

Interview with Bernie Johnson
November 25, 1998
Interview by Jodi Lampi

Me: This is Jodi Lampi I am at Bernie Johnson's house. I am about to interview him today which is November 25, 1998.

Me: Tell me your full name.

Mr. Johnson: My full name is Bernard Fred Johnson.

Me: Tell me when and where you were born.

Mr. J: I was born May 4, 1923 in Negaunee, Michigan.

Me: Were you named after anybody?

Mr. J: Not that I know of.

Me: Did you have any nicknames while you grew up?

Mr. J: Yea (laughs)

Me: What were some of them?

Mr. J: One that I was really know as was as I was a teenage was they called me Brogie. For some reason, I don't know why. But there was another Johnson kid named Johnson. He was called by the same name. So I suppose it was taken from that.

Wife adds: Why don't you tell her about when you went to school. (both laughs)

Mr. J: Yea, well, I was baptized Bernard Fredrick, that was the Swedish part of it, so the name got changed to Bernard somewhere along the line. And when it got twisted around. Fredrick, Fredrick was the first name and Bernard was the second name. So when I went to school the teachers thought I would be know as Fred. Fredrick. The teacher would call on Fredrick and he wouldn't answer. (laughs) because he was called Bernard. So the teacher talked to my mother and said well that's the reason because we call him by his first name and you call him by his second name.

Me: Do you ever remember you grandparents ever describing their life to you?

Mr. J: No (interrupts) I didn't know my grandparents at all. They lived in Sweden and my folks left Sweden to come to this country.

Me: When you grew up who was the oldest person in your family? What do you remember about them?

Mr. J: My immediate family? You mean like brothers and sisters? My oldest brother, Leonard, he was a mathematical whiz. And he went on to college to the University of Michigan and he graduated from the Northern Michigan University. It was then know as.. What was it know as before? Northern State Teachers College. He got his masters down there and has grand studies there in math and science and he went on to be an engineer at General Motors and he was at General Motors for many years. He's still active, he's eighty years old he conducts seminars all over the country. He's been to Europe and has authored of many books an he and a Chinese friend went to Detroit Tetectual College around Detroit and he's been active ever since...I don't know.

Me: Do you ever remember discussing world politics and events with your family?

Mr. J: Not anything special the biggest thing I remember in my youth was 1929 Stock Market crashed and the depression that followed. Many people were in want and in my family my dad worked for the Mining Company. And he was luck to work even 2 days a week because the mines were shut down just to keep from in parish (until the mines were open).

Me: When you were younger what kinds chores did you have to do?

Mr. J: Chores? Well in those early days the farmers were mostly immigrant families. And those from Finland and Sweden they usually had a cow or 2 cows right within the city and it was a chore that we would have to get the cows everyday. Sometimes it was quite a job, when the cow was kind of stubborn and they wouldn't come home (laughs).

wife: Tell her where the cows wandered.

Mr. J: Where they wandered? Well they wandered all over town and the city had what they called a cow pound where the cow that was wandering around town the police would over and bring it to the cow pound and which was a jail for a cow. (laughs) So you had to pay a dollar to get your cow back. (laughs) and the public health and that time was in the early days where everybody through there garbage right out in the alley. By the end of the winter there was, you could hardly walk through the alleys it was so full of garbage. It was awful.

Me: While your life time, what was the most important invention that was made?

Mr. J: Most important invention?

Me: That you think was important.

Mr. J: Well, there was so many that I could name any one, for one thing in the old days they had what they called iceboxes, where they in the winter time they harvest blocks of ice from the lakes and stored in a big storage barn. Where they piled ice in there and then put a layer of sawdust in between and another block of ice and another layer of sawdust so they can insulate it so the ice kept until the summer. So when the iceman would

deliver chunks of ice to each home. And then the refrigerator came into being, I remember the first refrigerator we got from the Montgomery Awards store in Marquette.

Me: Was it a whole lot easier with the refrigerator?

Mr. J: Well, yea, it was, of course the refrigerators weren't really big so you couldn't store very much in them, there wasn't a freezer either.

Me: From the world right now, how is different from what it was like when you were little?

