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Interview with Gwendolyn Johnston Regarding Her Life (FA 154)

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Folklife Archives Project 154 – A Generation Remembers, 1900-1949

Interview with Gwendolyn Johnston (CT 66)

TAPE1, SIDE1

KEITH SMITH: Oral history interview, Keith Smith, August 4th, 1986, with Gwen Johnson, in the, Roosevelt House Two, Rob's tape recorder, Super Scope. {Tape shut off and then on} Uh, can you tell me a little bit about when you, when you were born and where you were living, where your parents were living at the time?

GWENDOLYN JOHNSTON: Well, I was born in Chicago, Illinois.

KS: Ah.

GJ: Mm hm. This was in 1915.

KS: Uh, how did you get to this area?

GJ: Well, my parents, originally, were from, the uh, West Louisville, West Louisville and the uh, St. Joseph area. And my mother was born in a log cabin, which is now on Route 54, I think, yeah. Uh, right out of West Louisville.

KS: Well.

GJ: And uh, there is some, history behind, my mother's people. My, grandfather, had a dry goods store, in West Louisville, before the big tornado hit,

KS: What, what was his name?

GJ: In 1885. His name was Holmes Blandforth, and, a tornado, hit West Louisville, wiped out everything. There, there was quite a few buildings there. There was a, a doctor's office, and there was post office, and a general store, and a hotel, but, but the, the building that my grandfather had was, he was in, you see, he was with uh, with the, Livers, Blandford and Livers.

KS: Did he spell his name with a "d" in the middle?

GJ: Blandforth, uh huh.

KS: B-L-A-N-D?

GJ: Yeah.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And it was wiped out. And then my grandmother, had eight children, living children then and, she was pregnant with other one, with, the ninth one. Well, when the, tornado hit, they had no place to live, so they farmed, they were farmed out to other, relatives, the children. And someone, I don't know whether it was in the family or where, but they, told my grandfather that

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there was a house, well, about two or three miles out of town. It was empty, and if he could go, there, in and clean up around, he could live on the farm for property and get, until he could, get re-established.

KS: Mm hm.

GJ: Well, he took the oldest boy. He was about eleven or twelve, or something like that at the time, and he cleaned, supposedly cleaned out the well, but, there was a big rat in it. They didn't know it, and they drank the water, and it killed my grandfather.

KS: Now this was in?

GJ: This was in 1800s, 18-, oh, yes, eight-, I, I have the records of when that tornado hit, upstairs, in, it was in the Owensboro paper. And the, the youngest, I mean, the oldest grandson, got very ill, and my grandmother wasn't with him, when all this happened, but she heard he was ill. He was dying, but she went and got, horse and buggy. She said, "He is NOT going to die." And she got blankets, and she got, books, and uh, everything was warm, and she went and got him, and, where he were, was, and brought him back to where she was, and she nursed him back to health, and he lived to be eighty-seven years old.

KS: Wow.

GJ: {Chuckles} Yes, so, whatever in those days, whatever they used, it worked, didn't it?

KS: Apparently. Now, when did you, move back to West Louisville?

GJ: Well, my, we, my mother and father, were married in Louisville. My grandmother lived, my, after my, grandfather died, they moved to Louisville. And uh, my grandmother had a boarding house, and then my father, cooked, my father's mother knew my mother's mother, and my father could not work on the farm 'cause he had, arthritis. And uh, well, they sent him to Louisville to take uh, Business School, go to Business School, 'cause my father was a musician.

KS: What, what was his name?

GJ: Ambrose Vivins, V-I-V-I-N-S.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And that's, that's where he got connected to my mother. My, he, Father would, while boarding with my grandmother. He, he, he, became ill with arthritis, couldn't get around, and my mother was nursing. She was home, you know. She helped my grandmother. All the girls did. And, so, things, progressed and they got married in Louisville, and then they moved back, down, to where my father's parents lived, down the hill in a little, in a little ol' shack there, and that's where my

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KS: Do you remember what road that was on?

GJ: Uh, it was on the road, road to Panther. Panther to Louisville, from West Louisville to Panther. I don't know what they call it now. It goes to

KS: I think I know what road you're talkin' about.

GJ: When, when ya go to uh, to West Louisville. You don't go down to where Diamond Lake is, you turn, when you go left, on that road, and that goes, out toward Panther.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And uh, so that's when my oldest sister was born.

KS: I see.

GJ: She was about a year or so later, and, then, my mother, my father couldn't, he just couldn't work on a farm. He just couldn't, so, they went, they moved to Chicago. And, that's where I had a little older brother that was born, and then I was born and the little brother died, about, ten days after I was, born. He, he died. And then I had a sister.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And then that was during World War I. And

KS: So you were born in '15 so you were like before the beginning...

GJ: Yeah.

KS: ...of the war?

GJ: And then uh, when World War I, started, they were desperate for men, and my father was a big, strapping, six foot two, weighed about 175 or 80, almost 200. And uh, so they told him if he would, if he would go back to the farm, they wouldn't draft him. Well, he, they came back down to West Louisville. They moved to West Louisville.

KS: Do, do you remember how old you were then?

GJ: I was only about five, four, four or five, 'cause my mother had another child, a little girl.

KS: And so

GJ: After that, was when they moved to West Louisville

KS: Oh.

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GJ: And she had another child, a girl, before that, too.

KS: ‘Course that would have been, right around,

GJ: You see, I was in

KS: 1919 or something like that when?

GJ: Yeah, 1919, 1920, uh huh.

KS: Toward the end of the war.

GJ: Well, the war wasn’t ended yet, because while we lived in West Louisville, best as I can remember, we lived on this old school house, down in, the valley there. I don’t know whether you know it, but that went, that went up ?? about four or five years ago. I had a picture of it and everything, and I made a poem about living down there. I, I, I, should have brought that down here. Anyway, the Messenger-Inquirer ran that all on the front page now, anyway. I remember when the war was over, somebody, come woke, my father up. It was a mill, used to be a mill in West Louisville, but it’s burnt down now. I don’t know when it burnt, but, my father got up about two or three o’clock in the morning to open up that mill, and he laid on that, whistle in that mill, and woke everybody up, and scared ‘em for miles away. { Chuckles }

KS: Great.

