

NASA HEADQUARTERS NACA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

MARY ANN JOHNSON
INTERVIEWED BY SANDRA JOHNSON
NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA – APRIL 3, 2014

S. JOHNSON: Today is April 3, 2014. This oral history session is being conducted with Mary Ann Johnson at her home in Newport News, Virginia as part of the NACA [National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics] Oral History Project, sponsored by the NASA Headquarters History Office. The interviewer is Sandra Johnson, assisted by Rebecca Wright. I want to thank you again for agreeing to meet with us today and allowing us to come to your home. I want to start by just talking to you briefly about your background, where you went to school, and how you first learned about the NACA.

M. JOHNSON: I went to school at Mississippi State College for Women. It is now Mississippi University for Women. That is in Columbus, Mississippi. I majored in mathematics and had planned to be math teacher. That's about all you did back then. Actually, I had almost signed a contract when the NACA came down, recruiting mathematicians. They had done that for a number of years. I really hadn't thought about it, but when they came down, I decided that I would give it a try. One reason was my highest job offer for teaching was about \$1800 a year, and NACA offered me \$3100. I thought that was pretty good, so I thought I would come up here for a year and then go back to Mississippi.

S. JOHNSON: Tell us about coming up here. That was a distance from Mississippi.

M. JOHNSON: That certainly was a distance. It was my first plane ride. Actually, I didn't decided to do this until almost graduation, so in July—I think it was July 11—I came up. One other girl from MSCW came up. We weren't really good friends, but we knew each other. We were in the same graduating class. I came up by myself. I flew up. I had never flown in an airplane before. I landed in Norfolk [Virginia], and somebody met me there. We came over from Norfolk. Of course, that was during the Korean War, and Norfolk was just filled with sailors. We had to come over on the ferry, because we didn't have tunnels or any other way to get across Hampton Roads.

S. JOHNSON: Where did you stay at first?

M. JOHNSON: Actually, the only apartments they had around were on Kecoughtan Road. I stayed in South Hampton Apartments and got an apartment there because a friend—I think she had MS [Multiple Sclerosis] and was away at the hospital in Washington State, I guess, for about three or four months—so we stayed there until we really found a place. I'm surprised that I came up. I didn't have an automobile. I didn't know where I was going to stay.

S. JOHNSON: That was quite a leap of faith.

M. JOHNSON: It is, for a little Mississippi girl.

S. JOHNSON: Did you have any idea what to expect at NACA?

M. JOHNSON: No. I really didn't, because I didn't know the two girls that were already up here well. I just knew that they were working for NACA. I just thought it would be something different. I thought, well, this sounds like fun.

S. JOHNSON: What did your family think about it?

M. JOHNSON: They let me do it. I don't think they were too happy about it. I think they were a little uneasy about it, but they said, "Fine." Of course, they did expect me to come back home, and I really didn't, except for visits.

S. JOHNSON: Talk about those first days when you first got here.

M. JOHNSON: I can't remember exactly at first, except I do know that, on the first day we moved into this apartment, and I assume it was the first day I was here, but I don't know; South Hampton was just kind of like a college campus at that time. It was so filled with young people—young, single people. There were some married people there, but a lot of them were just young people coming in. I met quite a few people. One fellow came over on the pretense of borrowing a card table. He lived across the street. He knew where I was going to work. I was assigned to work at 19-Foot [Pressure] Tunnel. That was just next door to where he worked, so he offered to give me a ride to work. If that hadn't happened, I don't know how I would have gotten to work. Anyway, he did offer. He said they had one place in their carpool, so I rode with him. Two years later, I married him.

S. JOHNSON: Did you have to contribute for these carpools, since you didn't have a car?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, I paid so much a week. The guys would take turns driving. I have forgotten what I paid but something for gasoline. I think there were five of us. We worked on the East side. Most people were on the West side, but we were on the East—the Air Force side. That's where I worked the whole time.

S. JOHNSON: You were in that 19-Foot Tunnel?

M. JOHNSON: The 19-Foot Tunnel.

S. JOHNSON: Were you considered a mathematician or a computer?

M. JOHNSON: I came up on a temporary assignment. When they came down recruiting, we were recruited as a temporary assignment, so I didn't have to take the civil service exam or anything like that. I was actually on Social Security for a little while. I was not considered a mathematician. I wasn't called a mathematician. When I got my civil service rating or whatever, I was considered a mathematician.