Mr. J: Well, for one thing the economy is much different now, a lot better, most people now, most they things they have now, we never heard of before because of lot of it was even invented. But what we did have, we learned to get along with and people lived their life just like you live your life now. When you time comes you go.

Me: Did you like to read?

Mr. J: Did I like to read? Well I did some reading, but my most favorite thing was when the radio came into being. And I'm always kidded by my wife that there's a radio in every room, here. And I think there's 2 or 3 of them in the living room. (laughs) So I listen to the radio a lot and I learned a lot just from listening to the radio.

Me: From the hard times in the family, do you ever remember not having enough food to eat?

Mr. J: No, that was a problem the government when different administrators when the open bill of Roosevelt was voted as president for the United States. He came up with many socials programs where they allowed the government to supply food to the people who were in need and our family was one of those families. The things were tough, I remember my folks who were trying to by a home and pay for it and when the depression came they weren't able to make payments so they lost the home.

Me: How was your life changed because of some important changes in the technology and science?

Mr. J: I don't know what to say on that one, but certainly when these new technology came out and made life easier for most people. Most in my early childhood, our family did not own an automobile so it was later after the depression began to be over where we were able to afford a used car. Was a neatest thing that we were able to have our own (water) and travel to the neighboring towns.

Me: What were your favorite childhood games?

Mr. J: Well, as smaller children we had, we didn't have toys and tricycles and bicycles like most of the kids have now days. So we made do with what we had. We would make

our own, we would find an old bike frame someplace and a old wheel first you couldn't pedal the thing the only way you could ride it was ride it down hill and push it back up.

Me: What were your schools like when you went to school?

Mr. J: Well, the school buildings, I remember were by the (old barn) and one of the schools K street school grades school was quite an old building and it was actually a 2 story building and I remember the stairs would creek when you went up the stairs and actually the lower level the basement it was rat infested for some reason. So that's what I remember about that old school. (laughs) The principal was a very strict old maid principal and if you got on the line she would get a hold of you and handle you pretty roughly. Which now days if you did that to a child you would get arrested.

Me: How did you get to school?

Mr. J: Walked

Me: Was it far?

Mr. J: No it wasn't that far, I had to walk about 5 blocks so that wasn't far. They used to bus kids and from the out line areas and the farm country areas and Palmer, Michigan. Of course they had an elementary school in Palmer and a High schools which later they had to close those down and bus the kids to Negaunee.

Me: What was your favorite subject in school? And why did you like it?

Mr. J: You mean in my highs school days?

Me: Any certain subject that you liked.

Mr. J: Well, I don't know about the lower grades, but in junior high school and high school I was interested in the Industrial Arts program they had there. I did graduate which was they call an Occasional Course. And they had another course college Preparatory course that prepared you for college. But the occasional course that I went through would not prepare you for college. If you didn't go to college you had to go back and take the necessary course for it.

Me: What was your least favorite subject? Or did you have any?

Mr. J: Least favorite. Not really.

Me: Did you have any favorite teacher?

Mr. J: Favorite teacher? Not really. I know the first day I went to school, my oldest brother took me by the hand, and took me to the kindergarten teacher and that was my

introduce to the school, my mother didn't bring me there. But she was a very kind teacher and she was nice to all the children.

Me: What kind of sports and school activities were in involved with?

Mr. J: Well, intramural sports But they had basketball teams for the lower grades like they do now days. I played on that basketball team. And also the had what they called service teams or football teams, that the kids would play they were just intramural they didn't have any out of town teams just within the school system.

Me: I talked to Mrs. Honkala, and she asked me to have you tell me about Jimmy the Crow.

Mr. J: Oh, Jimmy the Crow. There was a crow that was around town, that would pick a kid every now and then, it would change off on certain kids, and hang around with the one kid for awhile and change off and go to another one. You would be walking down the street and you would hear the crow call "don't fall" and you would look around you and wonder who's hollering at you and see a crow up in the tree. It was Jimmy the Crow. It was kind of a pest. In the old days they would deliver milk in bottles, the milk man would place the bottles on the porch and Jimmy would go and peck the cap off and help himself to the crow.