GJ: Everybody was, well, getting up, you know?

KS: Mm hm.

GJ: That much I can remember. And

KS: Okay now well, this school house, that they lived in, do you remember much about that?

GJ: It was an old school house at, the uh, the new school house was, you know where the, the, the grade school is now in West Louisville? Well, they had,

KS: Yeah.

GJ: They built, the first, school house that was built there, they, the kids used to go to one, this old school house we lived in. It had a tin roof.

KS: Uh huh. Where was it in relation to the new school house?

GJ: Well, it uh, when they moved out of the old school house, well, they rented it. We, that’s when we moved into it, you see?

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KS: Okay.

GJ: And in fact, they hadn't built the other school. 'Course that stuff is gone now. They got another one. That school has been torn down, the new school, but the other old building that we lived in, we, it was sold after we moved out, and they tore it down and put a house there. That's the house that is still there, but uh,

KS: Still there on, what road is that on?

GJ: Well, as you go to West Louisville, you know, where you get to the uh, the intersection, where the Diamond Lake is, and you go to,

KS: Yeah.

GJ: West, which, there's a little lane that goes down, to your left, right down that little lane.

KS: Okay.

GJ: All right, and there used to be a big house on the hill it was in black paint. We had been there before he, before we went down to the, to the old school house. And my father renovated that. It was an old, house, that was, it had columns and everything, and he, remodeled it and refurbished it and put in, uh, butane, what was it? Butane, I think, something that, for lights, for the doctor's office.

KS: Gasoline.

GJ: Well, anyway, and we lived, and we lived there while we, while my father was remodeling it, and then we moved out. My father was a mechanic, too. His, he had all kinds of uh, had of uh, he could do anything, he was, and he was a musician. He could play any instrument. He played the piano, he played the drums, he could blow any kind of a horn, he played the mandolin, he played guitar. You name it. So, I took after him. I'm a singer.

KS: O.K.

GJ: Yes, uh huh, and I'm, I'm the only one to get,

KS: You know uh,

GJ: Anything.

KS: Did you uh, let's see, if you moved, if you moved there when you were about four or five,

GJ: We lived there, I was about six or seven years old and then we moved, we moved there after, well, they sold the, property, and we moved to Owensboro.

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KS: Okay,

GJ: And then we lived in Owensboro.

KS: Now, about when was this?

GJ: Uh, I was seven years old when I made my Communion at, at St. Joseph Church. And the new school, Lucia that, that school there now, that's the old school, that was brand new when I made my Communion.

KS: Okay.

GJ: I was one of the first students, you know. I was in second grade.

KS: I made my Communion here, too.

GJ: Yes, so I was, I was when they first started, when they first opened, that was ??. And we lived here, my father, he, he had a hard time tryin' to find a place that uh, a place to work that was, not, wet, uh, damp or anything, 'cause he, in the winter time he suffered. We called it rheumatism, but it was arthritis, you know?

KS: Mm hm.

GJ: In those days, we didn't know what arthritis meant, you know?

KS: Mm hm.

GJ: And he did help, when they started to build the bridge, across the river? He, they gave him a job on the bridge, and what was he doing, going down there with, he had to put on hip boots and wade in the water, and put those big pilings in, you know? Put it in and it knocked him out, so

KS: So he couldn't?

GJ: He couldn't, he had to quit that job, so then he decided,

KS: Really.

GJ: So then he decided, he wanted to go to California, but my father knew he suffered, and we sold everything we had, and my father bought tents. Everything, every, everything we had and put it on an old touring car, well, he traded our car for a touring car. We started for Evan-, I mean for, California. You know how far we got?

KS: Mm nmh.

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GJ: To Evansville. My sister, my oldest sister, became ill, and the doctor said that she wouldn't live but a couple years. That's as far as we got.

KS: How long did you stay in Evansville?

GJ: And, you know, I think about a couple years, and she got worse, and she got worse, and then just before she died, well, my grandmother came and picked my sister and I and took us to Chicago, and then we moved to Chicago, but she, she was in Chicago a week when she died. She's fourteen years old.

KS: And how old were you when your family decided to, to they were gonna go to California?

GJ: I was eight or, about eight, between, about eight and a half years old. We didn't live in Owensboro too long.

KS: Or West Louisville either?

GJ: Mm mnh. That's why I say, my, my, history of West Louisville is, is what I have heard. No there's a lady here in the building, that's related to me. She's a Blandford. She could tell you anything you want to know about uh, Louisville and, and St. Jo. {Chuckles}

KS: Maybe we'll want to talk with her, you know?

GJ: You, you want me, she's you want me to go get her?

KS: No, that's okay. I, I'll, I'll call her later. What's her, what's her name?

GJ: Uh, Florine, F-L-O-R-I-N-E, Blandford. Same as, she, her husband's a cousin of my mother.

KS: Okay. Maybe I'll give her a call.

GJ: Uh huh. Well, she can tell you everything. She's,

KS: Well, okay, well, let's back up then, and to those, these first days of school. Now, where did you go to your, where was uh, your first day of school?

GJ: That was in, West Louisville.

KS: What was uh, tell me a little bit about that.

GJ: Well, we uh, it wasn't very far, just, cut in the hill, it wasn't part of the school. I remember the school, you know what they did? They divided the whole school, into two, what they call, uh, segments, that, one would be the Careers, let's see, the Careers and the Eureka. {Chuckles} C-O-R-E-C-A, see, the Eureka, E-U-R-E-K-A, and we had colors. One was a blue

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and one was gold. Then we would, compete against each other. The whole school was divided. I went to that, ever hear of anything like that in your life?