S. JOHNSON: So, when you first came in, were you a computer?

M. JOHNSON: I guess I was a computer, and I continued to be a computer for a good while. I got a raise along with the title of mathematician rather than whatever it was at first. I guess it was a computer.

S. JOHNSON: The 19-Foot Tunnel—was that like a pool of computers?

M. JOHNSON: Computers. We were on the second floor. I think they had a supersonic group on one end of the building, and we were on the other end. We had a large office, filled with engineers. It was just one big room. Past that, we had the computers—the women—in a small office. I guess we had about eight or ten computers. Going into that office, they had said that they did not want any more college graduates. They wanted people to read tape, plot, and do this, that, and the other. Two of us came in, and we were both mathematicians, so they really weren't too happy to see us.

They would read tapes and read film or something. Anyway, I was assigned to one of those Friden machines. That's what I had to learn to do—data sheets for the Friden machines. I had never seen one of those before. I didn't really enjoy doing it very much. It was pretty boring, but got used to it. We just filled in columns and just did what a computer would have done in a few minutes. Anyway, we worked all day, punching the Friden machines.

I would say my feelings towards my work there were that it was very boring, but we tried to make it a little bit more interesting at times. Very routine work there, until I got my mathematician rating. Then, I started working more with individual engineers, which was more interesting. I never used a lot of math, but I did use some. I found that much more interesting.

We worked hard. Of course, we didn't have air conditioning. It was terribly, terribly hot on the second floor. I can remember putting those big fans right down on the desk and have it blow on your legs. We worked hard. I guess he was a section head—I don't know—but, anyway, the man who was in charge of the 19-Foot—really kept tabs on us. We had a head computer, who told us what to do and what our assignments were, but the section head was very strict on the computers. We could go down and get a Coke, but we couldn't stop punching that little machine while we drank it. He really was very strict. I remember talking about it, and it wasn't that way in all of the offices, but in our office, it was pretty much that way. But, we had a good time. We still enjoyed being there and found new friends.

S. JOHNSON: What were your hours like for the first year and a half?

M. JOHNSON: I can't remember what time. I think it was 8:00 to 4:30 or something like that.

S. JOHNSON: So, you just worked during the day.

M. JOHNSON: No, I don't think any of the girls worked the night shift. I think the engineers worked the night shift, but the girls just worked the day shift. I guess about half of the girls would read data from films and do plots, and the other half or maybe a little more than half would do the calculations.

S. JOHNSON: After that first year and a half and you got promoted to the mathematician position, were you working more one-on-one with the engineers at that time?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, more or less, one-on-one. I would work with the equations they would set up and that sort of thing; doing a little more math. I still used the Friden machine and calculated, but I would be given equations, too, to work through and then set it up. That was much more interesting. I finally got used to it, but at first, I thought, “I went to school to do all of this, and all I’m doing is punching this little machine.”

I just remember our boss being so strict. He wasn’t strict on the engineers at all. I had one that sat right on the opposite side from me. He slept most of the time, and was a very smart engineer. I can’t remember his name, but I remember finally going to my boss and saying, “You know, I just don’t understand the difference here.” I said, “So-and-so sleeps all day long, and you’re after us every minute. We don’t even have a break.”

He said, “Well, he has so much potential.”

I said, “I know where that puts us, then—that we don’t have very much potential.” I can just remember being upset about that. My office wasn’t the most pleasant office. I had some friends that worked in a much nicer office. The head computer was great. I worked there, as I said, from ’51 to the spring of ’56. They closed down the tunnel, and they were going to rehabilitate it, so most people were leaving. That’s when a lot of people went down to Houston. The engineers went to different places. What’s the place in Tennessee?

S. JOHNSON: Are you thinking of Oak Ridge [National Laboratory]?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. A number of them went there. Of course, the computers split up, too. I was offered a job being a head computer somewhere, but I was married then and was pregnant, so

decided I would just stop work. I stayed in touch with NASA, because my husband worked there for 46 years.

