

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions  
Oral History Documentation Project

**ETHEL W. JOHNSON REED**

Interviewed by Joyce Blackwell

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[location unknown]

Logged by Tania Jordon on December 12, 2007

A verbatim transcript is available

Original format is one cassette tape

45 minutes, 10 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 1

Track 01

00:00 What were times like when you were a child? "I know I had foster parents. I have an idea that there was so much missing by not having real parents."

1:00 How did your family live? Her foster parents were hard working religious people. There names were Robert and Easter Johnson.

1:45 What kind of things did you eat as a family? They had a good table. They always had chickens, vegetables, and cakes. They lived in the country and raised everything, so there was always plenty to eat.

2:05 Were times better or worse in those days? "Today is better because you have modern conveniences. In the old days, they had a pump and they had to haul water."

Track 02

2:52 What chores did you have as a child? Hauling water, picked up chips, cut wood and worked in the fields. "By the time I was seven years old, my mother gave me a hoe and some seeds, and that's how I learned to plant."

3:30 What is your earliest memory? "I did see my real mother. She came to see use and she always sent presents. The biggest thing was when she died, that was a sad time of her life." She lived in Richmond.

4:57 What kinds of things did you do as a child? She would play with her dolls and washed and ironed for them and made mud cakes. She liked to play, but there was always work to do. "Children didn't have freedom and pleasure like today."

5:45 How did your foster parents treat you? They were good, but there always seemed to be unhappiness with me. Any little thing she did always bought on a whipping.

6:30 How did your parents prepare you for life? They nourished her and gave her a roof over her head. They tried to correct her or direct her in the way she should go. It was a “good learning, because when I went out on my own, I was always able to make it.” There were no other children in the family. The neighbors had children but she was not allowed to play with them.

#### Track 03

7:39 Describe your formal Schooling? “We lived in the country and it was a poor country. We didn’t get into school until the last of October, until all the farm work was taken care of. In April we were out of school.

8:30 How did you get to school? She worked about a mile to school. She basically walked alone.

8:50 What was the classroom like? It was a one room school house.

9:10 Who were your favorite Teachers? We only had one teacher at a time and were fortunate enough to have her. She completed the third grade. She remembers one nice teacher.

10:32 What was your favorite subject in school? None

10:45 What did you dream of becoming as an adult? She didn’t have “much to go upon” so she didn’t dream about becoming anything in particular.

11:10 As a teenager did your foster parents allow you to court or date? “No, because by the time I was eleven years old, I had to go out and work.

#### Track 04

11:25 What was it like when you first went out on your own? “I always knew how to take care of myself and to protect myself.” I knew how to be economical. Her foster father had died when she was 9 years old and she was out on her own at age 11.

12:30 Where did you go and what did you do? She lived with her grandmother and cousins in the Richmond.

12:45 What kind of work have you done to support yourself? She did housework and worked in restaurants. She always did “honorable work.”

12:55 What was the money situation as a child? She made \$0.75 per week doing housework.

13:55 A few years later she moved to New York and lived with her cousins. She went to night school, took correspondence courses (religious), and course at the YWCA. She took English, Spanish, dressmaking, ladies tailoring and art. She went to night school for approximately a year.

15:15 She moved to Washington, DC and passed the exam for a government job. She became a clerk. She stayed with the federal government for 26 years until she retired. She made from \$1,440 per year to about \$1,680.

#### Track 05

16:35 What do you remember about your wedding? “It took a while for me to say yes.” As you go along you meet so many people and so many nationalities. Finally, Harry said, you’re off on Wednesday; let’s go to Rockville to get married.” I met him through a friend. At the time he was working at the Shoreham Hotel. “I thought hum, another good looking man. I got married because I was tired of being single and tired of meeting various guys. She didn’t have a honeymoon. After they got married, “he went home and I went home.” “We didn’t get together until about a month later.” Married life is beautiful. They had no children.

#### Track 06

19:43 What part has religion played in your life? “Everything”. “I learned God is the giver of all, he has all things and gives all things, without him you have nothing”. She attended Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, DC before she moved to Maryland. She now attends All Saints Episcopal Church.

20:35 How do you know there is a God? “I couldn’t have existed if it hadn’t been for him and I did not believe in him. All these things, accomplishment, protection, and meeting beautiful people who were always so good and kind. I know there’s a God.”

21:22 How do you feel about your life today? “It’s a great life. Now that I’m retired, I do what I must and I let it go at that.”

22:01 Are people different now then they use to be? Yes, because many changes have come about that are beneficial to all. I think people are more gentle and kinder.

#### Track 07

22:50 Can you describe how you came to St. Mary’s County and why? We don’t know why we came. They met somebody who was selling beautiful lots so they came down to look at the lots. They came down in 1951. They stopped at the top of the hill and it looked so peaceful with the water and trees. Their lot was a commercial lot. They both had restaurant experience. Harry drew the plans for the restaurant/hotel and he had a lot of friends who were builders and they helped to put it together. They wanted to make an

arrow shape. Somebody ran the business during the week and they came down on the weekends.

#### Track 08

30:18 Did you find the people in St. Mary's different from the people you had been use to dealing with? "We met a very prominent family that was a life saver. Mr. Leroy Thompson was his name. He was everything. He helped us in so many ways. He was a big brother to Harry. Without the whole family we would not have existed. He did everything. He was a jewel to us and St. Mary's county. He was a diplomat because he knew how to deal with it, he was the peace maker."

32:40 How have you deal with race relations in the county or before you came to the county? Everyone had been good to me throughout my life. Perhaps they felt sorry for me. Do you think that was related to your background? "They say we come from a Cherokee background."

34:15 When did you come to live in the county permanently and how do you feel about living in the county? She moved to the county in 1969. "We have had a wonderful life here, there are no complaints. We have a lot of friends and everyone accepts us and we accept everyone. It is a peaceful beautiful place to be." The city is crowded; everyone lives in their own little corner."

#### Track 09

35:42 Do you think there is a difference between county people and outsiders. Not different, "I can fit in with any people regardless of where they are from and what nationality they are. I can get along with them. All we ask of anyone is to meet us halfway.

36:40 What do you think about the direction the county is going in now? "I think they are going in the right direction and fixing things for the benefit of its citizens."

37:10 How have you contributed to the county? She has done work in the church, county fair, Christmas in April, the Commission on Aging, and many other things.

38:00 Awards: She won a bronze medal and silver cup in the American Life Saving Course and awards for crafts at the county fair.

#### Track 10

40:05 What do you consider your most valuable asset or possession? Good health. She has had one cataract removed from one eye and tonsils removed years ago. "They had good health from the way that they live, eat and good mind and one spirituality".

41:55 Have you done everything in life that you wanted or planned do? Yes, she wanted to paint a picture and travel. She's travel to the Holy Land. She was very moved by this trip.

43:00 What do you feel has the biggest changes in this county since you've been here? There is good relationship in the county. The people are nice and do whatever they can.

43:55 Closing comments: I hope that I can live here as long as there is life and try to get along with everyone. Help everyone that I can

44:34 What year were you married? 1933 They have just celebrated their 63rd anniversary.