

**Nellie Stone Johnson  
Narrator**

**Mary Murphy-Gnatz, Nora Murphy and Daniel Bergin  
Interviewers**

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Nellie Stone Johnson - NSJ  
Mary Murphy-Gnatz - MM  
Nora Murphy - NM  
Daniel Bergin - DB

**MM:** The purpose of this interview is to obtain details about Nellie Stone Johnson's life to include in the fourth grade curriculum package on African-American history in Minnesota. The focus, then, will be on Miss Johnson's childhood, including her life on the farm and early school experience. Questions about clothes, meals, and transportation are specifically framed to address interests of young students. An attempt will also be made to make the connection between Johnson's childhood and her early and later involvement in human rights activism. An underlying theme of the curriculum is migration. Because of that, questions will be asked regarding Miss Johnson's parents' migration to Minnesota. Details about Miss Johnson's move from a rural to an urban setting will also be discussed. The following questions will serve as a guide only, as much of the information will probably emerge as Miss Johnson recalls her past.

Miss Johnson, we would like to express our appreciation for your time and interest in the Minnesota Historical Society's elementary school curriculum project. Much has been written about your deep involvement in human and civil rights' issues and your many accomplishments as an adult activist. Because that part of your life has been so well documented, today, we'd like to focus more on your childhood and formative years. Our questions will be geared towards engaging the interests of students from the fourth to the eighth grades. Of course, we want to include any information you deem vital to this goal. To start, where and when were you born?

**NSJ:** On December 17, 1905, two miles north of Lakeville, Minnesota, which is about twenty-five, thirty miles south of where we're sitting right now.

**MM:** Was that your home at the time?

**NSJ:** Yes. That's where my parents had moved about a year or so before I was born, when they first got married. They got married in Minneapolis and they moved there on a farm and started farming almost overnight.

**MM:** Why did they move from Minneapolis to the farm?

**NSJ:** Neither one of them wanted to live in the city, in the urban area. My mother had graduated from the teacher's college in Louisville, Kentucky, had some experience in teaching in Chicago and in her hometown in Carrollton, Kentucky. My father . . . his father owned quite a bit of property in Missouri, so they had always been farmers.

**MM:** Did your mother come directly from Kentucky to Minnesota?

**NSJ:** Yes, she did, but not directly to marry my father. She had hoped to get a job of teaching. She had two aunts, my grandmother's sisters that lived in Chicago. So one of her stops was to stop and see her aunts there. In the meantime, she started teaching, did a little teaching there, not very long, a couple of years, something like that.

**MM:** Then, from Chicago, she moved . . . ?

**NSJ:** From Chicago to Minneapolis. Of course, people in those days looked up whatever church affiliation it was that they had someplace else. That's when she met my father. We always told her, "That was the beginning of your downfall."

**MM:** [Laughter] Then, your father came directly from Missouri to Minneapolis?

**NSJ:** By way of Canada and Montana and a few places. He always came to Minnesota, for many years prior to getting married, because he did the wheat fields here, whatever the harvest was at a given time when he came in, to keep his finger in the farming aspect.

**MM:** Do you remember what years your mother and father arrived? I know it was separate years, but...

**NSJ:** Yes. I think my father's first trip was about 1899 or something like that. He had an older brother that was here and that worked for the linseed oil mills here and was trying to get on the railroad, which my father, later on, starting working for, the linseed oil company here. It was stationed not too far from here, across the river there where all the Gold Medal, Pillsbury, and all of those buildings have been for 100 years. This linseed oil building was kind of sandwiched in there someplace. I remember seeing it many years ago. I came to Minneapolis in 1923, so I remember a lot of the old buildings.

**MM:** He came around the turn of the century?

**NSJ:** Yes.

**MM:** And do you remember when your mother moved here?

**NSJ:** No, but it would be about 1903, something like that, because they got married in 1904.

**MM:** What was the church where they met?

**NSJ:** Bethesda Baptist Church. I don't know if the church, as such, is still going, but it was located on Eleventh Avenue South and Eighth Street.

**MM:** In Minneapolis?

**NSJ:** In Minneapolis . . . for years and years. As I was getting to be, you know, that great grownup person, like, eight, nine years old, my dad used to come up to . . . Every once in awhile on Sunday morning, we'd come to the old church and visit that. Then, in 1914, we bought one of those great automobiles known as a Ford, the "Tin Lizzie," as they called it. We would drive up on Sunday mornings. My grandmother always liked to go. She was quite a church person.

**MM:** Can you tell us how your parents came to acquire the first farm where you were born?

**NSJ:** The first farm that they had, the one where I was born, which was only about a mile or so from this one I'm talking about, where we lived, they rented that. My dad knew the country pretty well because he had a team of horses and a wagon while he was still living in Minneapolis and working. At the same time, he worked on the Minnesota River. There was a private gun club. Maybe it's still going, I don't know. I'm trying to think of the name of that gun club. He worked there and was able to trap and do a number of things, so he had an added income other than what he earned there at the club. That's how he bought his horses and his wagon.

**MM:** That's how he came to acquire . . .

**NSJ:** The Long Meadow Gun Club was the name of it. Since you're from the [Minnesota] Historical Society, you probably can look that one up.

**MM:** We certainly will. After they rented, they bought their own farm?

**NSJ:** Either rented more land . . . We still have our home farm that after we left Dakota County we bought in Pine [County]. That seems like 100 years ago.

**MM:** You actually owned a car in those days?

**NSJ:** Yes, \$400 wasn't a whole lot of money, but it was, I guess, for those times. That's what those Fords were selling at, at that time.

**MM:** Can we talk a little bit about your childhood? For instance, what was a typical day like for you, say, at age ten?

**NSJ:** At age ten, I had already started milking. I started at about six and a half years. I had this one cow and, then, little by little, I brought in another one. Spot was the one that we all started to milk on. And I started milking—like, I said, I would add that second cow to it. Then, I'd go in and have breakfast and change my clothes from my overalls, whatever I had on, and put on my school clothes and get ready and go to school. I liked going to school.

**MM:** What time did you get up to get your milking done before school?

**NSJ:** Let's see, what time did the old man hit the barn? I guess about six-thirty in the morning. Of course, I was always right there, too. Whether I was producing or not, I still was there. My mother would always have breakfast around seven or seven-thirty.