Me: Smart crow. (he laughs) In your school life has changes ever made school life different?

Mr. J. Well, I got bounce around in two elementary school. For some reason, the classes were too big so they would send one child to another school. I remember one time I had to be moved from one school to another so they gave me a wagon to put my supplies and books in there and pull the wagon to the other school. (laughs) That's one thing I remember about school.

Me: From the schoolhouses they had then, are they very different from the schoolhouses today?

Mr. J: Oh yea, Now days they only build a one story buildings, I suppose for safety purposes and heating purposes. Our schools are like our highs schools that were three stories.

Me: Did you have any special hang-out place that you and your friends went to?

Mr. J: Well, we didn't have a special place. We didn't have any special place like the kids now days. We made our own entertainment. In the winter time, we would build ski hills, and ski jumps, and we would spend our day usually on the hills or the skating rink. The city used to plug the field every winter to make a skating rink. So we spent time there.

Me: In school have you ever received any special awards for your studies?

Mr. J: No, not really. I wasn't an exceptional student. But I was still in the upper third of the graduating class.

Me: Do you have a college degree?

Mr. J: No, I didn't have the chance to go to college. But I did, after I got out of the service to go to college, GI Bill. And I trained in the orthopedic field. But that was making braces like in the polio epidemic that occurred in the 40's. All the children that were crippled by polio they couldn't walk because their limbs were atrophy. Their muscles were just wasted away. So we would have to brace their legs up so they could walk. I was certified in that. I served a five year apprenticeship in that field. But now days it is required to have college courses in that field.

Me: What kind of clothes did you usually wear to school?

Mr. J: As a boy? Well it the clothing was also supplied by the government, because people just didn't have any money to buy clothes for kids. So most of the kids in school look the same as far as their clothing was concerned.

Me: Was their any certain styles or fads that you had then?

Mr. J: I don't remember anything special.

Me: Can you name a good friend you have know for a long time?

Mr. J: That is living yet? No, most of them when they graduated moved away to find work and when I graduated in 1941 when the war broke out in 1941. And a lot of those friends I had chummed around with many of them died in the war. So I don't really, I know some yet who I see every once in a while. I go to the mall or something when I run into them. I recognize them and go up to them and ask them if they are so and so. And they say yea that's me. So then we have a fun time visiting and remembering about the old days.

Me: How did you meet the person you were to later marry?

Mr. J: How did I met that, I don't know if I remember, let me see. I got a phone call one day from Elaine Frantti, and she said there was a young girl there going to college as Northern there and she needs a ride to church. So I said O.K. I'll go over there and so I went over there and of course they had housemothers there at that time. Do they have housemothers anymore?

wife: No

Mr. J: No? (laughs) So I went there and asked for Miss Rantila, that was her name then. So that's the first time I met her. And she came bouncing up the steps with her blond hair flying. (laughs) So that's where it all started.

Me: How long did you know her before you got married?

Mr. J: How long was it Ma? Four years five years?

wife: Five years.

Mr. J: Yea, five years.

Me: Can you describe your wedding proposal?

Mr. J: Well, I don't think so. I guess I just asked her, becoming known to each other. And finally I just popped the question one day. She said yes.

Me: When and where did you get married?

Mr. J: Well, we were married on October 22, 1956. Correct?

wife: Yes

Mr. J: O.K. in Ishpeming at the old South Porseas.

Me: Can you describe you wedding ceremony?

Mr. J: It was a simple one, it wasn't like the ones you see now days with rented tuxedos and those things. She had her beautiful wedding gown and I had just a navy suit and we walked up the aisle hand and hand. We didn't have anybody to escort us.

Me: How would you describe her now days?

Mr. J: She still the one and only as far as that goes. I've been very fortune to have her as a wife. She's been quite a help in my life time. We both, as you hear in wedding ceremony's for better or for worse, well, we've both had our better and our worse. I had to take care of her and she's had to take care of me. So we have come down to this day and were still taking care of each other.

Me: How long have you been married?

Mr. J: What will it be now 42 year?

wife: Yes.

Mr. J: 42 years.

Me: What wise advise would you give to somebody on their wedding day?