S. JOHNSON: Were there a lot of women that were getting married at that time and having their children?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, I guess I had three or four different roommates. As one would get married, somebody else would move in. The apartments were at a premium. The only way that I got an apartment when my friend came back from her stay in Washington State, one of the engineers had built a house; he put a good word in for us, and we were able to get an apartment. So, as people got married, you would have different roommates. They were just young girls out of college.

S. JOHNSON: Do you remember anything specific about any of the projects you worked on? I know you said that, once you became a mathematician, at least—maybe after that?

M. JOHNSON: I really don't. I tried. When I read this, I tried to think, and I really don't remember what I worked on.

S. JOHNSON: We were wondering if they even told you, at that time, what you were working on.

M. JOHNSON: I think they did, sort of. I don't know that we knew what they found with the data. We had different numbers down, but I don't think we really had any concept of what it was. I

think they were just numbers. I do remember certain equations for certain things. I remember them telling you that, but we really had very little knowledge of what was going on. I think we were told sometimes what plane we were working on.

Sometimes, on really hot days, we would go down to the tunnel, because maybe it was air-conditioned. Maybe, it was just cooler, but that was the only time we ever really saw the tunnel working.

S. JOHNSON: You had mentioned that your boss was so hard on you, as opposed to the engineers. Did you find that generally? Did other people that you talked to experience the same type of treatment?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, I think some of them did. They had noticed it. For some reason, my boss was very strict. He worked his engineers hard, too, I'm sure, but he was very strict. I would talk to my roommates about it. We had a thirty-minute break for lunch. We weren't supposed to come back thirty-one minutes after or thirty-two minutes after. He was very, very strict about that. As I say, we really didn't have much break time. I remember we had a meeting, and he said, "If you want to go down and get a Coke, you can do that, but I expect you to bring it back up and continue your work."

We didn't see that with the engineers at all. They would go around and sit on each other's tables and talk and visit. Of course, I guess, they were doing brain work that we didn't know about. I don't know, but everybody in the office kind of complained about it. It wasn't the best office to work in, I would say, for a girl.

S. JOHNSON: Other than being hot, were there separate restroom facilities? Was it planned that females would be working in those buildings?

M. JOHNSON: We had a restroom with salt tablets right on the outside. When it was so hot and you were perspiring, you were supposed to eat a salt tablet with your water. I guess that's the worst thing you could do, really, but that's what they told us to do. I remember doing that.

S. JOHNSON: To keep you from dehydrating.

M. JOHNSON: I guess, so you would drink water.

S. JOHNSON: They were metal buildings, weren't they?

M. JOHNSON: Brick and metal. We'd be right by the windows, with the sun shining in.

S. JOHNSON: What about dress code?

M. JOHNSON: We all wore dresses. Nobody wore slacks. I think, in some places, if there were tunnel girls there, they wore slacks, but we all wore dresses. So, we would let that fan just blow right on our legs. That's just one of the few things that I remember—just being so hot. Your hands would be wet, and you had to write the data down. It would be so hot. I make it sound terrible, and it really wasn't. We had fun, too, but we did work. It wasn't the most challenging work you could do, but it was work.

S. JOHNSON: You said you had fun, too. I'm sure, with everyone being so young at that time.

M. JOHNSON: We had lots of things in the Activities Building. We had dances quite frequently and oyster roasts and things like this. It was just very similar to a college campus, really, and everybody seemed to know people from other tunnels. There was a good bit of social interacting on and off Langley. We had a nice time. We got to know each other, the people who lived in the apartments, and this sort of thing.

S. JOHNSON: What about the community itself in Hampton and that area as far as the people that were here and had been here for generations and then this influx? I know that a lot of times they called them the 'NACA-nuts.'

M. JOHNSON: I didn't have a lot of interaction with the community. I did go to the Methodist Church in Hampton. I guess for shopping we would go to Newport News. Most of the workers were in just three little groups of apartments there, right on Kecoughtan Road, because there were no other apartments available. Now, when my husband came, he stayed in a boardinghouse, way up in the attic, so I know that was hot. But, it was on the water. It was on Chesapeake Boulevard. They had to stay there until they could get an apartment. You just didn't have too many choices back then as to where you could live.

