



Orleans County Historical Association

TABLE OF CONTENTS: Melvin Johnson Interview

SUBJECTS

NAMES

- * farming
 - work by the month
 - wood cutter
 - cows / sheep
 - crops
 - potatoes / beans
 - hay / wheat
 - delivering milk
- * bean house
 - process
 - working conditions
 - women workers
 - fire !
 - salary of workers
- ice house
- schools
 - transportation
 - salary of teachers
- basket-boarding
- roads / conditions
- * The Depression
 - first automobiles
 - tires/ repairing, etc.
 - Fordson tractor

- Lula (Howard Waldo)
- Laura (Lavern Bacon)
- Edith (Roy Hill)
- Fred Hill
- Ray Hill
- Charlie Russell
- Homer Ward
- Lewis Phinney
- Edwin Pettit
- Mort Gould
- Bill James
- Ben Helston
- Alvin Eskelson
- Jay Bowen
- Jay Walker
- Don Allen
- Shisler's orchard
- Heinz Canning Company
- Punch Company
- Medina Dairy
- Sears Roebuck and Company
- Barre, Oakfield, Alabama,
- Medina, Albion, Holley
- Owego, Millville
- Albion Training class

1891 - 1985



Orleans County Historical Association

INTERVIEW

Melvin Johnson
11937 Maple Ridge Road
Medina, New York

Melvin Johnson was born March 31, 1891. He is 87 years of age.

Interviewed April 18, 1978 by Arden McAllister and Howard
Albright of Medina, New York.

Mrs. Johnson is also in the room and makes several comments.

J Melvin Johnson
Mrs. J Mrs. Johnson
A Howard Albright
Mc Arden McAllister





Orleans County Historical Association

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to collect information about the historical development of Orleans County by means of tape-recorded conversations with people whose experiences reflect the county's growth.

These tapes and transcriptions will be preserved as educational resources and possible publication (all or in part).

I hereby release this tape and transcription to the Orleans County Historical Association.

Nelson Johnson

Signed

April 18, 1978

Date

Understood and agreed to:

Arden R. McAllister

INTERVIEWER

April 8, 1978

Date

For the Orleans County Historical Association, April 18, 1978, this is an interview with Mr. Melvin Johnson of 11937 Maple Ridge Road, Medina, New York. Mr. Johnson is being interviewed by Mr. Howard Albright and Mr. Arden McAllister, both of Medina, New York.

Mc Mr. Johnson, I want to ask you a few questions about your own life here. Could you tell us where you were born?

J Barre, New York.

Mc A few miles down the road from your present residence. Well, let me ask you, when were you born?

J March 31, 1891.

Mc Well, that's quite a few years back, isn't it! Did you get to go to school over there in Barre when you were a kid?

J Just in the District School.... That was North Oakfield... I lived in Barre and went to school in Oakfield. ... Then I went to high school.

Mc Where did you go to high school?

J I never went.

Mc Oh, you didn't get to go to the high school? How did you get to the school?

J Walked.

Mc How far was it?

J A mile and a half.

Mc A mile and a half! That school then, would have been on what road?

J That was, well, the Oakfield Road.

Mc ... That was out of Barre? I see.

What kind of work did you do, in your earlier days, Mr. Johnson?

J Well, I was home 'til I was 19 and then I worked one year, by the month. And then I been doing everything, I guess. ...

Mc A little bit of everything. You said you worked by the month; was that for a farmer maybe?

J Yeah, farm work. For Fred Hill (on Gillette Road). I don't know whether you know him or not? (No). I was running a hay press for a couple of years.

Mc What did you do after that?

J ... I went to work in Owego when I was 14, in the woods as a

wood cutter. We got 50¢ a cord for stove wood. Cut fiber and props for the mines.

Mc That's for the mines down at Oakfield?

J Yeah. Plaster.

Mc When did you take this place over, what year?

J March 1, 1927.

Mc And this was a whole farm that you ran yourself?

J Yeah. It's a hundred acres here. This little place come off that, see. Leona's father, I got a mortgage with him and finally reserved two acres.

A What was his name?

J Charlie Russell. (Leona lived on Crane Road). That's just before you came around here, wasn't it?

A Yeah.

J He ran a beanhouse down here, that you're talkin' about. ... Chapin was in when he first took over

Mc Do you remember his first name?

J Robert or Charles. I forgot what it was. Then he sold out to Haxton, or Haxton took it over. Then her father (Charlie) worked for Haxton... over at Oakfield.

Mc So, you went to work in this bean house?

J I worked down there when I had time off the farm. (Mrs. Johnson is also in the room. Mr. Johnson turns to her and asks:) Was we on the other farm when I first worked there, Toots?