Mr. J: The advice that the old preacher reads in Ecclesiastics, you welcome those days, the most difficult days and it has come to those days also that the only thing left is your neutral faith.

Me: How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?

Mr. J: Well, when the wife thinks she pregnant, that's how I knew. (laughs)

Me: How many children did you have?

Mr. J: Five children. We have four boys and one daughter.

Me: What are all their names and what order do they come?

Mr. J: The oldest one is Walter, he lives in the Minneapolis area. And then there's Ken, and Ron, Kathleen, and Dan.

Me: Do you ever remember anything that your children have ever said or done?

Mr. J: Amazing? Well mom, you better come over here and tell those funny experiences.

Wife: Well, a couple of the interesting things they did, was when they found a seat that had been ejected from one of the air force planes. And it was in the woods behind our house. And it still had, what do they still call them, explosives attached to it. So the air force was very much concerned that it be found, and they found it. Because there was those big hills and woods behind our house. And so they were rewarded by having a special tour of the air force base. It was open at the time. And then our youngest son, had found the body of a escape prisoner, out in the woods one time too. So those were quite unusual. Now of course, they tell us that is was good we didn't know of the places they went. All the trees they swung from and they only ended up with a few broken bones. (laughs)

Me: What are some of the most unusual things your kids have ever said?

Mr. J: Tell her the one about the church.

Wife: We used to play a lot of records for them because that was because they didn't have audio tapes or CDs. And we didn't have an organ in our church at that time, but when we went to the Calumet church there was an organ. When they played the organ and after the first song the music stopped and Ron said, out loud, "Put another record on!" (laughs) They loved those tapes, they listen to them records again and again and again.

Me: If you were parents again would you change the way you brought them up?

Mr. J: Well, I suppose when you look back to those things , maybe we should of done different, or where did we fail and that stuff. We just can't draw on those kind of things, we just have to go on.

Me: What did you find most difficult and rewarding about raising a family?

Mr. J: That's one for you.

wife: Raising children is always difficult in some ways and they have their own ideas about things and you know some of the sayings are not good. And you wish they wouldn't but they have their own minds. And they have to become independent for themselves. But rewarding, just the joy of having children around. That is the greatest reward. And having their love and you opportunity to love them. It is a very special opportunity.

Me: What types of equipment or toys have your children now that you've never heard of or never had?

Mr. J: Do the children have now? Well, I don't know, most of the toys now days are made of plastic. In the old days the toys were made of metal, and they lasted they didn't break so easily. And now days those toys are worth a lot of money. There are collectors that would pay millions of dollars for a certain item.

wife: Well, now days everything has to do something. They have to have some technology in them. Where as when our children were younger, there favorite things were building out of building blocks.

Me: What advice would you give to someone raising a family?

Mr. J: Well, the home is the first place where they learn things. And teaching begins at home, and taught right from wrong. And the most important thing is the fear and love of God and see to it that they learn.

wife: I have to add, Read to your children. And talk with them and communicate.

Mr. J: Yea, well, that's really important.

Me: As a child what did you want to be when you grew up?

Mr. J: Well, I don't know, sometimes when you ask a child what they want to be, they say garbage truck driver or something like that. I don't know what I really wanted to be. (laughs) That kind thing never really entered my mind at that time when I was a child.

Me: What was your first job that you had?

Mr. J: First job? I guess, when I got out of high school the times weren't too good, but I did work at a gasoline station, pumping gasoline and washing cars and things like that. After that Uncle Sam gave me a job for a while. But after I got out of that, I went to that training that I told you about, the orthopedic field.

Me: Have you had any other kind of jobs?

Mr. J: Oh, I had lot of jobs, I tried to get into the mining company, they had under ground mines in those days. Now days there all open pit mines. I couldn't pass the physical in order to get a job there, because as a child I suffered a Ramadic fever. And that had damaged my heart valve. But my physical condition didn't allow me to work in the mines, but the same company that owns the railroad, I was able to get a job with them and that was a lot more circle labor that working in the mines. So I couldn't understand how one branch of the company I wasn't good enough to work at, but the other one I was. It was confusing for me. (laughs)

Me: Have you been in a job one time where there was a big important change that happened?

