

Beverly Bond Oral History Transcript

0:00

Hi my name is Fiona Cismesia it is March 22, 2019 and we are at New Zion Baptist Church in Beloit Wisconsin with Beloit College Digital History Harvest and the Beloit Historical Society. And today I will be interviewing...

B: Beverly Bond, my maiden name is Beverly Johnson. I am 72 years old and I grew up here in Beloit. I was born in 1946.

What are your parents names?

Phillip and Christabel Johnson.

Were they from Beloit?

My father migrated here with his father in 1917. He was four years old. And he came up here with his two brothers. His father was Joseph Johnson and his two brothers were Andrew (also known as Jim) and Wade Johnson, and they were from Pheba, Mississippi.

Do you know what jobs they did when they came to Beloit?

Well they were sharecroppers when they were in Mississippi, but when they came up in 1917 the three brothers worked at Fairbanks and then a few years (2 or 3 years) after they arrived and saved up money, they opened up a grocery store, the Johnson's Grocery Store. That they had for maybe four or 5 years.

Do you know anything about their experiences back in Mississippi?

No not other than that they were sharecroppers. No no more than what Mississippi was like in the early 1900s. No jobs, agricultural jobs and they were looking for a better future. So they came up here, the three brothers, two of them were married, so they brought their wives, and two of the brothers had children, so they brought their children and Joseph had two boys, Sidney and Phillip Johnson, and so they came up with their father.

2:50

So tell me a little bit about your father...

Well when he came up here he went to school, he went to Wright Elementary School, Roosevelt Jr High and graduated from Beloit Memorial High School in 1933 I think... and my mother (Christabel Johnson) graduated in 1936 and they got married in June of 1936... but in that time my father was working at Fairbanks and he worked there several years and later on he went on to working in Rockford at Gunite and he was a welder where later on he became a millwright. But he was at Gunite's for 30 years. My mom and dad had three children. The oldest is Shirley Johnson she is deceased now, my brother Philip Leslie Johnson is in LA now and me (Beverly) who lived in Dayton Ohio, who after graduating high school lived in Dayton Ohio for about thirty years. I came back in 2010 to take care of my mother who was up in age, she was in her 90s, she had some type of Alzheimers and I came up take care and she passed away last year at 101 years of age.

So your parents met in high school?

Yes they did, my father was a little bit older than my mother but they said that they met at a school dance. Yeah, she graduated in '36 and he graduated in '34 same high school

that I graduated from. Beloit Memorial High School was not segregated as they were in the other cities and towns back in the 30s they were all segregated.

5:15

Where in Beloit did your parents grow up and where did you grow up?

B: The three brothers who migrated to Beloit from Mississippi in 1917 after about two years of being here, saved up their money and purchased houses on the 1100 block of Pleasant St., directly across from Fairbanks-Morse. And they first bought one house for \$800 and a few years later they brought two more houses for I think about \$2500 the mortgage was so my grandfather Joe had a house, Wade had a house and Jim had a house, so the three brothers had houses on Pleasant St, so that was known as the Johnson Block, we all grew up right there together since we all grew up in that area. And I do not have a lot of memories from Pleasant St because by the time I came along in 1950 we, my father, had already built a house and had moved there. But my brother and sister had a lot of memories of Pleasant St and we were probably the first Johnson family to move out of the area.

And do you remember your father recalling any memories from Pleasant St?

B: The only ones that I can recall, his mother died when he was four years old right after they had come up here, 4 months after they had come up here, they moved to Beloit from Pheba Mississippi, his mother passed away due to surgery at Beloit Memorial Hospital. She was thirty two years old and she passed away so she is buried in Oakwood cemetery and he would talk a lot about just going up to oakwood cemetery and just sitting there-just to be close to his mother. He doesn't remember his mother a lot, he remembers his grandmother, who later came up and helped his dad out, who was his dad's mother who came up and she kinda helped him out. But not a lot that I can recall. My father grew up here in Beloit, like I said he went to school here he was very active minded- he was in the NAACP, he was a County Commissioner for Rock County and worked- he has an award at home for volunteer of the year award you know that Beloit presented to him so you know there is a lot of memories here. He was very active in Beloit- a lot of people know him here. As I said he worked at Fairbanks and then at Gunites in Rockford so just a very active man with a lot of civic duties.