**MM:** What was your elementary school then?

**NSJ:** It was good. It was a big one-room schoolhouse. I liked that very much. There were a lot of activities around. Like, when the weather was good, we had a baseball game and I liked to skate and that sort of thing. We had some clubs, not a whole lot. There was one that I became president of when I was about nine, the Little Citizen's League, or something like that, if I remember the name right.

**MM:** What did they do?

**NSJ:** Oh, just keep up with the news that was going on and how to become a good citizen. At that time, there was a lot of migration in the country, so it was very interesting.

**MM:** You read the newspaper everyday as a club?

**NSJ:** Oh, yes, I loved to read. I thought it was a waste of time if you didn't read it from cover to cover. Half of it, I didn't understand because the business section or the stock market, what would I know about that? I'd read the headlines and that's about it. I did, I really liked to read the newspaper.

**MM:** What grades were covered in your one-room schoolhouse?

**NSJ:** Kindergarten to eighth.

**MM:** And you had one teacher?

**NSJ:** Yes. I don't know how in the world she stood all of us.

**MM:** About how many children attended school there?

**NSJ:** For the most part, there was, I suppose you would say, a figure from twenty-five to thirty all the time. Sometimes, in the wintertime, it was more because there were some teen-age boys that would come in in the fall that didn't go when the weather was real good because they had to help on the farm to harvest and some were involved with milking and that sort of thing, too.

**MM:** Did you have a short school year?

**NSJ:** No, September to May, pretty usual.

**MM:** What was the ethnic makeup of the students? Was it very mixed?

**NSJ:** Most of that part of the country . . . By the way, my father was elected on that school board in 1913. I meant to mention that because that was very important to me. I didn't know the political ramifications, but I built within myself what I thought the advantages would be of having your father on the school board. [Laughter]

**MM:** [Laughter] Did you realize any of those hopes?

**NSJ:** No. He was harder on me than the teacher.

**MM:** [Laughter] What was the ethnic makeup?

**NSJ:** The ethnic makeup was mostly Irish Catholic and, of course, we were the only Black family there. Then, just up the hill from us was a family of Lutheran people who come from Holland, the Netherlands or whatever—everybody had a different name for it—the Streefland family and they had a girl about the same age as me, so we could visit and had a lot of fun.

**MM:** Did you learn any Dutch?

**NSJ:** No, I could have. I kick myself all over since that I didn't learn some of it. They spoke it. Their mother would just rattle it off all the time.

**MM:** How did they keep the different subjects and levels separate to make sure you . . . ?

**NSJ:** I don't think they did because I remember by the time that I was a second or third grade student, I was already an eighth grade student because you hear all of this around you and the discussion of the older students and it's bound to sink in.

**MM:** So, the younger kids had a real advantage?

**NSJ:** Yes, really. By the time they got there, they were already there.

**MM:** That's really interesting. You said your school clothes differed from your work clothes. Young kids today want to know all about clothes, so how did your work clothes differ?

**NSJ:** It was older—if I wore the same clothes, like a dress . . . I started very young wearing pants, coveralls. I noticed a couple, three years ago, some of those same coveralls like I wore—my first ones, but that was before I was into the boy syndrome—the light blue, a blue like a light blue shirt and it had red piping all around it and I see they're back on the market again after 100 years. Then, later on, I started working outdoors with my dad more. He bought me the regular boy's coveralls, which was the OD [olive drab] or what the military used, that color and much heavier, reinforced pockets and all of that. I liked that, too, because I could get very slippery with milk, and oil, and all of that stuff and my mother wouldn't yell at me.

**MM:** How did your school clothes differ?

**NSJ:** The school clothes were dress up clothes. If it was a warm part of the year, then, I had a cotton dress or something like that. Usually, in the winter, but also on top of the cotton dress, I'd wear a pinafore, too. I kind of liked those. Then, if it was cold weather, I had a wool dress. I had a maroon one. I remember that one. Then, I had a navy blue. I guess you'd change off and put the pinafore on top of that.

**MM:** How far was your school from your home?

**NSJ:** Two miles.

**MM:** Did you walk?

**NSJ:** Yes. That was quite a walk there.

**MM:** Are you still a walker?

**NSJ:** As much as I can be, yes.

**MM:** Tell me a little bit about your home and home life.

**NSJ:** Do you mean what it was like in the house?

**MM:** In the house and dinner conversation and all of that.

**NSJ:** That's good to ask me that one. It got to the place where we got to be, we were near teenagers or teen-agers that there were restrictions put on the conversation because it got to be too much politics, but it was good because we understood or tried to understand everything that was going on. We all read the paper. What we didn't read, my dad did. He was, we thought, up to par on everything, the most knowledgeable person around.

**MM:** Your dad?

**NSJ:** Yes. That was our thoughts about it anyway.

**MM:** So, he was always involved and interested in politics?

**NSJ:** Yes.

**MM:** And your mother, too?

**NSJ:** My mother, up to a point, as much as he was. She was very interested in the publicity or whatever that would bring out the community knowledge in the paper or the magazines through the church or what have you because of her education. She was a history teacher. So you can see she come by that a little bit naturally.

**MM:** You said you drove to Minneapolis occasionally to attend your old church. Did you have a church closer to home that you attended?

**NSJ:** Yes, when I was a child, very young, we started a church at Orchard Lake and started going to that. It wasn't really a church. They did do services in the morning after Sunday School, but primarily, I went there because I liked Sunday School.

**MM:** Was it denominational?

**NSJ:** No, it was non-denominational. It was called the Union Church or Union Sunday School. I liked it because I approached the Bible like I would approach a history book. I think I learned more by that than by being a denominational.

**MM:** Was your church active in the community?

**NSJ:** Yes, it was all community people. That's one time that the Lutherans and the Catholics got along and somebody else over here and somebody over there . . . we all got along. [Laughter] We'd take the family picnic. When the kids graduated through a certain graduation from Sunday School, they all got together. The parents didn't fight and fuss with each other.

**MM:** I'm trying to picture your home in that rural setting. Was your closest neighbor very far away?

**NSJ:** No, this Streefland family that I mentioned to you was just up the hill from us. It was about a half a mile. Then, going east, the other way, was the Catholic-Irish family, the Connollys. It was almost a mile from us. I remember the field, our field, when you left the house till you got to the corner just prior to going to where their property was, was a half a mile alone there.