Mr. J: Well, I did work with that orthopedic field for 12 years, but the working conditions got to be so that I felt that I shouldn't continue in that field. So I had taken an exam for the post office and one day I received a call from the post office saying that there was an opening for me if I wanted to take it. So I left the orthopedic field and went to the post office. And I finished my working days at the post office. I had worked there for 20 some years.

Me: How did you decide on your career?

Mr. J: Well, I don't know, I guess it just happened to me. I didn't really care. The job in the orthopedic field, that's the training corp. But like I said, I had to leave that field. Because of certain conditions that were too hard.

Me: Did you make enough money to live comfortably as you wanted?

Mr. J: Well, yea, we've been well blest as that goes, were both retired now and we have a good retirement benefits. Were thankful to God for that. We have no special needs, we have all we need as far as living comfortably.

Me: How has the money amount for working jobs changed while you've worked?

Mr. J: Well, I started working at the minimum wage of .40 cents and hour. So you work all day for a total of \$3.20. So that \$3.20, you could buy a lot of materials with that. Because the prices were low that day.

Me: How long have you worked at your jobs?

Mr. J: Well, my working days were 47 years and Ester's were over 30 years in the school system and when she was out of high school she had a couple odd jobs, but as she graduated from college she's been in education all her life except what she took off to raise the children.

Me: How old were you when you retired?

Mr. J: I was 60 years old when I retired.

Me: What was the hardest choice you ever had to make and do you feel you made the right choice?

Mr. J: Well, what I suppose I should have done when I left the employment in the orthopedic field, what I should have done was gone to a different area and continued with that field. But I guess it was meant to be that I stay here in Marquette and continue education.

Me: Did you ever have a person that had a positive influence on your life?

Mr. J: Well, some of the teachers I had in high school especially in Industrial Arts. There was a older teacher there, he was a craftsman, and in those days they didn't require a degree to be a teacher. And actually he didn't even have a high school diploma. He was an expert blacksmith, and expert coppersmith, tinsmith, and he was hired because of his abilities as in the degrees he had.

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He had a great influence as far as my working with my hands. Which was a big part of that working that orthopedic with your hands. Because they didn't have what they have now days, so advanced in technology that it's all high tech, now days. But then you had to be a welder and a blacksmith and you had to do the work on the different types of sewing machines were you had to fabricate and pad braces to protect the limbs.

Me: Do you remember that teacher's name?

Mr. J: Yeah, his name was John Wilson, he was from Calumet.

Me: Do you remember someone saying something to you that had a big impact on how you lived your life?

Mr. J: Well, no, I suppose born and raised in a Christian home, there was always those visitors who came over and talked about different things. And here I was interested in how you as far as you faith matters were concerned. I remember many different people, older people. I always seemed to gravitate toward older people for some reason or other. I had the opportunity to how a lot of them didn't have automobiles and I was able to bring them to services and church. So that was part of my life that was dear to me.

Me: During your lifetime what wars were fought?

Mr. J: My lifetime? Well, 2nd World War, then there was the Koran War, the Vietnam, and the Gulf War.

Me: How did you feel about each war?

Mr. J: Well certainly World War 2 was a war that had to be fought because Germans had taken over most of Europe and slaved those people. And England would have been overtaken if the United States had gotten into it.

Me: When you served in the military what branch were you in?

Mr. J: Well, I was in what they called the Army Air Corp. Now days they separate the, now it's SAU Air Force now. But it was a branch of the United States Army. The Air Corp. was volunteer. They asked you if you wanted to volunteer.

Me: What were your duties when you served there?

Mr. J: Well, actually, I shouldn't have gone into the service because of my heart condition that I had. When I got into the service, they had volunteers who wanted to be pilots. Well, they had to pass a very severe or strict exam to get into that. When I took the exam for that, they wondered how I ever go into the service. So they decided it would be better for me to

be let out of the service and I could serve my country better in the defense industry. And I did work for the defense industry for the building, for building B-24 bombers and work at a different plant where they built parts for different war machines.

Me: What battles were you in?