8:50

Could you talk a little bit more about your siblings?

B: Shirley is the youngest and she is deceased now, but she went to Beloit Memorial and went on to college, she graduated from the University of Wisconsin Madison, she had a TV show in Chicago called Tree Top House.. I think I have a picture of that...and she lived in Chicago most of the time until she got sick then she moved back to this area. She passed away in 2008 from ovarian cancer. My brother Phillip Leslie is still alive he is 80 years old now and he lives in Los Angeles. He is a retired attorney, he went to Beloit Memorial High School and he received an ROTC scholarship and he went to Princeton University. He was commissioned as Second lieutenant and when he graduated he went directly to the Marine corps and he was a helicopter pilot in the Vietnam war and he had three tours there I think in Vietnam flying helicopters. And then after that he became an attorney out in Los Angeles until he retired a few years ago. And then I graduated from

Beloit Memorial High School and I went to college where I graduated from Southern Illinois University and after I married a guy, Willy Bond he was military so we moved around a lot and he settled- the last time we moved was Dayton Ohio at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and I began working there as a financial manager for the Air force so I worked for the Federal Government for 30 some years. And we have three kids together. My oldest is Michael who is an aerospace engineer, graduated from Ohio State, and my second son Dorian Bond he attended a college in Rockford- Rock Valley and then Wright State in Ohio- now he has in own business, he is a private investigator out in Phoenix, Arizona, and my daughter Kristina graduated from the College of Wooster, in Wooster Ohio and she is a Pharmacist.

I know that you only recently moved back to Beloit but are you doing any type of community involvement?

B: Yes I came back to Beloit in 2010, I retired from the Federal Government in 2010 because my mother was up in age and there was no one to care for her, she had alzheimer's at the time and at first when I came back it was kind of slow for me to get back into Beloit because I wasn't too thrilled about coming back, but you know I adjusted again, and I have been gradually working with the community, mostly here in the church New Zion Baptist Church as I am the financial secretary here, and over at the ministry, just doing different things here at the church. I am a member of NAACP and the League of Women Voters (LWV), just some small things.. I am a member of that..just some little things.

13:25

So when you came back to Beloit were there a lot of people that recognized you from childhood and remembered your father and his legacy?

B: Yes, very much so he was very well known- so people remembered me through my parents because they were very well known. Both of them did a lot of work in the church; my mother was a musician, a Sunday School teacher, a bible study teacher. My father was a trustee and treasurer and he was instrumental in moving the church- this was a school- to the Waterman School. Waterman was an elementary school-then they closed it and we the church bought it and built onto it. We built the sanctuary and some of the offices downstairs. So he was very instrumental in getting that done.

And so your mother was a musician here at New Zion?

B: Yes, she was a musician for most of her life in the town and in the church but most people probably know her for teaching bible study classes. She would go into homes and teach bible study classes and a lot of people remember her quite well for that.

15:00

Do you have any favorite memories in Beloit?

B: No, really because I left right after high school and my high school 55th high school reunion is coming up this year so you know I will go back to that and see the people but nothing more than what I would do in high school. I played in the band here in the high school and I played the instrument- the clarinet. It is interesting that one of the things that I remember is my last reunion- the 50th- one of the girls came up to me and said " I remember you because I could never beat you as first chair clarinet player" and you

know that stunned me because I was first chair clarinet but my senior year but I just don't remember anybody who you know was challenging me at that time. (laughs). But you know that was interesting at the time just that thing for her to remember and she wasn't the one who told me it was her husband who said that she remembers you so well because she could never beat you when she challenged you playing clarinet in the band. Other than that no, it was just regular high school.