**MM:** So, a lot different than an urban setting.

**NSJ:** Yes, quite a bit.

**NM:** What kind of crops did your family raise? Besides cows, did you have any other livestock on your farm?

**NSJ:** Yes, a lot of horses. I just loved the horses. I knew the difference between the good ones and the bad ones that I could ride, too. I just loved to go down in the pasture and pick out what horse I wanted to ride today, maybe not even to put a bridle on, just to use the halter or maybe carry one of the old rough bridles with me and get on the horse and go.

**MM:** And ride bareback?

**NSJ:** Yes, which I learned quickly not to do too much of. [Laughter]

**MM:** What were the ramifications of riding bareback?

**NSJ:** It gets pretty rough on you, you know . . . the inside of your legs. I remember once when I was about twelve, I think . . . We moved from Dakota County in 1918, 1919 to Pine County and doubled our dairy herd of cows. That was the prime reason that my parents wanted to go. We had what was a large herd for Dakota County, but not as large as they wanted. By the time that the Great Depression came along, we were milking fifty cows. That was a large-sized operation. You asked me also about the crops. Wheat was one of the crops that we did in Dakota County and corn, both the hard corn and, then, the silage and every other vegetable that you can think of, my mother did. She'd can. Almost everything was 100 quarts of this and 100 quarts of that.

**MM:** Did you grow crops primarily for sale, like the wheat and the corn?

**NSJ:** The wheat and the corn and the potatoes, yes, stuff like that. Then, we had some oats that we grew too, but that was mostly for our own horses. A few acres here and there over and above what you need for your own, you could sell off, too. Every once in awhile, my dad was selling off some oats.

**MM:** What did you actually produce on the dairy part of your farm, other than milk?

**NSJ:** That's it. We didn't do any other--Some people would go into the cottage cheese or the hard cheese or some other aspect of the dairy, but ours was just milk.

**MM:** I understand your father belonged to a dairy cooperative?

**NSJ:** Yes, that little operation out there known as Land O' Lakes.

**MM:** [gasp] Okay. [Laughter]

**NSJ:** In fact, he was one of the organizers of one of the small ones in Pine County, Clover Dale. Have you ever been up in that part of the country, around Hinckley?

**MM:** I don't think so, no.

**NSJ:** You mean you never were quartered or stationed at the St. Croix Park?

**NM:** I've been there.

**MM:** I've only been here a year.

**NSJ:** I see. So many of the young people that I talk to and on up to about forty years, everyone of them had been to the St. Croix Park. I picked blueberries on there many, many years ago and, of course, we did a lot of other things afterwards on the St. Croix River. The reason I mentioned that is because my dad, we rented some hay land there—NSP [Northern States Power], too—just acres and acres of hay land along the St. Croix River. We used to cut that and bale it and sell that from that part of the country. It seems like we were always into some kind of enterprise.

**MM:** Right. I understand your activism started at a very early age. It sounds like it did with your Citizen's Club when you were nine years old.

**NSJ:** My mother said it started before that. I can remember some of the conversation when my dad was elected to the school board. I remember when I got up that morning, she said, "Your dad was elected to the school board last night at the meeting." I said, "School board?" I knew what that was but I asked her the question anyway. Then, I said, "What do they do? What do you have to do? What do have to know?" the usual things that a kid will ask. So she kind of reminded me that I hadn't stopped since.

**MM:** [Laughter] We read the story that you delivered literature, regarding farmers' rights, on horseback when you were thirteen.

**NSJ:** Yes, that was in Pine County. Yes, I was thirteen. We moved to Pine County and that was a good, kind of a radical part of the state. We didn't know too much about it, but enough to know that there was a lot of good political farmers up there. But, my father also belonged to it while we were still in Dakota County. I know one of the first things that I did was to deliver some of that literature. Many things were happening that would indicate that we were going to have some kind of a depression by 1918, 1919. I guess that's the reason so many of the farmers were involved with that literature.

**MM:** How did you happen to get involved with delivering it?

**NSJ:** He had talked to several of the farmers around. We're coming in new to a new part of the country. Then, the feelers, I guess, went out to see, what is the political persuasion here and there, enough to affect that some of our neighbors had said that they would like to have some of that literature and know more about it. It was the Non-Partisan League. Have you done any of the history on that?

**MM:** I read a little bit about it. It started in the Dakotas?

**NSJ:** Yes, North Dakota.

**MM:** By the Scandinavians?

**NSJ:** A lot of Scandinavian people. There was quite a settlement of Russian people in there, too, so it could have been a combination of people. That would figure: Russian and the Scandinavian people with a good understanding of class struggle and all of that.

**MM:** Exactly. Did you travel far delivering your literature on horseback?

**NSJ:** No, I kind of went around the township area there. That was about an eight-mile circle because I would go two miles north, two miles east and, then, back south about two miles and, then, from that corner, the St. Croix Road, as we called it, back to our house.

**MM:** In that big distance, how many farms or homes would you say you hit?

**NSJ:** I'd hit them all . . . very scattered, too. Sometimes, you'd run into three, say, within one of those two-mile stretches and, then, you might go two without hitting anybody. Sometimes, there were just a lot of little places that you'd go to.

**MM:** Another question about your early involvement. I understand you gave a civics lesson in the eighth grade class?

**NSJ:** I was trying to.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** Can't you imagine an eighth grader, still a teen-ager, out there. However, I was very good in math. My teacher had no qualms at all about putting me up at the front of the room at the blackboard to do the math things, but the civics, that's a little bit out of my line. You talk too much. Math was a little different. Yes, I did do that.

**MM:** But for your age, you certainly were probably more knowledgeable than a lot of the other students.

**NSJ:** You have to be because if you're in that line of parents like that that's into everything and don't know when to stop. I view that as kind of fun thing, too. They wanted me to do a written dissertation in the civics class on something and I picked out this Non-Partisan League. That's when I ran into the trouble. My mother . . . I said to her, "Where is that paper." I'd come from work [Miss Stone Johnson may mean school here]. I said, "I've got to do some writing." She said, "What do you mean? What paper?" I said, "You know, that paper that we get," not too explanatory coming out of me . . . just that paper. I had a mind's eye view of it. Then, I finally got around to telling her. I said, "That paper that's got "Big Biz" in it," because they portrayed, at that time, "Big Biz" with a big stomach and the puffy arms and legs and everything, probably dressed up in a suit that looked like the flag of the United States or something. That just struck me great. That's what I wanted from that because I really wanted to write from that as to what we should know in our civics class.