S. JOHNSON: When did your husband come?

M. JOHNSON: He came in '44. He came seven years before I did.

S. JOHNSON: Did he have a deferment from the military? I think they allowed them to join the military, but then they assigned them here.

M. JOHNSON: He had a deferment, and then, right after he got here, he was called. I guess they went to Richmond [Virginia], and most of them came back to NACA, but a few of them were sent on to Maryland. He was one of the few that were sent to Maryland. He went through the haircut and all of the shots and all of this, that, and the other, and didn't know what in the world had happened, because he had been promised a deferment if he came up here to work.

Anyway, he had active duty for three days, and then they called him out and told him that he was in the reserves and had been sent to NACA. We didn't even know until just recently that he stayed in the reserve for three years until after the war, and then he got an honorable discharge. He never considered himself a veteran, but I guess something happened that some of them didn't get deferred right away. He did come back to his old job.

S. JOHNSON: What did he do?

M. JOHNSON: He was an aeronautical engineer in the Full-Scale Tunnel. He stayed in the same place for 46 years.

S. JOHNSON: That's a long career.

M. JOHNSON: That was a long time.

S. JOHNSON: How did you meet?

M. JOHNSON: We met just when he—

S. JOHNSON: That's right. He was the one who was going to give you a ride.

M. JOHNSON: To borrow the card table. Then, I rode in his carpool.

S. JOHNSON: That's a good way to meet.

M. JOHNSON: Somebody asked me later, "Did you date anybody else?" I did. I dated other people, and he dated other people. We dated for quite a while. I was a person who was going to work and didn't want to get married at all. I had no desire to get married any time soon. Then, I got married almost two years to the day after I came up.

S. JOHNSON: Some of the other ladies we've talked to kind of have similar stories; the math major, and they thought they would end up teaching, and then they were here, and they would meet their husbands.

M. JOHNSON: Teaching was about all you did back then. If you majored in anything, you probably ended up being a teacher, or secretary, or nurse, or something. I always wanted to

teach, so I did teach later on, after my kids went to college. That's just about all I did. I can't think of anything outstanding that I did at all.

S. JOHNSON: When we talk to a lot of women that worked during that time period, they say the same thing, but just having a college degree and working in a technical field during that time period—that was special.

M. JOHNSON: Well, I guess so. I assume so. As I told you, they had said that they wanted just high school graduates, because that was the type of work that they did. I was so surprised to come into an office and they resented your being there right at first. I had been four years at an all-girls' college, so I thought I knew all about girls. I realized that you did have little cliques. I was so surprised, but, that worked out in a short time, and there was no problem at all. It was just that they let certain people do certain things. Some of the girls were not happy that they didn't have replacements.

S. JOHNSON: I know that engineers were in that 19-Foot Tunnel. Were there any men that were doing mathematical work or computer work at all?

M. JOHNSON: No. They were all girls. Some of them had been there for quite a while.

S. JOHNSON: You quit working in '56, but your husband was still working. You said he stayed in that Full-Scale Tunnel the whole time. Did he ever think about possibly going into the space side of it?

M. JOHNSON: No. He was asked to, at that time. He really didn't want to. He was interested in the low-speed aerodynamics. We discussed it. We had several very good friends who moved, but he didn't want to move to Houston, and he didn't want to go to space. He became branch head of that tunnel. They have just recently torn that down. It was one of the oldest tunnels there.

S. JOHNSON: Do you remember any of the projects or things that he worked on that were high-profile?

M. JOHNSON: I don't remember a whole lot, but I remember he worked on the supersonic transport a lot, which didn't get off the ground. He was going to and from Seattle [Washington]. He worked on vertical take-off planes. I don't remember. I really don't, but he loved his airplanes. He really enjoyed it. He loved NASA, because he was given the opportunity to do research on almost anything he wanted to do, and that was just so great for him.

S. JOHNSON: He found that all throughout his 46 years? He continued to feel that way?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. He just thought that there was no place you could go and have an idea and try to develop it and see what would take place. He just loved it. We always said that he had worked at such a wonderful time; he told me that, before I got here, Orville Wright came here. He shook hands with him, and somebody took his picture, but they didn't have film in it.

