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An Interview with

MRS. MARY JOHNSON

May 11, 1977

Interviewed by

Daisy M. Greene

Mississippi
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Interviewee: Mary Johnson
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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

This interview is with Mrs. Mary Johnson for the Mississippi Archives Department and the Washington County Library System. The interview is taking place at Mrs. Johnson's home at 908 McKinley Street, Hollandale, Mississippi. The interviewer is Daisy Greene. The date is May 11, 1977.

Mrs. Johnson, will you give me your birth place?

JOHNSON: My birth place is in Hinds County at Learned, Mississippi.

GREENE: And when was that?

JOHNSON: That was back in 1895.

GREENE: What was your birth date?

JOHNSON: February 6th.

GREENE: What year?

JOHNSON: Let me see, February 6, 1895 to my knowledge.

Now I've heard my niece say the government census states that I was born in 1894, but I've been just keeping it at 1895.

GREENE: Your niece looked at the census. That's what you are talking about, the Census?

JOHNSON: That's right.

GREENE: And you use as your birth date 1894.

JOHNSON: It would be from the census every two years it would be 1894, February 6th.

GREENE: Mrs. Johnson, do you remember your mother's maiden name?

JOHNSON: Yes. She was named Mahalia Style.

GREENE: S-t-y-l-e?

JOHNSON: Yes, Style.

GREENE: And your father's name?

JOHNSON: He was named Ray Lafoe.

GREENE: And you are retired now?

JOHNSON: Yes, ma'am.

GREENE: I learned of you through your Dial-a-buddy, Miss Lenora Briggs, who is a friend of mine in Greenville. She told me that she always came down to see you on Mother's Day, Christmas and Easter.

JOHNSON: She certainly does.

GREENE: And, as I walked in you were talking to her, and she was telling you that I was coming.

JOHNSON: That's right.

GREENE: Now, I learned that you made a speech at church yesterday. You mind telling me what you said at church on Mother's Day?

JOHNSON: No, I sure don't mind.

GREENE: All right.

JOHNSON: -- because I really enjoyed it. When all those children got through talking about mother, then I stood and said, "Another year I may not be here, I don't know, but I have this opportunity and I feel like I ought to say something about mother. So, I rose and talked on my mother's life first before I mentioned my life. I said I had a good mother, a

Christian mother; I had a working mother, a great mother. I just wished that I had the influence that my mother had. She was a praying woman, she was a good woman towards everybody. She carried everybody just like a baby in her heart and mind. When the people got sick she went to visit the sick. Also when they died, she shrouded a many, many a soul. You know back in those days they didn't have undertakers to come to the peoples houses. They would send around to the friends, and they would go and wash them and shroud them and fix them up and all the embalming they had was putting salt, salt and turpentine, on their breast and they would bind their cheeks up, and that's the way they embalmed them."

GREENE: Do you know why they put salt and turpentine on their breast?

JOHNSON: That must have been to keep down odor. That was called old time embalming.

GREENE: Is that the only part of the body they would put this turpentine on?

JOHNSON: On their breast. Then, after that, they made them ready for burial so they could bury them. They didn't keep them out like they do now. Like one thing, I told some of my grandchildren, they have undertakers to come to your bedside and dress you, carry you and embalm you and do for you. Back in those days they didn't have that. Now, I guess I let let them know what it had been like back in those days.

And then I talked about life, my life and my children.

I did all I could to carry my children and train them in the best way, the way of the Lord. I did my best.

GREENE: How many did you have?

JOHNSON: I have ten children, but I didn't raise but seven. I mothered ten children.

GREENE: Well, judging from your surroundings, they are very grateful for what you did for them.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

GREENE: You seem comfortable here.

JOHNSON: Yes.

GREENE: You know what attracted you to me, Mrs. Johnson, was the fact that your Dial-a-Buddy, Lenora Briggs, said that you were sightless.

JOHNSON: I sho is. I can't see.

GREENE: Despite that fact she said you made quilts.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I piece them and sews every day. The people are really nice to me. They bring me little old pieces of scraps and I sit here and make quilts, some weeks I piece two quilts and some of the weeks I won't. As long as I have pieces, I sew. It keeps my mind entertained. I bes happy sitting and sewing.

GREENE: How do you account for your cheerful outlook on life? I've just known you fifteen or twenty minutes, and I get the impression that you are a good, jolly person.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I still try to carry on.

I forgets about I'm blind. I don't think nothing about blindness.

GREENE: How long has this blindness been on you?

JOHNSON: Right next to four years.

GREENE: Is it glaucoma?

JOHNSON: Glaucoma cased me to be blind so I just have the mind and the will to go on. I forget, sometime I have to catch myself trying to do - there's work to do.

GREENE: Do you remember Mr. Simmons that used to teach here?

JOHNSON: Yes. Mr. Simmons taught my oldest girl She was graduated under Mr. Simmons. Mr. T. R. Sanders was teaching at that time, but he hadn't been teaching so long. He was just a teacher. After that, then they retired Mr. Simmons. Mr. Simmons got too old to carry on and Mr. Sanders taken over at that time.

GREENE: What type man was Mr. Simmons?

JOHNSON: Well, Mr. Simmons was a great man. He was a loyal man, as far as I know.

GREENE: White people liked him?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes! They really liked him. He stands today in the hearts and memory of the people. I'm his witness because he taught my oldest daughter.

GREENE: Do you know what has become of his home?

JOHNSON: Now, that's the one that fell into his daughter-in-law's hands - the child he raised, that fell into

his hands, and so, after all those children left, she went North or somewhere. I don't know who - to this day I don't know whose hands it's in.