KS: No, I haven't.

KS: Where was this?

GJ: This was West Louisville.

KS: Were they divided along the sex line?

GJ: Everybody, no, everybody. They just took names, and just pulled them out, and then, you you're, you're, you a Coreca, and you're a Eureka and you're a Coreca. Now, wait a minute, Excelsior and Eureka, that's what it was.

KS: Excelsior and Eureka?

GJ: Excelsior and Eureka. Uh huh. I was an Eureka. {Chuckles}

KS: Well, what was the difference?

GJ: Well, the, they wanted us to compete. We could play basketball against each other, you see? And then we played baseball against each other, and we had spelling bees against each other, and we had other things, all kinds of competitions, against each other.

KS: Just so that you have competition?

GJ: Well, it was something different. It was something different.

KS: Did uh, how did they decide, which, which student went in which group?

GJ: They, they did not. They just picked it out of an old hat, I guess. I don't know, yeah that's all. Uh huh. Well, you're this and you're that, see? {Chuckles}

KS: Excelsior and Eureka?

GJ: Uh huh. Excelsior, and Eureka. Uh, I never will forget that, and we, competed, it, oh, a little dissension, too, believe me, it did. And uh, but, I, I guess that was o.k.

KS: Did you have uh, grades? Uh, separate rooms for different grades and all that?

GJ: Uh huh, oh yes, uh huh.

KS: What, what kinds of things did you learn there, what?

GJ: I, we, we had uh, the, the first grade, and 'course I was in the first grade. I remember reading, and every morning we got up, before we came we'd salute the flag, you

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know? And uh, we'd sing a song. I liked, I loved school. And uh, one thing, I would say most, I betcha, most of the people, most of those people are gone and dead now, passed away. There I am. {Chuckles}

KS: Oh, I don't know about that.

GJ: {Chuckles} That I went to school with, quite a few of them are gone. And uh, oh,

KS: Do you remember uh, much before school, what kind of games you played with your friends, or?

GJ: Yes. The old school house, here's something, had a tin roof. My father put that roof on before we moved in, 'cause the old school house was in such bad, repair, see, and they let us move there, I think they let live there, rent free.

KS: Mm.

GJ: So Daddy would fix it up. Well, Daddy put the tin roof on it, and every time it rained, I say, it sounded like, that we were being bombarded, you know, {Chuckles} but anyway, the games we played, we played Ally, Ally Over, we'd throw the ball, over the roof. To see who could get it over, and then throw it, to see who could catch it on the other side. That was a game, and then we'd, then we'd play uh, kickball.

KS: Did you call that first game "Ally, Ally"?

GJ: "Ally, Ally, O, Ocean," "Ally, Ally, Over" something, I can't, something, "Ally, Ally, Ocean Free" or something, I don't know. But we'd get out, you'd get out and throw the ball. You'd try to catch it, uh huh, on the other side of this big, school. And we played "Mumbledy Peg." Oh, I was good with any knife. Play with a knife, in the ground, "Mumbledy Peg," and I could shoot a marble as good as a boy. {Chuckles} My father had a, three girls, neither one was a boy, but one boy he had, passed away, even though he was two years old, when he died, but anyway, but Daddy made me a slingshot. You know what my sport was? Shooting at a chicken and a cow with a ball, 'til I got my, butt busted I tell ya. I shot the cows. {Chuckles} My father had to go get it.

KS: Oh. How old were you when you did it?

GJ: I was, {Chuckles} six or, six, six or seven. I was good with that slingshot. I could shoot everything I aimed at. {Chuckles}

KS: Did you have uh, have cows on your?

GJ: We had one, and we, see we didn't have. We had a little farm, but very little. Dad couldn't do too much. We had a little tobacco patch, that's what sold, and we had a garden, but

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Dad wasn't healthy, and worked at the mill. We didn't have it. Everybody was poor, and we didn't know it.

KS: Yeah. Uh, what about transportation around there? Did you all come to town much?

GJ: Now you see, my father, you see, lived in Chicago, my father, and when he went through there, he, he got into. He was always good at mechanics. He could fix anything, and he had learned how, and the car was startin' to come out, and he was good at 'em, and he, he learned how to drive in Chicago. And when we moved down to Louisville, he taught most those people in West Louisville how to drive. And so, first, no, at first he left, before my father got married, his parents owned a car, one of the first cars, they said if you're gonna buy a car for the family, but everybody has to learn how to drive. The girls included. Now that was something, in that day and age wasn't it?

KS: Sure was.

GJ: But the, the two of us girls did, but the young one, the one in the middle, she didn't learn, she didn't care about it, but the other two did. And they drove all their lives, and they lived to be eighty-seven years old. {Chuckles}

KS: So by the time that you all got to West Louisville cars would have already been around?

GJ: Yeah, they were around, but a lot of people didn't have 'em. They were getting them, you know, working for it, mostly Fords. But, and uh, then some had, I'm tryin' to think Buicks, I know, and uh, and Dad didn't uh, he was like a mechanic. 'Course we had, we had lots of more cars working on them all the time. Spare time, he was always working on those cars.

KS: He worked on other people's cars?

GJ: Uh huh, yeah, uh huh, down in the ??, uh, ??, you know down, you know, we didn't have, we didn't have, our dad was offered this school was, on the ground, you know.

KS: Did you all go to town much?

GJ: Oh, once in a while. Went to Owensboro. We went to all the fairs, the, the one time I, we went to the fair, or was it the circus, here, and I, I got so excited, I was jumpin' up and down to see the clowns and you know it, that I, that I had jumped up and down and fell through the seats, to the ground and I thought, "Help, I hope someone is looking for me." {Chuckles} I fell right through the seats. {Chuckles}

KS: Goodness.

GJ: I was always excited as a child. I just liked, gotta learn, you know?

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KS: Uh, what were the roads like when you were coming to town.