Mrs. J I don't think so.

A Where was the other farm located?

Mrs. J We lived six years on Ray Hill's farm; second home from across Bells there. We used to live there. Was there for six years.

J I've been down, helping out when they needed help and when I could get away from the farm.

Mc Just where was this bean house?

J Over on East Avenue. It was located quite close to the railroad.

Mc Do you know what is there now?

J Punch was there for a long time.... It's on East Avenue. It's

J It's a wooden building on the west side of the road.

Mc Just what was the process there, at this bean house?

J Well, the farmers would bring their beans in, in two bushel bags and we'd run them over the mill, weigh them up for them. And then they went up to the picking bins. There was a V-shaped bin at the bottom. These pickers were down below, and the beans used to come down the pipes from the machines, and they'd pick 'em. And then we'd bag them up in hundred pound bags and ship 'em out. They bought a lot of beans up in Michigan once. Sent 'em down there in box cars (railroad). Opened the doors and run 'em right in there, loose. And we had to shovel them out of there! We didn't have an elevator where you could reach it. We used to use a lot of nail kegs; set them on a big truck. Fill 'em up and run 'em into the building, and elevate 'em up into the picking bins.

A How many women did you have (working).

J Twenty, wasn't it?

Mrs. J Yeah.

J They used to pedal them machines with their feet, the same as you would a sewing machine. And then they got the electric, so they run with a motor. I got one of those old treadle machines out in the barn now.

A What actually did this machine do?

J When they come down in this pipe, into the hopper, and underneath there was a short belt, maybe that long (demonstrates), that run - you could run it slow or fast or just as you wanted to, and the beans went down into another elevator, and then it would go to the bagging spout. ...

A The women would pick the poor beans out, wouldn't they?

J They'd pick on each machine. They'd pick the poor beans out and drop them. They had holes here, on the sides where they dropped the poor ones in, and made them go in a little bag.

A How much did they get for (working) ?

Mrs. J I can't remember.

J Three cents a pound. Oh, they'd make \$1.20 maybe. Some of 'em would make \$1.50 a day.

Mc A dollar and a half a day!

J If they picked 50 pounds, they made \$1.50 (laughs), and that's a lot of poor beans.

Mrs. J A dollar and a half went farther, I guess, than it does now.

A What else was in this building besides the bean house?

J Well, they boxed dried apples at the other end. They used to dry a lot of apples around here. They'd put them in 25 and 50 pound boxes. They used to bring them in there and dump them. And they used to stomp them, in the boxes, with their feet! (laughter) rubber boots on; then nail 'em up.

Mc How did that drying process work?

J Well, these dry houses (there were several around here then) one right down there on the corner. Farmers would take their drops and cull apples, you know. And they'd pare 'em and slice 'em and dry 'em. I worked at the dry house up in Millville quite a lot. My brother-in-law (Lavern Bacon) run that then. He used to dry a lot of them.

Mc Where was the dry house in Millville located?

J You turn north there; straight on the left hand side, just below Millville there.

I had a fire one day. I had a kiln of waste on; that was the peelings and the cores. They used to dry them, and I had it pretty near dry. I went down and shut the furnace off, so it would cool off a little and I could go up and shovel it up. All at once I smelled smoke! Somebody had been in there and dumped in the furnace and turned it on again. It had a blower on it, and it was burning coke. She spoilt that kiln and another one before they got the fire company up here.

A What year was that?

J I'd have to guess. I don't believe I can remember

A I can remember when that was.

J Well, it was shortly after we come up here, wasn't it? It must have been '27 or '28. I used to work up there some, in winters.

A Is that when (Mr.) Bacon had it, and made pectin?

J Yeah! Well, he didn't make pectin. He made vinegar, or vinegar stock. He had three great big silos there. He used to fill them

besides. We drew waste from down here to - who run that canning factory?

Mc Heinz ?

J Yes, I guess it must have been Heinz. They'd draw all their peelings and dump them here in Shisler's orchard and we'd go down there and shovel 'em onto the truck and take them up there and press them. (laughter) Yeah, he'd load a car of that waste every little while.

A You said Homer Ward worked down there, in the bean house, with you?

J No. He worked in the apple department, in the other end of the building. ... He's alive yet, I guess.

A Yeah, he is.

J Yeah, I was trying to think. We used to go clear down to Holley to draw that waste up, press it and dry it. He got a lot of vinegar stock out of that stuff. He didn't make the vinegar.

A Who did you sell your farm to?

J To Hamlin.

A ... You sold it to Hamlin?

J In '49. He had it, what was it, ten years?

Mrs. J Nine or ten.

J And he sold it to Lewis Phinney. You know him.

Mc Was this road paved when you moved here?