GREENE: How did you fare during the twenty-seven flood?

JOHNSON: Oh, I fared fine. I doubt if I can recall the day it be, but it was on the third Sunday.

GREENE: The twenty-first of April, 1927.

JOHNSON: That's right. The water come across that creek. You know, there's two mounds at Panther Burn - one is a big, big mound and one is a small mound with a flat top. You know, you can work on that mound and you can stay on that mound. But that other big mound --- they took that to take care of the stock and things. That place was full of horses, cows up on that big mound, but we went on that little mound Sunday evening about four o'clock. We left the creek. We were staying on Deer Creek. We left the creek in a wagon. They had some little houses down in front of that mound. We stayed on the mound that night. The water just come, and just come and overtook everything around that mound. The water was just boiling in those ditches. You could hear it rolling, you know, and just going over like that, the noise, the sound of the water. So, we stayed on that mound that night. I had three children. My husband and the oldest boy went back and had built a scaffold for the hogs. Then he went back and shut the hogs up. When they got back, I guess it was around

six o'clock, they waded water near to their neck to make it back to that mound. The water had just got that high and we stayed on that mound all night. I sat on a molasses bucket with my baby in my lap and the other two children laying beside me all night. The next morning when everything had settled down, you could see our house and the dry land around it - about an acre of land - That evening we went back home and the water was up to the bed of the wagon. The mules were just pulling and swimming around, and we went back to our home. That's where we stayed until the water went down, but all around us, every which-a-way was nothing but water.

GREENE: The water was not in your house?

JOHNSON: No, the water was not in my house. It was out.

GREENE: You must have been on a mound.

JOHNSON: Yes. I lived right in front of George's Bend, the grave yard. The grave yard didn't get covered. My husband went to the lower end to a place called Panther Burn. They called those places names - lower and upper end. You see, that was a great big plantation, Panther Burn. He got on Deer Creek and brought a body from the lower end to this here Geroge's Bend in the water. The assistant pastor's mother died and they brought her body up Deer Creek and buried her. The water didn't get over George's Bend.

GREENE: How did you get food?

JOHNSON: Well, my husband had a boat and he would

bring big loads of meat, rice and flour and sugar. Then he would go up here to this place between Leland and Hollandale-- They would go up there to the barges and things and get that food. He would bring it back in boat loads to my house. He would come down the creek. You see, the creek come right in front of my house, and the water was up from bank to bank.

GREENE: Did you enjoy Mother's Day yesterday?

JOHNSON: Oh, I really enjoyed it. It was fine.

GREENE: I understand you had some guests.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. My boy and his wife was here from Chicago. Of course my daughter-in-law--- she didn't go -- but my son taken me because he went to Sunday School, and he taught the Sunday School lesson. We had a beautiful lesson. Everything that they said I really enjoyed it.

GREENE: Mrs. Johnson, your secret pal tells me that you make quilts, so I'm going to ask your daughter to tell me how you make quilts sightless?

GREENE: How does your mother thread the needles and get the designs?

DAUGHTER: Well, she threads the needles by a needle threader. I hold it for her and she threads it by feeling.

GREENE: What about her colors? I notice they are matched pretty well.

DAUGHTER: She matches her colors by feeling them. She can tell what color it is and whether it is on the right

side or wrong side by feeling.

GREENE: Will you tell me who you are?

DAUGHTER: My name is Maryvene Johnson and I live here with my mother.

GREENE: I have heard from your daughter, Mrs. Johnson, now I want you to tell me how you match these colors and how you know the right and wrong side.

JOHNSON: Well, the way I know it - I also know the colors. She tells me if it's red and if it has a rough or smooth side. I'll ask her "Which is wrong and which is right? She'll say, "The rough side, that's the right, the smooth side is the wrong." Well, from then on I remember and I lay it aside. Well, if it's a blue piece, if it feels slick like on each side, one side is going to feel a little different, and I ask her "What side is this?" She says "That's the right side." I know it's the wrong side because it's got another feel. And white I ask her, "What color is this?" and she says, "White." I feel that white until I find out how it feels and I lay it aside, and when I come to it again I know that's the white. And, pink - I'll ask her what color that pink is and she'll say, "Pink" and I say, "Oh, is that pink?" because on different sides by feel I'll say, "Which is the right and which is the wrong?" and she'll tell me which is the right and which is the wrong and I know then which to put with the wrong or the right.

GREENE: They tell me you know your different colors?

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JOHNSON: Green or blue. I know my green from the blue, that's the way I gets --

GREENE: They tell me, Mrs. Johnson, that practically every day you are quilting. What do you do with your quilts? Do you sell them for your church?

JOHNSON: Well, mostly I give them to my children. I keeps them all supplied with covers, but if anybody wants any, if they do I'll sell them. I'll sell them at no big price because the pieces are gived to me. I don't buy nothing but the thread. The pieces are all given to me. When people bring me pieces, I'll give them one. My Dial-a-Buddy brought me some nice pieces. I gived her one of the quilts what I pieced, and I have three of them yet. I made me one of the loveliest couch covers out of those pieces she brought me. I taken them and made me a couch cover with different colors.

GREENE: Tell me, just by talking with me, do you have any idea of how I might look?

JOHNSON: I think you are a fairly nice looking person. I think you are 'tween brown and dark. I say I feel of your voice. Now, lots of times I tell people by the sound of their voice, whether they are stout or small. Now you sound like you'd be a kind of a stout person.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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