality?

JOHNSON: I would say she was even more reserved and conscious of what she was saying, not quite as outgoing perhaps. Personally, I think she looks very much today as she did when she was here in Ottumwa. I think she is much more poised and becoming more so all the time, I mean, as far as being able to speak publicly. But I think she always was a little shy perhaps.

ARENA: Seeing her as we all have on TV in which she has been rather prominent and not maybe just from the standpoint of politics but from the standpoint of comparing her physically and personality-wise. As you know the project does not go into politics. It's to the '45 period, but historians would not

forgive me for not asking a person like you who knew her then and knows her now to go into this matter of change. Bearing in mind her conduct, her activities, her appearance during we'll say the China and Moscow visit, how would you compare her with the '42-'43 Mrs. Nixon?

JOHNSON: Just much more poised and sure of herself. I was very proud of her during those visits. I thought she did a great job.

ARENA: I believe we did discuss possible meetings with the Nixons out of work and away from the bank and I just want to be absolutely certain. When it came to shopping or religious or social activities, was there ever any contact between you?

JOHNSON: No.

ARENA: Is there anything I have not mentioned or brought out or asked in this interview, Geneva, that you would like to bring up yourself that you think should be touched upon regarding your recollections of the Nixons back in '42-'43 when they were both living in Ottumwa?

JOHNSON: No, I don't think so.

ARENA: And may I thank you very sincerely for allowing me your hospitality and the privilege of having this interview and answering all of my questions so frankly and fully and clearly. Thank you very much.

JOHNSON: Thank you. I am sorry I could not be of more help.