J Yes.

Mc Been paved a few years, probably?

J This road was built in 1914. That is, the road rebuilt, the state road. It used to be a gravel road when I first came down this way. Yeah. They hauled stone here with all teams and dump trucks. They put a good foundation in here. Now they have ruined it. It don't drain! They got the ditches all filled up. That's the reason we have so much water out here.

A Could you tell me when they closed the school here, and started taking them to Medina?

J They was taking them to Medina when I went to school. I can't seem to remember.

A This was one of the first schools.

J It must have been.

Mc I think it was the first one in this area.

A That took them to Medina. Edwin Pettit, they had a rig that took them out.

J Yes, Ed Pettit and Mort Gould, they drew busses. (Bill) James, he used to take them with a team and democrat (wagon). (This was about 1910, before the Pettits). There wasn't more than six or seven before that, and they must have closed this (school) shortly after we came here.

Mrs. J Well, I quit Medina school. I didn't go to high school. I quit. I was about 13 years old also. That would be about 1912 and they'd bring 'em before that.

Mc You probably remember the ice house?

J Oh yes. I remember that.

Mc On the corner, down there?

J I remember that from when I was living up home, where I was born. Yeah. We used to come to town about once a week. ...

A How long did it take you?

J Couple of hours, I guess. It was ten miles from everything downtown.

Mc How come you didn't go to Albion? Wasn't that closer?

J We did, once in awhile. No, that was eleven miles .

Mc You lived on the Oakfield Road, near Barre?

J Barre was the nearest. That was seven miles. My sister taught school when I was 13. Thirteen or 14, I guess. She just thought she wanted to have more to be a teacher. She got \$7.00 a week the first year. A little over \$1.00 a day. (laughter) We had to take her to Oakfield to school. That was high school. Then she went to seminary in Oakfield for a year. We'd take her Monday morning; and Friday night, go after her. Then she went to Albion for a year. Training Class, they called it. And that was a longer drive; twice a week. Then she got a school seven miles from home, and we had to take her again. She always took her food from home. A basket of stuff, you know. And she found a

place to board. I think she paid \$2.00 a week for a room. She had privilliges of cooking. All the time she went to high school, to the seminary, and when she was teaching, she got a place right near the school. Take her food from home. (This common practice was called "Basket-Boarding").

The second year she taught, she got \$9.00 a week, and then she gave up! She didn't have much to buy clothes with.

Mc What was your sister's name?

J Edith Johnson, the oldest. I had three sisters: one down here in the Infirmary now who is two years older than I am; the other one died when she was 60. (The sister's names were/are: Lula Johnson Waldo, Mrs. Howard Waldo; Laura Johnson Bacon, Mrs. Lavern Bacon; Edith Johnson Hill, Mrs. Roy Hill).

Mc You saw a few changes in your lifetime, didn't you?

J Yes. I used to work for ten cents an hour.

Mc I want to ask you a little more about this farm, here, that you ran. Was it a dairy farm, or a fruit farm?

J It was her father's uncle. He was the first one I knew that lived here.

Mrs. J Have you heard of Ben Helston? He's gone now. He built the barn and the house, both, over here. He didn't build 'em but he had 'em built.

A What did they raise then?

J Over here? Why, then they used to raise quite a few potatoes. That's when Charlie Russell had it. One year he had that big cellar filled right up with 'taters; right up to the floor! They kept good, in there. He'd set there and sort potatoes all winter. And when he got a load sorted, he'd take it down.

A He had sheep too, didn't he?

Mrs. J Yeah, he had sheep.

Mc How about you, Mr. Johnson? What did you specialize in?

J Oh, I raised beans, and hay, and wheat. I had eight ot nine cows. Sold milk down to the dairy for four cents and a half for a quart. And now it's 74¢, I guess, or more! Alvin Eskelson, he used to run the dairy down here. He figured on giving us about half of what he got for it. Pasteurized it and delivered it.

I guess five cents was the most we ever got.

Mc How did you deliver the milk?

J Take it down every morning at seven o'clock. You had to be down at seven o'clock. Them was long days: about 16 hours every day.

A You used to have milk cans, five gallon milk cans?

Mrs I'd be up stirring milk, five o'clock every morning.

J Yeah. We had ten gallon cans. When I first came over here, we made butter, skimmed the milk. Then we sold milk to the women down at the bean house. They'd bring their quart cans there, and we'd ... bring them up and we'd fill them up. And they'd take them back when they went in the morning. Ten cents a quart, at that time.

Mrs. J I guess we didn't have a right to do that. You'd better not be telling all these things!! (laughter)

A It's too late now to do anything about it! (laughter)

J We got along alright. All but in the Depression. We bought this darned farm about two years before the depression hit us.