GJ: Oh, they, they were, uh, I think that the roads were gravel then. I don't think that they were black-top, at that time. I, I can't, now, Florine can tell you better than I can.

[Original tape is distorted from this point]

KS: I'd be surprised if they were even in gravel, actually.

GJ: No, they were gravel. Let's see, it wasn't, every, everyone came in through Parrish, on Parrish Avenue, that's how we came into town. It was a little town, and uh, I'm tryin' to think what else, {Someone talking loudly in the background} when you say things and bring it to mind, but I don't know what it is. It'll tickle my memory.

KS: You were talkin' about comin' to town.

GJ: Uh huh, and that it would be cold, we had uh, Daddy had uh, the, you know, the, I, I don't know if you ever see the, covered cars, the Fords that had the, the, the uh, ising glass flaps, you know, uh, on the side. They were open, and you had, you had buttons and you would strap them down, in the winter times,

KS: Canvas or something like that?

GJ: It had Ising, Ising glass in 'em, where you could see out of 'em. Oh, it was great, but cold, oh, was it cold in that car. And Momma, I come, come to town, I can remember comin' to town in a horse and buggy, too. I can, I can remember that.

KS: Bet that took a while.

GJ: Yeah, and the horse and buggies didn't die out for a while. They, they stayed around a little while.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And uh, tryin' to think now what else.

KS: What was it like when you were a little kid and you moved to Owensboro? Was that a big deal for ya?

GJ: Well, yes, it was different. It was

KS: It was the big city.

GJ: Uh huh. And uh,

KS: Now, that would have been about 1920, I guess, when you moved to Owensboro?

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GJ: No, about '22 or '23.

KS: Okay.

GJ: I remember that Harding died.

KS: Why?

GJ: 'Cause, it was about '2 or '3 when President Harding, you know, when he died.

KS: I've got it down here somewhere.

GJ: And then he, then he, they had uh, every time something like that happened, they would come out "Extra, Extra, Extra, President Harding Died," you know? I remember that. They woke everybody up as they went by the house.

KS: Was he uh, popular?

GJ: I don't remember, too much, you know, my Dad, was very much of a patriot. I can remember he had a big book, well, to me it was big, and about that book, he called it the "War Book." He bought that after the, the First World War, and we, I looked at that book, I couldn't read until I got into school, but I would look at those pictures, and I'd look, I want to, I can't remember who, wrote the book or what but he always called it "The War Book." And he would show us, things and talk to us about it. He would be, I learned a lot from my Dad. My Dad died when he was thirty-seven years old.

KS: You learned a lot in a few years.

GJ: Yeah.

KS: Now, now, what grade did you start, when you, when you came to town, then what grade were you goin' in to?

GJ: Seventh.

KS: You were in?

GJ: Seventh grade, uh huh.

KS: You?

GJ: I mean uh, second grade, second grade.

KS: Okay.

GJ: See, I had an older sister.

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KS: Where did you move to in Owensboro?

GJ: We lived on Clay Street. About, about a block down from, two blocks down from St. Joe's.

KS: Close.

GJ: Stop, stop and think there.

KS: Those things are still here.

GJ: It was new then, see?

KS: Okay.

GJ: It was a new school, brand new school.

KS: Tell me about it.

GJ: I can't remember too much about it. I can't, my mind, is,

KS: Yeah.

GJ: I know the sisters, the sisters came from the Mount. By the way, I went, after my father died, a couple years when I was, about, about eight, my mother sent my sister and I down to Mount St. Joseph, and I got, I went to school down there. At Saint, you know, St. Joseph.

KS: Okay. Uh,

GJ: Anyway. I can't, remember too much. 'Cause, I went, I went to so many different schools. In Evansville, I went to a Catholic school, and then I went to a public school, and, my sister was ill. So bad, you know, and I, I would home at noon, and fix her something to eat. My father was a salesman and he'd come in and uh, so she wouldn't be alone, and my mother worked, too.

KS: That was when you were in Evansville?

GJ: Yeah.

KS: On the way to California?

GJ: And that, I remember when they had that big tornado in Vincennes, Indiana. You've heard about it?

KS: No, I never heard of it.

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GJ: Tornado Alley, yeah, it was bad. It then tore up Vincennes and it almost tore up Evansville, too. The trees were, the ground there. I was, runnin' home from, from school, I've got to go take care of my sister. She'll be frightened, you know? And uh, I, I made it back.

KS: Uh, now, when you moved to Owensboro, your, what did you say your father do for a living, when you came to town?

GJ: At the time when he was killed, why, he, he, he moved and, I know he tried to work on the bridge. I don't know whether that was, that,

KS: That would have been

GJ: He first got a job on the bridge, when they started the bridge.

KS: That would have been about the '30s.

GJ: No, this is, this is when they started the pilings and, underneath when they were starting, the bridge.

KS: The bridge was finished in 1940.

GJ: Yeah, but this was, see, this was when they first started, and I was, only in, in the second grade, and I was about seven, seven years old, and that's when they first started, see, all the, road work and everything to get to it and everything, see? They had to work close to the bank and down in the water.

KS: Do you remember him talking much, about what it was like when he came home from work?

GJ: ??

KS: ??

GJ: ?? I remember that he would be dirty and, and he, he'd come in and would just collapse, but it was, it would just kill him, you know? He didn't, and then, uh, he had to get out of that and then he went to work as a, mechanic, in a garage. I can't remember the name of the garage. I think it was on ??, 'cause they would have been there. Where they, when they ??, I mean it's on ???. And the garage is still there, That's the same garage.

KS: There's a few garages around there.

GJ: And uh, we had, we had moved to a house across the street from the garage, when we moved from Evansville.

KS: Do you remember much about uh, you were around when the Prohibition started, do you remember much about that? Or were you, too young then to?

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GJ: No, I uh, and I, I think I was in Chicago when the Prohibition started. I remember that in Chicago. I know that, that, that they have Blue laws here now. Does anybody remember the Blue Laws?