**MM:** About "Big Biz" and farmers?

**NSJ:** Yes, that's right or anybody else out there that's being stepped on.

**MM:** How did your lesson go?

**NSJ:** It went okay. But, I didn't get the full benefit of that paper because she said me, "What are you going to do with the paper?" I said, "I'm going to take it to school. Then, I'm going to do my own writing from there." She said, "Let me tell you something, young lady, about that. You don't talk about that too much because that's a paper, we are not supposed to..." That was kind of an underground paper, at that time, politically. She gave me the fine comeuppance on how you handle underground education or whatever. But, I got through. It was good because I remembered an awful lot.

**MM:** Do you think your classmates were familiar with the Non-Partisan League paper?

**NSJ:** Some of them were because their fathers got a smattering here and there in different conversations. There was a lot of radicalism on the farms, at that time, especially the family type farms.

**MM:** Can you tell us, from elementary school, from your one-room school house . . . You, then, went on to high school in Pine County?

**NSJ:** Yes, we had two years. There, again, is where my parents really had a great influence, at that time. Neither one were on the board right then. I don't know how they could have handled another board because my dad was on the town board. He was clerk of Clover Township. Then, they were building this embryo of the Land O' Lakes Creamery. Then, the New Deal was coming in and he had just been appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, who was the old Harold Ickes at that time, to the REA [Rural Electrification Association] for Pine County. So he had just about all he could take care of. Of course, my mother did most of the secretarial work for him.

**MM:** How did he have time for the farm with all of that?

**NSJ:** We were teen-agers then. [Laughter]

**MM:** So, you took over a lot of the responsibilities?

**NSJ:** Yes, we did. One of my brothers who had a very fast lip—

[Tape interruption]

—bother to come home. I said, "You're almost like a boss coming in here." The old man didn't take too kindly to that one.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** But, anyway, he got it out of his system.

**MM:** How did your chores differ from when you were ten, say, to when you were a teen-ager and you had to take on more?

**NSJ:** The big jump in my chores was the increase in cows that I had to milk. By the time I had become a teen-ager, I was milking thirty cows a day, fifteen in the morning and fifteen at night.

**MM:** My gosh! What time did you get up for that?

**NSJ:** Around five.

**MM:** Oh, my.

**NSJ:** That is hard work. It is good for a person. It keeps you healthy and keeps you moving all the time. When it's cold weather, you don't get cold because you're jumping around, but it's hard work.

**MM:** Did your role at home differ any from your brothers'? Was there any kind of differentiation between you all?

**NSJ:** Sometimes, after we got out of the cow barn, then there was a differentiation. We all were treated the same because we all had our allotment of cows and we milked the same cows. You'd go in in the morning and you'd milk your same cows. You and the cows knew each other. It was the same way with the boys.

**MM:** Did they have any chores different from yours?

**NSJ:** Yes. We had horses, had quite a lot of horses. My brother next to me was the horseman. He and my dad, when the old man was home, they would get the horses together and get them fed and curried. It was very routine and everything was a commitment to time or the clock. You'd do it this way at a given time. That's the way they were.

**MM:** I understand you drove a tractor?

**NSJ:** Yes, I did.

**MM:** When you were very young?

**NSJ:** I was very young. I wasn't too keen about that. I liked the horses and I did both.

**MM:** What did you do on the tractor?

**NSJ:** I did a little plowing. I tried to do a little cultivating. Most every girl on the farm knew how to run a tractor if their people had a tractor or drive the car. The same year I learned to drive the old "Tin Lizzie."

**MM:** Do you remember how old you were?

**NSJ:** Nine and a half.

**MM:** Oh, my. What jobs did you do that the boys didn't?

**NSJ:** There was very few that I didn't, because I was strong, big, and tall. I think my strength was one of the things that my dad looked at all the time. It just seemed like, to me, that there was nothing that he wouldn't assign to me.

I forgot to tell you about this. Shortly after I started milking—I guess I was seven, maybe seven and a half—I started driving a team of horses on a hay mower.

**MM:** When you were seven?

**NSJ:** Yes, either seven or seven and a half.

**MM:** You could handle that?

**NSJ:** I would put it closer to seven and a half and the reason for it is that the hay you cut in the summertime and the summer months is my half year.

**MM:** How many brothers and sisters did you have growing up?

**NSJ:** Seven of us grew up.

**MM:** How many girls?

**NSJ:** Three. One died very young as an infant, but there were three of us that grew up. I've got one sister now, the youngest one in the family. What is she? Seventy eight. That's not very young. Our other sister died a year ago last March at eighty-two. So, you can tell we were all getting along there in years. Of course, I'm ninety-two, going on ninety-three.

**MM:** Are you? You seem in wonderful health. Do you attribute that at all to the farm?

**NSJ:** Milk.

**MM:** Milk? [Laughter]

**NSJ:** I tell everybody I drank milk like milk was going out of style and green vegetables. I really love green vegetables.

**MM:** At one place, it was said that you were very grateful to the experience you gained on the farm because you didn't have a lot of amenities that people take for granted like electricity.

**NSJ:** Because you knew how to do everything. You see, if you didn't have electricity, you produced your own. You'd have your own generator and all of those things. I tried to learn everything, too.

**MM:** Your father taught you everything?

**NSJ:** Just about everything that he knew himself, he taught me. I remember one time, we were putting a roof on the machine shed and I said, "Gosh, I can hire myself out now as a carpenter." He said, "Well, you're not quite there yet." [Laughter] It was good, good training.

**MM:** It sounds like your father was pretty self-sufficient?

**NSJ:** Yes, he was very and so was his father before him. Grandpa was very . . .

**MM:** In Kentucky?

**NSJ:** No, the one from Missouri.

**MM:** I'm sorry.

**NSJ:** They come from Missouri. My mother come from Kentucky. The grandparents from Kentucky . . . I didn't know them too well. Grandma Foree came up to visit us a couple of times and she and I just didn't get along at all.