Anyway, he shook hands with Orville Wright, and he was there when they put the man on the Moon. What a wonderful period of time to be in aeronautics.

S. JOHNSON: The early astronauts were training here, too.

M. JOHNSON: Yes. Our really good friend was the one that did the lunar landing structure that they had here.

S. JOHNSON: The simulator?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. We did have some space going on here, but when they got ready to move, he really wanted to stay here.

S. JOHNSON: It sounds like he had a long career here.

M. JOHNSON: He sure did.

S. JOHNSON: Rebecca, do you have anything that you want to ask?

WRIGHT: I want to ask you about training. Did they give you any type of training on the Friden machine?

M. JOHNSON: Those Friden machines? I guess they did. Well, they would have to, because I had never seen one before. I would say that my head computer did that. I don't remember, but I do remember struggling with it some. People were working so fast, and I would be punching along. I remember that. I assume that it was just in-office training. I did not go to any classes. I remember just going into that office, and that was where I was assigned. I didn't have any training before I went into that office.

WRIGHT: You had mentioned the different groups. You were with the computers and mathematicians. We know there were secretaries or administrative support. People have mentioned the tunnel girls. What did they do?

M. JOHNSON: They assisted the engineers. I don't think we had any tunnel girls in our office, but I know that my husband, Joe [Joseph L. Johnson, Jr.], did. Of course, his tunnel was big. It was the Full-Scale. I remember they would be climbing up and putting models in and out, I guess, helped to run it. The engineers usually had the controls. I don't know, but they did have tunnel girls. In fact, he had several. One of the tunnel girls ended up getting rated as an engineer. She was considered one of the engineers later.

WRIGHT: I know that Langley [Research Center] for a while in different areas had different types of programs. Was there anything else that you were interested in doing while you were there? Did you plan to work for a while? I know you said something about going back to Mississippi, but those plans changed. I wondered if you had wanted to do something else. Did you have a desire to be an engineer?

M. JOHNSON: No. I guess because we started having a family, and I quit then and just didn't go back.

WRIGHT: Did you only stay in this area?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. Probably a year or so after we married, we moved here, just one street over. We have been here ever since. After about nine years, we moved to this house. So, we've been within the block of where we were practically the whole 60 years we were married.

WRIGHT: Lots of people at Langley chose this community.

M. JOHNSON: They did. A lot of people bought lots here and built homes. I think that's why we probably ended up here, too. Joe's boss bought a home, and I think that got us interested in coming here and looking around. There are quite a few. You can go around and find the "NACA-nut" houses. My good friend lived across the street, one house back. You can't see the house from here, but she always said, "My house is a typical NASA house. Everybody who passes by can tell it's a NASA house."

WRIGHT: Why could they tell that?

M. JOHNSON: No real trim on it, and higher windows. I know three or four that had the windows up high and very efficient. They had radiant heat in the floor and all of this, that, and the other; just very fundamental and their own design and not a whole lot of eye appeal.

WRIGHT: Return on their investment.

S. JOHNSON: We just spoke to Sue Johnson. She was saying that her husband finished and built—they moved into an unfinished house, and then he built everything.

M. JOHNSON: When hers was done, it didn't look like a NASA house. It has much more curb appeal than most did.

S. JOHNSON: I know, in the Houston area, when people did move in, they came from Virginia, and it was quite a shock for the people from this area to come down to Houston, just because of the climate and the way things looked. They went into neighborhoods and kind of filled up those areas.

M. JOHNSON: Kind of did their own thing.

S. JOHNSON: Yes, and then they really affected the local culture. Their kids all went to the same schools, and they had swim teams, and all the kids knew each other, and that sort of thing. When you all moved into these neighborhoods, was it sort of the same thing?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, definitely. When we built our house here, I guess half the people there were from NASA. We all had young children, and we spent half the day sitting on stoops, letting the children play and this sort of thing. We continued to have lots of activities out at the field. We would go out there for things. It was very friendly. It was just like a big family.