KS: Sunday closings?

GJ: You could not go to the grocery store, nothing open, on Sunday. I think that they left the movie theater open on Sunday. That was the only thing with the Blue Laws. No, no, no

KS: No business

GJ: No businesses could, be open on Sunday. I remember that.

KS: So did that upset people?

GJ: Well, yeah, I guess it could.

KS: Did people...?

GJ: Yeah, and uh, I think the movie, they let us go to the movies. Yeah, I, I think the Princess, yeah, the movies.

KS: I was tryin' to figure out when you were talkin' about Chicago ?? in the '20s, ?? how was it then? Dam. That's when they built the dam.

GJ: ??

KS: Did you think of that?

GJ: Oh, I did it was right down here.

KS: That's what I mean, it was

GJ: ?? , uh huh.

KS: Down there where English Park is?

GJ: Yeah, ??, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, and he had

KS: That would have been during the '20s and he would have had to get down in the water then.

GJ: Yeah, he had to get in the water. I would, we never did go down there, and see it, you know? ?? another job ??

KS: That was a big deal, in the '20s.

GJ: Yeah.

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KS: Was your uh, were there airplanes around here? Do you remember much about them?

GJ: ?? I remember the, when it, when the, they would uh, have the car races. Race cars.

KS: Mm hm.

GJ: And we had a racetrack here, and everybody would, we would, see the races, the cars race.

KS: And how old were you, when you?

GJ: Now, that's, that's when I, I first, went probably about seven, seven years old.

KS: Where was the racetrack?

GJ: Out, out at ???. I don't know whether it was ??, I don't know where, fairgrounds, fairgrounds, another fairgrounds at that time, I don't know.

KS: Okay. And they raced cars?

GJ: Yeah, and they, that's where they had the, they had the county fairs. They had the circuses there, and then the races.

KS: ?? the races ??

GJ: Uh huh, about ??

KS: Where it ??

GJ: Yeah, uh huh, and ?? we went, we, several times ?? talk about the cars we would see, you know? But, I was so young, that I didn't, ?? years ?? Chicago.

KS: That's when you ??

GJ: I, boy, talk about bootleggers, I say murders and everything in Chicago. ?? I was ?? shoot out in Chicago. Cops come out of the bank where they're shootin', 'n ?? children {Chuckles} ??

KS: Okay, now, whenabouts did you'all moved from Owensboro, to, to Evansville? You told me that once, ?? would have been in the '20s also, I guess?

GJ: Mm hm, yes. We were in Chicago during the Depression. In, in the '20s, I was ?? and we lived in Chicago, I used the Charleston. I would do that hours on end, out on ?? {Chuckles} ?? the Charleston, the Charleston, the Charleston.

KS: The Roaring Twenties.

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GJ: Yeah.

KS: I guess that they were “Roaring” in Chicago?

GJ: Uh huh, yeah, oh, yes. Now, about the Twenties, the mobsters, they, you see, they, after my father died, a mobster, ?? Joe, Espisito was, was goin’, Espisito was shot down in his home which was, two blocks from where we lived, on ?? Boulevard in Chicago. We went down there and saw how they’d, how they’d covered with bullets, in the house, you know, ??. They were bringing his, daughter home from the Catholic school and the limousine, and she got out, she got out and she went in the house, and he got out and ?? shot up the car and everything.

KS: Really?

GJ: ?? in the house.

KS: Was it during the Prohibition?

GJ: Just two blocks from where we lived.

KS: And that was during Prohibition?

GJ: And that was west side. Uh huh, yeah.

KS: When

GJ: And I could tell you ?? about Prohibition. We moved, when we moved from there, and we, we ?? on the second floor, and one night I heard some shots, and my father come in, and said to my sister, “?? Get back, get back into bed.” The cops were chasin’ the, the rumrunners. And we could see where the guys were hidin’ and the cops were shootin’ ??. The cops couldn’t see ‘em, but we watchin’ the whole thing scenario where we could see the guys shootin’ each other, you know? I never forget that, and that next day we got down there, and bullet holes all, around, the side of our house.

KS: How old were you?

GJ: I was, my sister had already died, I was, get, I was ten or eleven years old. Mm hm, yeah, yeah, eleven, I guess, ?? around after that.

KS: And how was, during the ‘20s also, women got the right to vote.

GJ: Mm hm. I guess.

KS: Did that make a big deal there?

GJ: I don’t remember, now, I can’t

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KS: Would your mom go to vote or anything?

GJ: My, my family was ??, everybody was, always, was ??.

KS: Well, you were in Chicago, I guess, when uh, the start of the Crash of '29?

GJ: I

KS: And then?

GJ: Yeah. But, my mother and ?? two little girls. It was rough ??, and my I got nothing ?? worked a lot. I babysit 'n, babysit and everything. Scrub people's, you know, went out and cleaned their houses and things, you know, on a Saturday when I wasn't workin'.

KS: Well, now, was your father still alive then?

GJ: No, he'd, he'd died. I, I think that, you know, he died in, when he was, when he died. He was, it was before 1929, though, I know.

KS: So your

GJ: I, I went to the Mount between 1930 and '31. It was, uh, I think he died in 1928.

KS: Okay, so

END TAPE1, SIDE1

TAPE1, SIDE2

GJ: up there now, and she and I, would, would, we had permission to walk and we was, we knew what we wanted to do, we wanted talk to the boys, you know? {Chuckles}

KS: Sure.

GJ: ?? and the boys kind of, enticed up to them to call, but we would never do that. We just walked out and, found another boy to, almost it, you know, fall in a ditch with a car, you know? {Chuckles}

KS: But uh,

GJ: But anyway,

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KS: Go ahead.

GJ: So, well, I remember so many things. Then we would have bazaars at the Mount, then you know, and we had musicals, and I was always in the musicals. And uh, oh, so many things, just, school, I, I never had a prom, though. I never, been to prom.