**MM:** Oh. Did you want to tell us about that or not?

**NSJ:** Well, I don't know. I guess I thought she was too dictatorial or something. I probably needed it because I'm sure that she wasn't a malicious person at all. It looked like to me that she kept me busier all the time at things I didn't want to do than my other grandmother or my mother.

**MM:** So, she was another boss when she came to visit?

**NSJ:** Yes, I think you hit it.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** That's it exactly . . . just another boss.

**MM:** I wanted to step into today, current events, unless Nora has some additional questions.

**NM:** May I ask a couple of questions? You said you didn't have electricity on the farm. How about heating? How was your farmhouse heated?

**NSJ:** Wood. Everybody, at that time, was heating with wood. Some had central heating, which I wouldn't call too central, but it was. They'd have a furnace, say, under the dining room with a

great big grill in it and it went out all over the house. Even if there was a good stairwell there for your second floor bedrooms, the heat would just seem like it would go up the steps and it would be nice and warm up there to sleep, not too warm but warm enough.

**MM:** How big was your farmhouse?

**NSJ:** Three bedrooms upstairs and one on the main floor, kitchen, dining room and a living room—no bathroom. We hadn't gotten around to that yet.

**NM:** Why was it that you moved to Minneapolis? I think we read that you moved to Minneapolis to finish high school because the high school was so far away?

**NSJ:** Yes. You see, the real high school was in Hinckley. It was fourteen miles from us. The two years of high school that we had in the grade school that was done at the initiative of the parents out there. It seems like, to me, every since my dad had been serving on a school board anyplace, it was his job to hire the teachers. I don't know how the other people got around to that. Maybe the fact that my mother was a school teacher . . . it could have been. They made a point of anybody that they got in there, they had to be able to teach high school, at least the first two years.

**MM:** Then, you moved to Minneapolis to stay with your uncle?

**NSJ:** Yes, uncle and aunt and went on to school. I got involved, too. I started working, at the same time, and got involved with the labor movement, organizing and that sort of thing, so before I knew it, I was back . . . not only high school but I was in college by that time because I was making my own money and labor . . . just understanding the education of labor itself or economics brought me right on back. I really liked that because I did like school.

**MM:** Did you study that in school and join organizations?

**NSJ:** No, I learned that. It was on-the-job training.

**MM:** What was your first job?

**NSJ:** I was an elevator operator at the Athletic Club, where I did all of this mischievous work like organizing a union and so forth.

**MM:** You must have been very young then?

**NSJ:** I was. I was still a teenager, eighteen, I think. I went there in November and, then, I turned eighteen in December. I know, at nineteen, I was still deep into the activities around the club and organizing to the hilt.

**MM:** I understand you were very successful in starting the union.

**NSJ:** We did. We did some very good contracts. Yes. One of the things—that was a few years later though . . . I always saw to it that I was a part of the contract negotiation committee. I liked that because instead of being out there yelling about somebody else doing a job, I was doing it myself. It was about 1940, I guess, that we negotiated a contract, our first contract, for equal pay for women—one of the first in the country. I happened to have the good fortune to be on that contract negotiation.

**MM:** That was an incredible accomplishment.

**NSJ:** It really was when you stop and think about it. People didn't follow through with it from other unions. Other internationals kind of drug their feet on it. It went a little bit backwards. Now, every union in this country, especially the internationals, should have that provision: equal pay for women.

**MM:** Then, how did you become involved with the political figures, like Hubert Humphrey?

**NSJ:** In pretty much the same way. I was there. In our union, we did have political education, which came under the old Farmer-Labor system. The Farmer-Labor Party was getting very strong in Minnesota, at that time, as well as the Progressive Party in Wisconsin. In Minnesota, we had the adjunct, or whatever you want to call it, to the party structure known as the Farmer Labor Association. We had regular teachers there, two of them to teach political history. It just went right on over into the whole economic field of labor. The association membership was made up of labor people. It was a delegated body, so I was one of the five members that went on there from my union.

**MM:** That was quite an opportunity. Do these types of organizations still have that kind of education?

**NSJ:** No. It's too bad. That's the reason we've got 100 candidates out there for governor and a whole lot of stuff right now. If you had that kind of education, there would be some pragmatism prevailing within the party structure.

**MM:** You're saying the people would be more involved?

**NSJ:** Yes, they would be more involved and know pretty much what they were doing and not just go off and lead with their emotions.

**MM:** Right. I understand that you're now involved with the young [Skip] Humphrey's gubernatorial campaign?

**NSJ:** Yes. One of the calls that came while you girls were waiting for me was coming from his office to be sure that I'd be at a certain meeting tonight.

**MM:** Can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing for his campaign?

**NSJ:** What I'm doing for him is not anything too precise, but, generally speaking, I think pretty good because I am kind of an adviser on a lot of things pertaining to the campaign itself. I like that. That's what I did for his dad early on, too. I like the idea that the two planks that we put in the platform in 1948 dealt with ordinary people, the workers and people of color.

**MM:** That was quite a big step for a political figure to make in 1948, I understand.

**NSJ:** Yes, that's right. Racism was rampant and to say nothing . . . Gender discrimination was just an everyday thing, right in your home and everything else.

**MM:** It was just a way of life.

**NSJ:** Yes, that's right. My father always told me that I didn't have to separate girl and boy work. I could do anything I wanted to do. Of course, I waxed on that one pretty hard. [Laughter]

**MM:** I'm sure. That was an unusual thing to hear for a young girl growing up during that time.

**NSJ:** Yes, especially when all your friends all around you are talking about the girls' work and the boys' work and all of that. I even made up my mind at Christmas time when I heard the song—I think it was *Jolly Old St. Nick* or something like that—that “Nellie thinks that dolls are folly,” or something like that. It's a part of the lyrics.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** I said, “Somebody's writing after me.” That probably wasn't the exact words that I used, but that was my thought.

**MM:** Now, that we're on that subject, tell me, were the toys separated by gender that you got for Christmas?

**NSJ:** Yes, they were, come to think of it. I never got too excited about, like I said, the dolls and I did have my share of dolls. They didn't last very long. I'd put them up for show someplace and maybe put them on a shelf, who knows? I did like books. I just went crazy about books. That was a good gift for me. It would take the place of a dozen dolls.