S. JOHNSON: In '59, they had the first open house. Did you go to that?

M. JOHNSON: Yes.

S. JOHNSON: Do you remember touring all of the facilities?

M. JOHNSON: We went to some of the facilities. I continued to go to the functions at the Full-Scale Tunnel.

S. JOHNSON: What kinds of functions did they have?

M. JOHNSON: They would have parties. They would have oyster roasts in the wintertime, we would go there. Later on, they started having Christmas parties. I can't remember but different anniversaries, I suppose, or when some dignitaries were there. Of course, you'd see a lot of people that you had worked with and knew. A lot of my friends stayed in this area, and we continued to be friends throughout our married life. Some moved away, but a lot of them stayed.

WRIGHT: Did the groups mingle together based on where you worked, like people from the East side or the West side?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. Most of the people I knew had worked on the East side, unless they got married later, and then I met them that way. But, the people I really I knew best early on were the people who worked on the East side. There were just a couple of tunnels there. What was the water one? They had one that was the water—I can't remember—and then that had the Full-Scale Tunnel, and they had the 19-Foot. There may be one other one on our side. We had the little BX [Base Exchange] at Langley—a little place where we could go eat and a few little things like that. We never did go to the NASA Cafeteria.

S. JOHNSON: That was the Air Force Cafeteria?

M. JOHNSON: It was the Air Force. We had that. We had the runways right behind us.

WRIGHT: I want to go back and ask about the first thing you said. I'm fascinated by the fact that you took a plane here.

M. JOHNSON: I did.

WRIGHT: Tell me about that.

M. JOHNSON: I did. I remember wearing high-heeled shoes. I was really dressed up. It was on Capitol Airlines. A young guy was the attendant. He must have known I was scared to death. I must have looked apprehensive. He asked me if I would like to help him serve meals. I said, "Yes, I would." Here I was with my high-heeled shoes on. I don't know what else we had, but we had green peas. I remember that, because I remember trying to keep those trays straight and serve green peas that wouldn't roll off the plate.

S. JOHNSON: That's so funny.

M. JOHNSON: But, I did.

WRIGHT: How many people on the plane?

M. JOHNSON: I don't remember.

WRIGHT: That is amazing.

M. JOHNSON: Isn't that something? I guess I just wanted an adventure.

S. JOHNSON: Yes, that's quite a choice, because I know we talked to a lot of people that got here by train. You are the first one we've talked to that flew.

M. JOHNSON: I flew into Norfolk.

WRIGHT: Then, you had airfields behind you for five years, and you married somebody who was an aeronautical engineer. It was kind of like it was destined to happen.

M. JOHNSON: That I definitely wasn't going to do. I said, "I want to work. I really want to work for a while. I don't want to get married." That was a surprise that I ended up getting married.

WRIGHT: Did you ever ask him if he really needed that card table?

M. JOHNSON: I have always accused him. I really don't think he ever used that card table. I think he was told that two new girls had just moved into the apartment. He was just across the street, so he wanted to meet these two girls who had moved in. My roommate was the other girl from MSCW. She was a PE [Physical Education] major. She had had some math, but she hadn't had nearly the math I had. It was really funny, because she got her mathematician rating before I did, because she had had a science course. She took astronomy—a course that everybody took because it was so easy. I hadn't had a science course, so I had to wait to get my mathematician's rating. I thought that was so funny, that you had to have so many hours of science. I had enough hours of math to have a major and a minor in math, because I liked it. I thought that was so strange.

WRIGHT: That was your first introduction to how the government figures things out.

M. JOHNSON: It was. It just didn't make sense to me.

S. JOHNSON: Did you actually take the civil service exam?

M. JOHNSON: I never took it.

S. JOHNSON: You never had to. You just got certified or whatever the term was at that time.

M. JOHNSON: Yes, they just automatically changed over.

S. JOHNSON: After you'd been there for a while.

M. JOHNSON: I don't remember how long. It wasn't too long. I expected to come up and use my math. I was really excited about that, and I punched that machine instead.

S. JOHNSON: When you went back to teaching, did you teach math?

M. JOHNSON: Yes. I didn't work at all while the kids were growing up. Then, my youngest one went off to college, and I thought, "I'm not going to sit here." I think I did a little tutoring, maybe—just a little bit. I had wanted to substitute teach, just to see if I would enjoy it, because I got my teaching certificate from Mississippi. My boys would not let me go into the public school and substitute—that was during integration, and there was so much misbehavior and this sort of thing.