KS: Were you all allowed to go out on dates with boys or was that?

GJ: No way.

KS: Really.

GJ: If you did, you'd, you got it.

KS: Mm hm. People say...

GJ: It was very, very strict, very strict. Oh, my grandmother, I asked her, how come my grandmother run off with, my grandfather. My grandfather, was workin' around Mount and he lived across the road from the Mount, and my grandmother very mature, ran off and got married, with a forged note from her father, which was in the Archives in Washington, D.C.

KS: Oh.

GJ: {Chuckles} But a priest married them. He did. He took that note and read it, you know, ?? {Announcement in background} ?? And uh, there's a lot of history. I love the Mount. People there ?? My mother's cousins are all gone now, but Sister Josephine, not my teacher, but, I was close to her. And Sister Cecelia, Mary Cecelia, was my, she was my music teacher, she had a white veil there. Have you ever heard of Sister Cecelia of Brescia?

KS: Sure.

GJ: Yeah.

KS: ?? down here ??

GJ: She was my music teacher. Uh huh.

KS: She, she taught seventh and eighth grade at St. Joseph.

GJ: Really? Well, and, she had a white veil. She's not much older than I am.

KS: Really.

GJ: And uh, she taught me piano, and, I had a voice and I heard her taught the Sisters, uh, the mother's, Mother uh, Mother, Mother Agnes was her aunt, and Mother Agnes and my grandmother went, went to school there the same time, community.. I, I, I'm kind of involved

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with all that, you know, and when he heard me sing, I, I, I heard a conversation between Sister Cecelia and Mother Agnes that “We’re going to have to do something with Elaine to get her a scholarship,” but, that’s the way, uh, ??, who found, ??, when things got bad, you know, and my mother couldn’t send us back.

KS: Is that after the Depression.

GJ: Yeah, uh huh, and I couldn’t go back.

KS: ??

GJ: Things were really bad. In the 30’s, you know.

KS: I guess your mom’s, was trying to raise a family on her own.

GJ: Yes, and she had to work, and she had to work, and leave us, you know. And I, ?? hard for me ??

KS: ?? see, you’ve been doin’ that now ??

GJ: Well, that was three years, ’29, ’30 and ’31. Almost three years.

KS: Did you have a radio out there or anything like that?

GJ: Uh huh. Let me see, uh, I’m trying to think, I think, no,

KS: That was about the time that radio was getting started.

GJ: Yeah, I, I, we had a radio before Dad died. Dad went and bought one. I remember hearing little Jack play the piano. Now, now that comes back.

KS: Okay.

GJ: And ??, because my Dad loved music, piano music. He just loved music. And uh, but I, I, I can’t I think we did have one at the Mount, but I don’t know where, we had uh, I had a little portable, victrola, we called it, portable, phonograph. We had records to play on it.

KS: What kind of music was popular then?

GJ: I,

KS: On that?

GJ: Trying to think, oh the old, we had, the funny ones. I can’t remember the names of ‘em now, but we danced to all of ‘em, you know. I can, I can see my Mother and Dad when they would have, down at West Louisville, and they would, would, the school would have dances for the, for the uh, well, you know, for the older people, the adults, and we’d go, you know, and I’d

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watch my Mother and Father dance. I loved to watch my Mother and Father dance. They could really waltz, two-step. And us kids, my sister and I cut a rug and we, we, we could sing, together, but my sister lost her voice. She was bad ??, but uh

KS: Sisters and brothers at home then ??

GJ: The other sister died and I'm the only one left now. I'm the only one. I might, I live to be ninety-something years old, I guess. {Chuckles}

KS: So be it.

GJ: Yeah.

KS: Well, should we bounce over to your life away from here? How long were you in Chicago?

GJ: Got married. I married in 19n3-, '3-, '35, and my son is fifty-one, my son is fifty year, years old now. And, it was pretty rough. I had kind of a, bad time, there. I mean, the way things were going, you know? And I did get married and my husband and I, we, well, uh, we just lived a normal life, you know, we didn't, I never had a home in my life, never. But he was from Arkansas, and, and Oklahoma. And uh, but I did get a good son out of it. My son was born at the University of Chicago. Would you believe that my two grandchildren got their degrees from the University of Chicago? My grandson works at the University of Chicago. He's, technical director of all the computers.

KS: Great. I haven't been there yet.

GJ: And uh, uh, both of my grandchildren, both are boys, both brilliant, and Kathy is book smart. ?? between us. Burgers is a new company, and they use ?? to put him in charge of all the computers.

KS: So all your grandchildren, are they?

GJ: Johnston.

KS: Johnston.

GJ: Christopher, and Kathy, Katherine Johnston.

KS: Excuse me, Ms. Johnston, but I've been, I've been,

GJ: Johnston.

KS: I've been mispronouncing all this time.

GJ: Johnston, J-O-H-N-S-T-O-N.

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KS: It was given to us wrong. I'm sorry.

GJ: Yeah, everybody does it. Now my son has uh, doctorate in California. See, they were born in Santa Monica, California, and, lived there with his wife, and family, for thirty-five years.

KS: So you finally made it to California?

GJ: Yeah, I did, I, my husband, my, he wanted a divorce and I gave him a divorce, and I went to California. Took my little boy. It's the best thing I ever did.

KS: Okay.

GJ: I, I, that's where my life really started. It really started.

KS: About what year was this?

GJ: 19-, during the war, 1943.

KS: And you were telling me about some singing?

GJ: Yes.

KS: For the uh, soldiers.

GJ: Yeah. I did that, for the uh, Hollywood Canteen. I also danced in a movie, Mickey Rooney's movie. I can't remember the name of the darn thing, and I can't, I remember him, and we were doing barn dancing. I remember that. With costume, we were wearing, and I was dancing around, just dancing up a storm and everything, and I got paid, I don't know what I got paid, but I sure needed the money. {Chuckles} And uh,

KS: How did you, how did you run into that?