**MM:** What did your brothers get for Christmas?

**NSJ:** Everything that's typical for boys, like trains, some kind of sporting goods, whatever. Baseball was pretty much the item then, the mitt, the glove, and the balls itself. I'm sure someplace along the line, there must have been a bat that somebody got one year.

**MM:** Didn't you play baseball?

**NSJ:** I did. But, see, I could play with a stick. Mine wasn't that professional like the boys' was.

**MM:** [Laughter] But you had as much fun, I'm sure.

**NSJ:** Oh, yes, and probably played better.

**MM:** What were some of the other sports you did?

**NSJ:** I loved to skate.

**MM:** Ice skate.

**NSJ:** Oh, gosh, did I love to skate. I would take one of those road slips that they used on the country roads in those days and put a horse onto it, take it down to the nearest lake not too far from the barn, and get all the snow off of it. Like I said, I was pretty strong and I could tip that thing up and do what I wanted to do and, then, go back and put my skates on and really stay there hour after hour.

**MM:** You made your own ice skating rink?

**NSJ:** Yes, or at least I uncovered it if it snowed. Then, I kept one pair of skates hanging in the barn, too. It was kind of a half basement, stone basement, and over the door, just as you come down the steps and come around the corner to the door to enter behind the cows, there was a big beam up there. I put a great big nail up there and, then, I put a string, or a piece of leather, or whatever it was through one of the skates and hung it up there.

**MM:** Were there any kind of competitive sports in your area at all?

**NSJ:** No, I didn't have any chance at that. I played a little basketball in the town of Hinckley, but that was like at a holiday or something like that.

**MM:** Did you?

**NSJ:** Yes, nothing that I could say was consistent that was competitive. We made competitiveness out of everything we did though within the family. We did that with skiing, too.

**MM:** So, you skied?

**NSJ:** I skied. I loved to ski, too. Buck Hill [Ski Area] . . . we rented Buck Hill out there for some of our stock, our feeder stock, at that time. My grandmother lived just a little bit north and to the east of Buck Hill on Crystal Lake. Many times, I'd cut across that east end and go on across the lake over to her house. It's changed out there an awful lot. I was out there about a year or a year and a half ago.

**MM:** Is that all gone now?

**NSJ:** All of that is gone. It's just like a regular development, almost of any city development.

**MM:** Like an extension of the city?

**NSJ:** Yes. Where our farm was, the last farm that we lived on there, the west end of the farm is all development and the east end was being developed for a golf course. We used to cut hay off of there and on part of it, we had corn. I don't know . . . it just seems like a different world out there.

**MM:** Do you miss that rural life?

**NSJ:** Yes. I think I missed it more up in Pine County, though. Like I said, we still have our farm up there. But, you don't get a chance to participate to the degree that we did when you're growing up in something that's there for you everyday. There are so many kids now in the family, the offspring of my sisters, brothers, and their offspring that if you go up to the farm, sometimes for the Fourth of July, you've got forty kids there.

**MM:** A big family reunion every holiday.

**NSJ:** Yes, it really is. This year, we didn't have quite what we've had. One of my older nephews, in fact, the brother to the one I just told you about—she is sixty-two and he is sixty-one or sixty—said, "Golly, I miss those family get-togethers." I said, "Yes, I do, too." At least, I don't eat too much.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** You really do when you go out to a picnic like that.

**MM:** I know we're jumping around a bit, but can you tell us a little bit about the general college where you finished high school at the "U" [University of Minnesota]?

**NSJ:** It wasn't called general college then, it was extension, at that time. They just did the traditional kinds of things that the students missed out on and said they needed to graduate. Half of us didn't graduate. We just went on and enrolled someplace else and went on to school.

**MM:** Things weren't that formal?

**NSJ:** That's right. I couldn't wait to get into college, to regular college, because I wanted to design my own program.

**MM:** What did you study when you started to college?

**NSJ:** Lots of history and economics, as much of politics as I could get into. But I found out that two of the professors that I had at the University didn't know as much about politics as I did. I had been studying this in . . .

**MM:** Because of your practical experience?

**NSJ:** Yes, that's right.

**MM:** I know that there were so many things that you accomplished, but can you give us an idea of some of the civil rights involvement that you had?

**NSJ:** Right off the reel, I guess we could go back to the Non-Partisan League and my early brush with good politics, hard hitting politics. They did believe in the equality of all people. That came through at every level. Then, of course, there was the family type farm, the small farmers, got did in by the big corporate things that even was going on at that time. I used to hear my father refer to how they set the prices on things and the family type farmer wasn't able to do that for themselves, which led, of course, into the corporate way of doing things and setting the system. I looked at all of those things and it kind of gave me a guide as to what not to let happen to what you're doing. Like when you're negotiating with your boss, negotiating with a large association, business, you keep your philosophy. You're going to have to fight like mad to maintain what it is you want. That's what causes the big cleavage between labor and management. I kind of learned that early, like I say, seeing how my dad . . . What I was going to say about my dad is that he used to always call those people in between there, that middle man . . . "If we could ever get rid of the middle man, us farmers could make a good living and we wouldn't have to take what they give us." The same thing was true in the labor management world.

**MM:** You saw the union as one of the major solutions to that problem?

**NSJ:** Yes, because the basis on it was organization anyhow, getting together, talking it over, and formulating your own policy and that's what the unions are all about.

**MM:** And trying to keep some control.

**NSJ:** That's right, maintain the control and write your own platform.

**MM:** What are some of the other civil rights issues that you were involved in?

**NSJ:** The first was coming out, again, of the Farmer-Labor setup, when we did the merger. I met Humphrey a little bit before that, but he and I were on that same committee. The rights of labor to organize was one of the first items on the platform. Then, the next item dealt with the rights of people of color to live and not be hung from the nearest tree and things like that, as we put it historically speaking.

**MM:** Anti-lynching laws?

**NSJ:** Yes. His speech of 1948 was pretty natural coming out of [unclear].

**MM:** A lot of people don't know what led up to that speech, but you were there?

**NSJ:** Yes, I was there. I was a part of it, should furnish a lot of the words. I come to Minneapolis in, as I said, 1923 and in 1923, just a few months before I came here, there had been the three-person lynching in Duluth. I thought, we can talk about Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and what have you, but we have this example here, right here in Minnesota.