Mrs. J That's right, 1929.

J '27 we bought it.

Mrs. J Yeah, but 1929 come the depression!

J Yeah. '29 or '30. In debt head over heels, on the farm.

Mc What did you do? The price of the things you sold went down. Is that so?

J Well, wheat was 50¢ a bushel, pea beans was 90¢ a 100 pounds. That's less than a cent a pound. I think that was the second year I was up here; yeah, 1928. I paid 14¢ a pound for red bean ssed and sold the crop for a cent and a half. That's the start of the depression when beans got down to that price. Wheat was only 55¢ a bushel. Now they're hollering that they can't get \$4.00!

Mrs. J With the price of bread, they ought to get more than they do, I guess.

J Well, it's like everything else. They take 5¢ of oats now, and they charge you \$1.20 for a couple pounds of oat flakes.

Mc Well, you got through the depression, anyway, didn't you?

J Yeah. There was only one year we couldn't make our payment. We bought it on land contract, or took over the contract from her father, paying 6% interest then. There was only one year we

missed our payment. I did manage paying the interest. This Ben Helston, her uncle, her father's uncle, held the mortgage on it. Well, we got out of it (debt) after awhile.

Mc Do you remember your first automobile?

J Yes.

Mc Where were you when you bought that?

J I was home, working around in different jobs. I bought a 1914 Ford Touring car. All you needed then was a piece of bailing wire and some pinchers, and you could fix most anything on it. I used to send to Sear and Roebuck and get some parts, bushings and one thing and another, to put in. I even had a tire vulcanizer. Tires didn't last very long in them days. Well, they cost around 11 or \$12.00 at that. And only three inch in front and three and a half behind. I sent and got a vulcanizer. I used to fix my own tires. I remember that one night - up at the Town-line Road- there was mud! Somebody had been through with a wagon, up through that mud. And it froze hard that night. When they got home that night, they come to Medina...

(end of side I of taped interview)

J Well, I don't know what the tires cost; only about \$4.00. Put a little waste in there and a spoonful of gas, touch a match to it, clamp that onto your tire where-ever you wanted to patch, and she'd hold!

Mc Did you have any trouble getting up hills?

J No, It would go anywhere.

Mc Of course, we don't have too many hills around here!

J The roads wasn't plowed then, you know. I run that Ford through snow that was coming right up over the lamps. Chains on the wheels behind. Go anywhere!

Mc Did you run your car all winter?

J Yeah.

Mc Ever get stuck in the mud?

J Mud up to the hub, the axle would go right through it. The wheels used to be a lot bigger then. Had 31 inch tires. 30 by 3½.

Mc And you'd change the tires pretty often?

J Yeah, I'd swap that in for a 1918. I had to go to Oakfield that morning, and I went to Alabama. Don Allen, you remember him, he went with me. I had been down the day before. Jay Walker was selling the Fords then. I had been down the day before and made a deal. And we got Alabama and that strip of road in there was "soup", muddy; and it froze that night, over a half inch crust right over that "soup", or mud. Got down to Medina and my tires was pretty well peeled. "Well", Jay says, "Them aren't the tires you had on yesterday, are they?" "Yeah, the same ones". He went through the deal alright. He gave me \$285.00 for that old wreck, and I paid him \$570.00 I think it was, for the new one.

Mc That was 1918?

J Yeah, when I got that auto.

Mrs. J That's the one he come to court me with! (laughter)

J I traded the '18 in for a '23 Maxwell Sport Touring car. Jay Bowen, he wouldn't give me over \$100.00 for the old Ford! Well, I paid only ten hundred and - yeah, I give him \$1,025.00. He give me \$100.00 for the old Ford. He got into the old Ford and drove it home.

Mc Did you have work horses on this farm when you first came?

J Yeah. We had a tractor, a Fordson. Her father and I together. I worked the farm up west of here. In '29, I bought an International Tractor. I got the tractor and a plow and cultipacker for \$1,000.00. It was a two-plough tractor.

Mc Well Mr. Johnson, I guess maybe you've told us enough. Unless there is anything special that you can remember that would be of interest.

J I can't think of much of anything.

Mc Well, I appreciate this very much. You have given us a picture of some of the activities around here for some years back. Thank you.

J You're welcome.

Melvin Johnson was interviewed by Arden McAllister and Howard Albright of Medina, New York.

Mrs. Johnson was in the room during the interview and makes occasional comments.

The original transcribing of this taped interview was done by Luther Burroughs of Albion.

This transcription was examined by Mrs. Howard (Florence) Albright for correct names listed, etc.

Final editing and typing was done by Helen McAllister, Medina, N.Y.