GJ: It was ad, in the paper, and uh, they wanted a occupation only, and I, I put my name in, someone said go put your name in. I would never really know what to do but I could sing and dance, you know. And uh, I was an extra, and boy, was dancin' up a storm.

KS: Were you really?

GJ: Yeah, and, and my, it, I, I worked for Western Union. Was a telegrapher for Western Union and I worked for an answering services, about twelve, fifteen years then I went in, state service.

KS: State job?

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GJ: State jobs. And that's where I retired from. I worked uh, for, the Department of Transportation, but they called it Highways then, but, and then, I had ten years at each place. I had ten years, at Transportation and ten years at Employment, at Unemployment Office, or Employment Office, whatever you want to call it. They call it, Employment Development now in uh, California.

KS: They changed the names of those kinds of these kinds or organizations every few years.

GJ: Yeah, they change 'em, in the wind. But the first I, that's where my education, that, secretarial course came in handy.

KS: It helped out.

GJ: Yeah, and I was, when I worked for Highways, the, I worked for the Traffic Department, one of the biggest departments and, and for the highways and we, we serviced five counties, in California, in, south of Los Angeles, five counties, and I was, uh, all these engineers. We had uh, two departments. One was Freeway Operations and Travel, and I was, timekeeper, and I give out the paychecks on payday and, took care of the sick-leave, things like that, you know, the vacation time.

KS: Okay, you

GJ: I, I, I see what happened after, all these years, how, an education will always in handy. And my son, he took it, he, spends more money on my grandchildren, that the fifty thousand dollars I spent on their education paid off. Really did.

KS: Were you there during uh, Ronald Reagan's governorship?

GJ: Oh yes, I seen him, talked to him, and I, we made cakes. He came to the Department of, of uh, Highways, and we were there on Belmont Avenue; we had moved downtown for a month, and we needed the space. And we had him to come, come and I, a bunch of us baked cakes and I was in charge of it. Now, I wish I'd put Epsom Salts in the cake. {Chuckles} That's nasty thing to say.

KS: And you, you were working for him then?

GJ: I know.

KS: He, he was governor, right?

GJ: I didn't like him. I never did like him.

KS: What was he like, uh?

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GJ: He wasn't nothing but a big mouth. He's, he always wanted attention. I had, I could tell you something way back, when I was workin'. This a little bit of gossip though, but I'm gonna tell ya, this happened, it happened, when I was workin' for Western Union, before I got, before the, before I worked for the answering service, this was back in, '40s or '50s, when he was a movie star. I think he was, he must of, broke his leg or somethin', riding a horse ??, and he, when I was takin' uh, telegraph from him, he was, "telling, this is Ronald Reagan," and he was laughin' and talkin' and havin' everything and having a big party, and, and I said, "Hey, Lois and I've got Ronald Reagan on the line...listen in" He, he propositioned me over that darn phone. {Chuckles} He said, "How would you like to come over and, join the other girls here?" You know, and so and so? And he said, "What do you look like?" And I thought, I'll fix him, I said, "I look like Kate Smith and I got a voice like William Bendix." {Chuckles}

KS: That's great. Mr. Morality, huh?

GJ: I, I, I, you know, it's just true, and I, I've lived,

KS: And then you ended up workin' for him.

GJ: I've lived all right, I, I, I could write a book on my life.

KS: Well, why don't you write one?

GJ: Well, I, I better do it before I forget it. All, every time I think about something, I should go type it out. But it is something. I've talked, I talked to, President, was it Eisenhower? Uh, Roosevelt, during the war. I worked for the telephone company down in Covena and while I was, taking a call, I got a call from uh, from the Pentagon. It, and that it, that, they were calling uh, uh, well, what do you call it again, not a battery but, it was arms, arms uh, what do they call it when they store arms, that, one of the little places over in California. It was a little town next to us, not too far, because we, we serviced that little town, and he was calling. I don't know what he was calling for, and I says, "Well, who's on the line?" And she says, "The President", and I said, I said, "You're kidding." She said, "Don't get smart, operator." {Chuckles} I almost got fired.

KS: You were like a telephone operator.

GJ: Yeah, I was, and I, I didn't know this, call was coming in, and I tried to get the thing to ring and it didn't ring, and I tried to ring something else, tried to get 'em. In those days, everything was, more antiquated than it is now.

KS: It was the old uh, the old uh?

GJ: The old uh, yeah, well, no, these were,

KS: The old uh, wires and things.

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GJ: No, on, we plugged in, plug in, you know, we plug in a, call.

KS: Right. You had to pull the wires out and plug ‘em in,

GJ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

KS: Sockets.

GJ: Yeah, yeah, and uh, I was trying to find numbers and everything, and so I told supervisor, the girl was here. “Quick,” I said, “I’ve got, President Roosevelt on the line. And I can hear him talkin’ to his operators.” He didn’t talk to me. I heard him talkin’ to her. I was listenin’, what he was tellin’ her what to do, and who to connect. And she said, “Operator, can you get this?” I said, “I, listen here, I’ll give you the number,” or whatever, I could, you know to uh, service her. And uh, then I talked to Eisenhower one night. I was on the answering service. He called one of the doctors on our exchange, and it wasn’t the right doctor, and I told that operator, I says, “You tell the President that, he’s got the wrong doctor, but I know which one he wants,” and I heard him say, “Thank you, operator.” {Chuckles} You know, I was tickled to death, and I got him, I got the right doctor, ‘cause I happen to know all his doctors. And this, this happens, I had a, darn good memory for everything. I had the best memory, and now it’s shot, but I did at that time.

KS: You haven’t done too bad with your memory here.

GJ: No, uh, okay, but I, I have talked to people, and I’ve seen, in Chicago when, President Roosevelt was, I think it was sixth time he was nominated or the third time, when he came to Chicago and he, came down Madison Street. Look, I took my little boy, and we went over there to see the President. Wave at him. He was right there, waved by right at him, in the car. I never will forget that. When, when he was, when he was, not nominated, but when he was, after the nomination and they win whatever it is. What is it?