**MM:** Was lynching occurring more often than was publicized in Minnesota?

**NSJ:** No, it was a very isolated thing. There hasn't been a lynching around, I don't think, since. That was done primarily because of color.

**MM:** Were you involved later on, in the 1960s, during . . . ?

**NSJ:** Yes, to a great degree. I raised an awful lot of money because I was involved with the labor, but before that, the writing of the Fair Employment Practices Act for the city of Minneapolis. Of course, Humphrey was mayor at that time. It was just a carry-on to what we had taught during his campaign, early on. That was 1947 that we got the Fair Employment Practices and, then, in 1955, we were able to get the legislature, get enough of a vote of them there, to get the state law through.

**MM:** How do you assess the local and national climate today as far as human rights and civil rights for African-Americans?

**NSJ:** Very bad. The very worse, it probably generates the feeling every place else the lack of equality in employment. I know there are a lot of people out there that want to blame labor for

that, but every time I get to the place where I can argue that point, labor doesn't write any of the rules, regulations. That's done by the power structure. At the same time, the inequality for people of color and women is comparable to what the same group of people are trying to do to labor today, just destroy labor completely.

**MM:** Do you see that is for the same reasons?

**NSJ:** Sure, political. Having a job, being able to live freely as our constitution says that we do, all of those kinds of things . . .

**MM:** What are your thoughts about young people and civil rights issues today?

**NSJ:** I think that the young people are not studying it. They're not even taking advantage of what's out there. I know that there's a lot of racism in a lot of areas of learning. Say, for instance, if you're discriminated [against] on a job, how are you going to learn to be a skilled person or if you're going to school and you want higher education, how are you going to learn that, if you don't have the opportunity to get into the halls that teach it?

**MM:** Exactly. Have you got any thoughts about how African-Americans and others can help to change those conditions, yet again?

**NSJ:** Yes, I do, by just . . . There's an awful gap in our teaching system. I don't know if you heard the report that came out of Massachusetts last week? Sixty percent of the teachers that are certified teachers are unqualified to teach. That's awful . . . yes, really awful.

**MM:** That's quite a statement.

**NSJ:** Yes.

**MM:** So, you think that one of the major problems are the teachers?

**NSJ:** Oh . . .

[Tape interruption]

—and all of that kind of a movement, regardless of who you are, is that you have a certain degree of knowledge. You can read and write. Then, take what you've got and accomplish all of these other things out there.

**MM:** What are your thoughts about getting younger people more interested and involved, say, the way you were involved?

**NSJ:** I don't know. It's kind of a hard . . . It takes a lot of effort to do a lot of that stuff. You've got to be geared to it. The difference with me, I did have enough from my parents, be it scholarly reading and education or hands-on, whatever. I had both of them. A lot of kids just don't have that.

**MM:** Do you think the school could answer that problem in some way?

**NSJ:** Yes, they could, sure. Yes, I do.

**MM:** The schools seem to be, many times, geared towards a stance of neutrality.

**NSJ:** It's probably easier to do because you don't rock any boats . . . just kind of the status quo.

**MM:** Do you think that issues, local and national, should be discussed and brought out more in the classroom?

**NSJ:** I do. I think the degree of academics has to be really looked at and studied and the input of students themselves as well as parents. On the other hand, I think the hands-on skill training has to be dealt with pretty much in the same way, because everybody that goes out there and makes a success of themselves has that combination of things.

**MM:** Right. You're saying it can't be just the classroom or just the home?

**NSJ:** That's right, yes. I don't know if in my life . . . In fact, I was telling a young man that's an officer down the hall here, "I've never seen so many educated fools in my life with Ph.D.s coming out of every crevice," and this that and the other.

[**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** They just don't know how to teach.

**MM:** Do you think it's a matter of not knowing a specific content well enough, that it's, maybe, too many education courses and not enough life experience?

**NSJ:** I think it's a combination of everything that you just mentioned. It just seems to me that it has to be that well-rounded kind of thing.

**MM:** I'd like you now to just comment on any additional areas of your life that you think would be of particular interest to young students or anything at all that you think should be included in this conversation.

**NSJ:** I think what we just covered there about the combination of academics as well as hands-on skill training . . . I think there has to really be a lot of discussion on that, a lot of conferences, a lot of workshops. People do have to come together on this. Because, otherwise, how are our young students going to reach back, grasp, or have the hindsight to say, “Oh, I should have been there,” or, “Maybe, I need this,” and, then, go on about their business? If you don’t know it, you just don’t know what to reach for either.

**MM:** Are you saying that schools should probably reach out more into the community to bring in people like yourself and others with that hands-on experience?

**NSJ:** Yes, I think some of us old crusty type people . . . I think that’s probably some of the answer. It may not be the whole answer. About a year and a half ago, I was at a big national conference at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. In fact, I found out one thing: dormitory life doesn’t agree with me at ninety years old.

[Laughter]

**NSJ:** Running up and down the halls with a towel around me . . . there was a time I could do all of that. We had just about every authority in the United States there, at some place or other, leading a workshop and that sort of thing. I never disagreed with so many so-called top-notch people in my life, because they weren’t dealing with the hard issues—reading and writing, number one, and to understand. Kids just don’t understand a lot of times what they’re reading.

**MM:** Was this a conference on education?

**NSJ:** Yes, it was. I was just trying to think of the official name: National Association of Educational Activists, something like that. It’s got all of the trappings of being very radical.

**MM:** Just the trappings?

**NSJ:** It had more than that. [Laughter] I liked that part. People like the writer—maybe, you’ve read some of his work—Ira Shore . . .

**MM:** I’ve heard the name.

**NSJ:** . . . was there through the whole time that we were there. I never had so many arguments with one person as I did with him. Where he and I differed to the greatest extent—I think he knows a lot about what he’s talking about—was on the community aspect of things, how you really do get that education, be it training or academia, how you get that out to the people. How do you people to latch onto it?

**DB:** I was interested, Miss Johnson . . . you were talking about some of the commissions you worked on. I was thinking, you may have worked with Cecil Newman?