16:40

Well moving back in time a little bit if that is okay, back to the Johnson brothers when they migrated here in 1917, do you have any idea of how they got to Beloit from Pheba, Mississippi?

B: Umm no as far as transportation- I'm not sure how they came up here if they had their own transportation or if they took a bus or train or something like that. I am not sure how the three brothers, because it was the three brothers who came up together, so I am not sure how they came up or even why they came to Beloit. That would be interesting to find out why they came to Beloit of all places passing through Chicago coming up through this cold area.

So they worked for Fairbanks-Morse when they came but you are not sure if they initially heard of Fairbanks in the south?

B: It is possible that they heard of it down there is that is why they came up because it was during that time when blacks were moving up from the south to the north for jobs. And I think that Fairbanks was actively recruiting people to come up.

Are you aware if they knew of anyone in the Beloit area (before they migrated)?

B: No they did not have any other relatives here, So I am not sure of anyone that they knew specifically that, the three brothers- James, Joseph and Wade Johnson- knew.

And they were leaving a lot of their family behind in Mississippi?

B: Yes their father had died the year before, so they were leaving their mother and they came up here and after about a year or two they went back down there and got their mother. The two oldest brothers were married, so they brought their wives with them when they came and Joseph had two sons- Sidney and Phillip came up at that time and Jim had three kids- Angeline, Arnie and Lummie. They were all young and the third brother Wade, he went back about a year later, got his girlfriend, married her and came up and had eight children. So that is where my extended family comes from here in Beloit, from the three brothers, coming up here from Mississippi coming up here to work, working at Fairbanks for awhile.

19:50

And the three of them together opened up that grocery store?

B: Yes- after working at Fairbanks saving up for several years they were able to save up enough money to open up a grocery store.

Do you happen to know the location of the store?

B: It was on the corner of Pleasant and Portland Ave.

And all three of them together ran the store- were any of them in charge of different things?

B: Yes, fortunately they had the store for 5 years, so it seems like they did pretty good with it. This was back in the early 20s, the 1920s.

21:00

B: The only one that I remember among the brothers- the youngest one was Wade- and he lived until he was 82 years old and he died in 1970 but he was very instrumental in this church. All the brothers were members of the church- and he was a teacher, he was a deacon, he just did everything here in the church so I remember him very well. So my uncle Joseph and the other uncle died earlier so I did not get to know them but my Uncle Wade I remember, and a memory I have of him is one morning I had a loose tooth, and he lived next door, we were living on Pleasant St, he was living next door to us and my mother told me to go over there and have Uncle Wade pull my tooth. I remember I went in there and he was eating breakfast and he just wiped his hand and said come on over and open your mouth, and he just reached in and pulled in out! And that was it and I went off to school (laughs).

That must have been very hectic having all of your family so close together?

B: Yes- but we just did everything together, growing up together we played hide and seek together, just lots of things. And Riverside Park was our backyard so we would go over to Riverside Park and play- you know softball and just different games and taking pictures in Riverside Park, having picnics in Riverside Park.

22:50

So Riverside Park and Pleasant St seem to be where you spent a lot of time here?

B: yeah, until my parents moved, my parents and my brother and sister, but the other relatives stayed up on the street for a few years, several years still after that for a few years.

And where do you live today in Beloit?

B: I live at the house that my mom and dad built over on 6th street, since my mother just passed, so I was living there until my mother passed last year and now I have to decide what I am going to do. I have a house in Ohio where I raised my kids and I think that I am going to sell that house and move to Beloit. My dream is to become a snow bird and travel and stay in Phoenix, Arizona in the winter where my two sons live and maybe stay here in the summer, because I do not like the summers there. So that is what I would like to do. We'll see.

Is there anything else you would like to add? Any final thought?

B: No, I do not have any final thoughts, I think that this is a good thing that you guys are doing and I think that I have a DVD of my dad "Builders of Beloit" he was also given an interview about Beloit and the different things that he has done here and the different things that he has taken part of in Beloit so I just feel like this is a continuation from one generation to the next.