KS: Inauguration?

GJ: I, I don’t know.

KS: Well,

GJ: He came there for something, but we, he’d already been made President. You know, he had gone through.

KS: Yeah. Now, when you were mentioning Western Union, what that have been for the telephone company then?

GJ: No, Western Union bought it.

KS: Okay.

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GJ: That's telegraph, that's telegraph.

KS: You worked at both?

GJ: Telegraph.

KS: Okay.

GJ: I worked for an answering service, a telephone company, and, I worked for a telephone company first, then Western Union, then I worked for answering service in Beverly Hills.

KS: Okay, and you ran into Ron Reagan when you were

GJ: Yeah.

KS: A telephone operator.

GJ: No, when I worked for the, when I

KS: No, that's when you were taking the telegraphs, for Western Union.

GJ: No, I, the first time I talked to him, when I was working for, for Western Union. First time, and then the second time was when I worked for the state, the State of California. When he came.

KS: The first time was when he,

GJ: Yeah, yeah, when he propositioned me. {Makes a noise}

KS: Made the lewd remarks. {Chuckles} Okay. Well, do you, can you, if you had to pick out something that probably had more impact than anything else on your life, when you were a little kid now, what do you think that might be? When you were a little youngster? Was there a certain memory that you carry with you from, your days back in Daviess County?

GJ: You know, I, for years I dreamed, always going back to the Mount St. Joseph. I felt an affinity with it. But we were, when I was a little girl, Momma took us there a couple times, and I loved it then. Maybe I was cut out to be a nun, but I wasn't, I guess, maybe. {Chuckles} But, for years and years, I always loved the Mount. I loved the grounds and I loved the, this, it was a different, it was a different place. And, years, through the years, I would dream I was a school girl, all the time, goin' up and down the stairs. Runnin', you know, around. I was happy there. I was really happy. And uh, that's the main thing that has, has always, stayed in my memory.

KS: What, what was, what was real important for school girls at the Mount then?

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GJ: Well, they were strict with us, and uh, but they, I, I think taught me things, that I have never forgotten.

KS: Like, like, for instance?

GJ: Uh, how to conduct myself, and one of those nuns taught me how to, darn, and she taught me beautifully, {Chuckles} and my darning would like it was weaving, weaved, and that's one thing I never forgot, and I took Art from Sister Joseph, Sister Mary Jean. Do you remember Sister Mary Jean at Brescia?

KS: Jo Marie?

GJ: No, Sister Mary Jean. She's dead now.

KS: I didn't know her.

GJ: No, she was my, Art teacher. But I, I liked Art, but I like my music better. Uh, I, Art was alright, but I, preferred, I always will wish that I could have furthered my music career. I wanted to sing opera, but it was too late. You have to start when you very young at that, and have good, have backing

KS: Hard work.

GJ: Yes, it was, I say, well, may be in another life, come true, but no.

KS: Do you know uh, Kristin Johnson, from here? She sings a little opera.

GJ: I think I saw her write-up in the paper.

KS: Yeah, I did that.

GJ: Uh huh, yes, I read that, but anything about opera I always read. I know Marilyn Horne. I met her in California. And I, I, she's, she's still got her voice, but I know she's like me, she can, she can sing high or low. That in between kind of gets us down now, so, uh, I'm going to be in that show, Showtime Eighty-Six, at the Daviess County, next Friday, Saturday.

KS: Oh, yeah?

GJ: Yeah.

KS: Okay.

GJ: Yeah, a bunch of 'em, we're gonna be Go-Go girls, would you believe it?
{Chuckles}

KS: Oh, yeah? {Chuckles} Great.

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{Tape shut off and then turned on again with same people, but louder.}

GJ: Well, they had a parade, and I, I went, and my father was uh, see, my father was a KC, you know, that's Knights of Columbus.

KS: Yes.

GJ: And uh, I remember the floats. One of 'em, they had uh, uh, a cross and this woman was hangin' on the cross, and then they would mockery, you know, everything was mockery. And then they had the blacks and they were, had 'em, bounded and, gagged, and you know, and they were, and I, uh, I remember the ones that wore the white hoods, and my father was MAD. He said he was goin', he said, "I'm goin' home to get a shotgun." And kill them. {Chuckles} He was really angry. He, he, he didn't like it.

KS: So, how old were you when, when you saw this?

GJ: I was about six, seven, seven years old.

KS: Did you, were you with your father when you saw it, or

GJ: No,

KS: When?

GJ: This was at night, and they did it, oh uh, Owensboro was in, see, especially the KCs, oh, the KCs just had a fit. But I remember my father got so angry.

KS: And they just had a parade?

GJ: They had a parade, through town. Yeah, on Frederica Street.

KS: Mm.

GJ: Was it Frederica Street? I think it was now. I'm not sure. But maybe it was on Second Street. I don't remember.

KS: Well, were they very active around here?

GJ: They were at that time. They had quite a few of 'em. And I don't know who they were, 'cause I, you know, I, my father was angry. And I can remember this woman, with that cross, standing underneath cross. In fact, and then, they burnt, they burnt crosses a lot. They burnt, you know, uh, but after I left, I think they got more active, after that I don't remember.

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KS: Do you remember seeing any of the cross burning?

GJ: No, I don't, huh unh, but I was, I remember that parade. You know, with the fire going and it was burning, burning something.

KS: What was the woman, supposed to be doing?

GJ: I don't know, I don't know why.

KS: She, she one of 'em, or?

GJ: I don't know. I remember seeing it, on a big flat bed, flat, bed truck, you know? And that cross, this woman was hanging on her, and she was, on her, it was supposed to the Catholic, religion, I think, and they were making a mockery of it. I don't know.

KS: And that's, that's a mock

END TAPE1, SIDE2