Mr. J: I wasn't in any battles.

Me: If you could change something about yourself, what would it be?

Mr. J: Ah, probably I would have gone on and taken the necessary course to be able to go to college. And I wanted to get a college education. But I managed to live my life with what I learned in my high school days and I have no regrets so far.

Me: Would you consider yourself creative?

Mr. J: To a certain point, I guess. (laughs)

Me: What do you like to work with?

Mr. J: Well, I got this nice shop in the back. I can show it to you later. And I build small pieces of furnachair. I'll show you some of the things I made. I just got through building a sewing for my wife which she involves quite a bit. Headwork and handwork.

Wife: I always tell him he's very creative because he looks at a problem and thinks, How could it be solved?, and he figures it out.

Me: That sounds very creative to me.

wife: Yes, plus coming up even with this wood working thing, he creates designs.

Me: Have you made something for someone, and they really liked it?

Mr. J: Oh, yes, I've made a nice cabinet for my son their in Minneapolis, he likes that.

Me: What activates do you like to do now as an adult?

Mr. J: Well, that's one of my activates, my wood working activity. And reading, reading is matters that concern on salvation ones soul. The Christian literature. I like music too.

Me: What do you like most about in your music hobby?

Mr. J: What do I like? Well, it's relaxing for one thing, it satisfies me a lot. And playing those hymns, it soothes the spirit. Most of the worldly songs are designed to inflame your flesh for the benefit of the flesh. But there are good songs that aren't necessarily hymns which folk songs are nice to play and even sing.

Me: Do you play any different instruments?

Mr. J: Well first of all I, many years ago, about 50 years ago I bought an auto harp. Do you know what an auto harp is? It's an accordion thing. But you can use them for accompanying singing. But you can play the cords, or play the cord and go as far as the note which is the melody and then you stop. So you get the melody. It takes a little practice to do that. I got pretty good at it, but I haven't touched it for years. It's sitting in the corner. It's a nice instrument and sounds nice. And I fool around with the piano. But years ago I also played the bandolin. I also got good at that but haven't touched that for years either. I tried but you got to have callouses on your fingers to press those strings. Most recent is the keyboard. I like the keyboard. Because there is so many different arrangements that you can set to different instruments. It's a wonderful pastime. And when there is nobody around the house I really go to town. (laughs) I really don't like to play with an audience or people around. (laughs)

Me: Out of all of them, which one is your favorite one?

Mr. J: I'll have to say the auto harp is. I like to play the organ too. A Baldwin organ. But you can only have certain arrangements on the organ. It's infinite on a keyboard.

Me: What kind of music do you like to play most of all?

Mr. J: Mostly our church music. And some of those folk songs. And patriotic songs like the "Battle Hymn of Republic." And some of the classical songs like "Beast of my Soul" it's a hymn, well, they made it into a hymn but it is actually a sivaliancy. Finlandia is a good song too.

Me: Have you composed any music? I did, but I can't consider myself a composer, I did compose a little song that my son Walt, he got a computer which you can just play the instrument and it puts it into notes. Ester got that finality music system too. She sets up music sheets for the choir.

Me: Are any of the pieces you made up well known to many people?

Mr. J: No, not really.

Me: Are there any other interests in music that you have other than playing instruments?

Mr. J: Well, yeah, I like to listen to music, classical, especially now with the CD, it's such good quality. And I got a pretty good system, an anoratic system. (laughs)

Me: In out all the music you do, Which one do you like to do better, do you like to listen to music or play?

Mr. J: I'd say it was half and half. I like both with the same interests. It's satisfying. It soothes you, when your kind of down and you play those hymn, it eases you spirit.

Me: Would you like to say anything else about you music?

Mr. J: Not really, but I regret that I didn't have a chance to study music more. That's the only regret I have. I didn't have the opportunity when I was young. Mostly what I have learned was on my own. I learned a little bit in school in music. That's all.

Me: With everything that has happened in your lifetime, what advice would you give to kids today?

Mr. J: Well to do their best when their in school and realize that their whole life is going to depend on those days in those school days. To love God in complete and you learn to serve him when he calls on you to serve him.