So, when Randy went off to college, I went to Hampton Roads Academy, which is a college preparatory school here, just to substitute. I thought I would like to be put on the substitute list and see. I had always wanted to teach and didn't get a chance to. We talked about that. They said, "Well, we really need a math teacher—a high school math teacher."

I said, "Oh, I don't know." I hadn't used my math in so long, but I ended up teaching about nine or ten years and just loved it. I just loved it.

S. JOHNSON: Was it general math, or was it algebra?

M. JOHNSON: I taught algebra and geometry. I substituted a little bit, but I didn't get up to calculus with that. I've forgotten what the highest math was I substituted in. By that time, I had lost my math skills.

S. JOHNSON: It wouldn't be hard to lose calculus!

M. JOHNSON: I enjoyed the algebra and geometry.

S. JOHNSON: That's neat. That's good that you got a chance to actually teach since that's what you started out wanting to do.

M. JOHNSON: That was one thing, I guess, that you could say was on my bucket list. I really wanted to teach.

S. JOHNSON: I'm sure the pay was better then than it was when you first looked into it.

M. JOHNSON: Well, I don't know. This was a private school. I said that was my community service. The pay was so poor, but I did get an annuity from it that ended up having grown quite a bit, so that was very nice. I had two children in college at that time; somehow they knew when pay day was. I usually got a phone call. I didn't see much of the pay.

S. JOHNSON: I was going to say that some things never change, do they?

WRIGHT: You raised smart children!

S. JOHNSON: Did they go on and do math or engineering?

M. JOHNSON: No. We had one that would have been a great engineer, but he decided he didn't want to do that. He started in business and ended up in agriculture. He's a plant pathologist. He does a lot of lab work. He is like an engineer. He would have made a great engineer, but he is a good plant pathologist.

One is an economist. He was in economics, and he works for the government in [Washington,] DC. My oldest one went in the Air Force, and now he is in Seattle. He's with Homeland Security there, after he retired from the Air Force. So, that's what they did.

S. JOHNSON: Three boys.

M. JOHNSON: Three boys and just two years apart—each one of them.

S. JOHNSON: That was a handful. I can see why you stayed home.

M. JOHNSON: It was. It really was. Then, after I finished teaching, I did tutor, just to keep my hands in it. I always enjoyed the math. I enjoyed teaching the girls; they just knew they didn't like math, because their mothers weren't good in math, and it was fun to try to turn them around to where they really liked it.

S. JOHNSON: When you first went to college and you majored in math—well, you were at a women's college.

M. JOHNSON: Yes, I was at a women's college. There weren't too many math majors, but there were some.

S. JOHNSON: But, it was just something you always wanted to do?

M. JOHNSON: I enjoyed it. Well, I really didn't know what I was going to major in. I had a minor in journalism and English, but when I started the math courses, I enjoyed it. I figured I'd just be a math teacher. That's what I did my practice teaching in. That's what I thought I would be.

WRIGHT: Were your parents in education?

M. JOHNSON: Yes, my mother taught school—not when we were growing up, but she taught before she married, and then when my youngest sister went into school, she taught again. So, I guess I got the teaching—and she went to the same college that I went to. I guess that’s why I ended up there. They encouraged that.

WRIGHT: Where was your husband from?

M. JOHNSON: He was from Atlanta, Georgia. He went to Georgia Tech [Georgia Institute of Technology] and majored in aeronautical engineering. He came straight from Georgia Tech here.

WRIGHT: He stayed in the south. That’s not too far from home.

M. JOHNSON: It’s been a great life, really. Virginia is my home. Some of my family would like me to come back to Mississippi. Virginia is home.

S. JOHNSON: You’ve spent more time here than you have in Mississippi.

M. JOHNSON: I really have. I have enjoyed being here.

S. JOHNSON: It’s beautiful. It’s just beautiful. Is there anything we haven’t talked about that you’d like to mention?

M. JOHNSON: I can't think of anything. I'm sorry that I can't remember more.

WRIGHT: We got some great information.

S. JOHNSON: Yes, it's good information. Thank you. We appreciate it.

[End of interview]