**NSJ:** Oh, Mr. Newman and I . . . he wouldn't write his editorial without talking to me on Sunday morning—either labor-wise, NAACP-wise [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], or political-wise. [Laughter] We had to do that. Was Mr. Newman related to you?

**DB:** He wasn't, no, but, he's someone whom I'm interested in, that I think young people should know more about.

**NSJ:** That's right. The fact is that he and I did correspond with each other on the telephone an awful lot.

**DB:** Was that an exciting time, after the war, when you were working on this commission, when Humphrey was mayor? What was Minneapolis like for African-Americans, at that time?

**NSJ:** It would depend upon how much we put into it. God knows I put an awful lot into it. It seemed like, to me, at times, that we were making some gains, but later on, it just seemed like things kind of went backwards. I see two areas: lack of education in politics and lack of education in the financial world. Most of the leadership in all of the people of color, the real leadership, comes out of those people that come out of the labor movement. I think that's true of women, too, regardless of what their nationality or their economic background is all about.

**DB:** For you and Mr. Newman and Hubert Humphrey, 1968 was an interesting year. You made a lot of gains . . .

**NSJ:** Yes, that's right. Mr. Newman came out of labor, too—a lot of people didn't realize that—the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

**DB:** I was wondering if you also may have worked at all with or met Carl Rowan?

**NSJ:** Oh, yes, but Carl and I never got along too well. Carl was kind of elite in many ways and, you know, I'm a very down-to-earth person. I just believe, if you've got to plow a field, get out there and plow that field and do it in the way it's supposed to be done. No amount of words and all of that is going to make the plowshare go down in the earth.

[Laughter]

**NSJ:** Excuse me, for being so much down to earth.

**DB:** Do you think a basic work ethic in your school and your labor is real important?

**NSJ:** Oh, yes, yes. You have to do that. I also ran a business for thirty-four years. I notice that many of the writings do refer to it from time to time. It was a very highly skilled operation. I had wished that I could have brought in a couple of my young relatives and they'd still had it going by now. I just had to get away from it because I was working, like, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours a day. I didn't mind doing that except it really tired me out. And the older I got, the more tired I got.

**NM:** Where was your shop?

**NSJ:** I was downtown about three different places. Where the IDS Center is now, that corner where the Montgomery Wards Store went in later on . . . I was right on that corner at 628 Nicollet [Avenue]. It was the old Kresge building. Then, I moved from there to the old Lumber Exchange building just up the street here on 5th [Street] and Hennepin [Avenue]. Then, they raised the rent so much at that old building. They started to rehab[ilitate] it. I moved to 920 Nicollet. I moved there in 1986. That was my last move. The next move was out completely. They've torn that building down now.

**MM:** Does anyone else have any other questions?

**NM:** You said that you liked to read a lot when you were a child. Do you remember any favorite books that you had?

**NSJ:** The first long book—I was eight years old when I read it—I remember. There were a lot of others that I read and, periodically, they come to me or some of the subject matter. This was *Dandelion's Cottage*. Do you remember that one? It's over 100 years old. I don't even remember the author, except that I thought it was well-done. It was a 350-page book and I was very interested in that when I got through with it. I said, "At eight years old, just look what I've done." After that, I didn't pay too much attention to . . . Of course, some of those Russian classics that go many thousands of . . . like, what is it? *The Brothers Karamazov* [Dostoevsky]. There was a couple of them I—volumes, great classics for all of the world, not just for the Russian people. After you read that, then, you know you have really read a book.

**MM:** [Laughter]

**NSJ:** The same thing is true of the classics of Carl Sandburg on the [Abraham] Lincoln years [*The Prairie Years* and *The War Years*], great big books and never stop, just volume after volume.

**MM:** Are you still an avid reader?

**NSJ:** I don't see too good anymore, but I like to read all the time what I can.

**MM:** The library now has books on tape.

**NSJ:** I know.

**MM:** Do you like to listen to those?

**NSJ:** I don't have time for that.

[Laughter]

**NSJ:** I've got to work my reading in between something or other.

**NM:** You mentioned a number of newspapers that your family read when you were in Pine County. Did your family ever take any of the newspapers that were published by the Black press, like Minneapolis or St. Paul produced?

**NSJ:** You see, the *Chicago Defender* and I were born together.

**MM:** Really?

**NSJ:** I always tell people—I guess they called him General Abbott, or whatever, that published the *Defender*—”Ever since I can remember, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender* were the two papers that came to our house.” And I've been remembering a long time. [Laughter]

**MM:** Yes.

**NSJ:** I'm not your ordinary child out there doing what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm doing everything that I'm not supposed to do.

**MM:** I think that was exactly what you were supposed to do. [Laughter]

We'd really like to thank you for this interview.

**NSJ:** Thank you. This was a nice interview.

**MM:** We will send you a copy of the transcript so that you can feel free to edit it, as you see fit.

**NSJ:** That's nice.

**MM:** This information will certainly enrich the understanding of the part African-Americans played in Minnesota history, especially for the younger residents.

**NSJ:** That's good.

I'm being interviewed for a book, too. I don't know if you know that. We've had several interviews and it's the second or third attempt at doing this. One of the things that's very interesting to me—I'm glad that you ladies interviewed me the way you did—is there wasn't one time that your questions said that you knew more about me than I knew about myself.

[Laughter]

**NSJ:** I just really want to throw that out there. I had a couple of women that were interviewing me and one of them was working at trying to get a contract with the Historical Society. I said, "Oh, my god!" It was on some women's issues. I thought, my god! when you come in with the preconceived idea what I'm supposed to be and, then, I have to argue like hell to tell you that I milked thirty cows each morning . . .

[Laughter]

**NSJ:** I know that's a non-traditional kind of thing for the average downtown girl to be doing. You shoveled this and you shoveled that and you could handle a manure spreader as good as your dad could handle it and all of that . . . all of those kind of things . . . give me an argument on it. You do understand what I'm saying?

**MM:** Absolutely. We came here to be informed . . .

**NSJ:** With wide-open minds and that as nice.

**MM:** . . . and to expand our knowledge on Nellie Stone Johnson and I think we've done that.

**NM:** Yes.

**MM:** Again, thank you so much.

**NSJ:** If any other questions hit your mind—because you two do have very curious minds and I like that—just give me a call and we can do things on the telephone, too.

**MM:** Okay. Thank you so much.