

Pauline G. "Polly" Chapman Johnson Oral History Interview, March 21, 2012
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Virginia Macro

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Biographical Note and Abstract

Pauline G. "Polly" (Chapman) Johnson was born 12 October 1921 in South Windsor, CT the daughter of Frederick F. and Sarahbelle Bownes Chapman. She was raised and educated in town, including being a member of the first class to graduate from Ellsworth High School. She married the late Clyde E. Johnson on 21 September 1940 and had one son, Clyde, Jr.

In this interview, Pauline Johnson recalls interesting information relating to being a lifelong resident of South Windsor. Besides sharing details of her personal background, Pauline shares her knowledge of the agricultural, historical, architectural, community residents, and significant places in town. She was a proud member of the Connecticut, Massachusetts, and National Button Collectors Society. Pauline Johnson passed away on Saturday, 6 September 2014 at Manchester Memorial Hospital.

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Transcript of Oral History Interview

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Pauline G. Johnson

Pauline G. (Polly) Chapman Johnson
Oral History Transcript
March 21, 2012
Interviewed by: Virginia Macro

[Audio Starts at 00:00]

MACRO: All right. I think we are ready to go. I'm here this morning to interview Pauline Johnson. My name is Virginia Macro, and this part of the oral history project at Wood Memorial Library in South Windsor, CT and we are in Mrs. Johnson's living room at 195 Oakland Road in South Windsor. Today is March 21, 2012. It is a lovely morning, at least in the temperature. It's a little cloudy this morning. I appreciate very much your willingness to talk to us and tell us about your life in South Windsor. I think we should probably start at the beginning—where you were born and when?

JOHNSON: I was born in South Windsor, October 10, 1921.

MACRO: You spent your life growing up in town, I assume?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: Where was it that you lived? Were you born in your house?

JOHNSON: Yes, we were born at home.

MACRO: Where was your house? Where did you live?

JOHNSON: It was on Ellington Road. I can't tell you the number of it, because we didn't have numbers then, but it is just south of Governor's Highway.

MACRO: Did you have a large family?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I'm from a large family, yes. When my folks came from Marlborough, Connecticut—let's see—I'm trying to think now. There were two sisters and two brothers that came from Marlborough. Then I was born here in 1921.

MACRO: Were you the youngest?

JOHNSON: No, I had two younger brothers and two younger sisters.

MACRO: Yes, that's a large family, so there were nine of you?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: Did you parents move here for a specific reason?

JOHNSON: My father, when he was young, his sister came up to South Windsor to stay with an uncle that lived here in South Windsor. My father came to work up here, because there was no work down there and stayed with them. He worked at the grist mill.

MACRO: Oh, which is now the restaurant. Was the mill for corn?

JOHNSON: Yeah, well, they ground anything—any grains and especially corn because that is what a lot of people used then.

MACRO: What was his job at the mill? Do you know?

JOHNSON: Well, first of all, when he first came, I think he had to get up in the morning and start the fires. I remember that, because he said one time he was late, and the owner didn't like it if it wasn't warm, so he was late. He just put up a candle or something and lit a candle or something in the stove, of course, so when the owner came in, he would see there was flame in there, and so he just put his hands—oh, it was nice and warm, [laughs] so he got away with it.

MACRO: Well, that is fascinating, and so—well, I'm sure your mother had her hands full with the large family.

JOHNSON: Yeah, but even then, she worked outside in the gardens in the (?) and the regular vegetable garden.

MACRO: Did you parents grow tobacco?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, they grew tobacco, all kinds of—not much corn—all kinds of vegetables.

MACRO: They had a fairly large piece of property that they could accommodate all of that?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, and then my father had a sawmill that sawed up lumber. He had it so that he traveled with it at times, where he could set up for a large job.

Pauline Johnson
March 21, 2012
Page 3

MACRO: It was a portable?

JOHNSON: Well, they made it that way. Of course, in those times, they didn't have all of this modern equipment that they have today to travel.

MACRO: Did he use a truck or—?

JOHNSON: A tractor, a trailer, a truck—it wasn't too much of a truck, because seeing we didn't have much of anything at that time. Even cars—you didn't have cars then.

MACRO: Did you have any animals—livestock to help with the—?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes we had horses. My dad had those big—not Clydesdales—but Belgium horses to work in the woods, and they had the farm animals that worked on the farm—no tractors or anything like that. They used a hand plow behind the horse, yeah. Oh, it was fascinating.

MACRO: You started school here?

JOHNSON: Yes, I walked down to the Pleasant Valley School one mile.

MACRO: Who was your teacher? Do you remember your teacher?

JOHNSON: Yeah, Gertrude Freitag.

MACRO: You went through how many—?

JOHNSON: Three grades there, and then I went to the Wapping School.

MACRO: That was a much larger school.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. We went by bus then. They had a bus that was—I have to stop and think now. I must have been—I can't remember. I think I went to school in '28.

MACRO: At Wapping?

JOHNSON: No, it wasn't that one.

MACRO: You did first grade.

JOHNSON: First, second, and third, so I must have been—what?

MACRO: Six or seven.

JOHNSON: Seven—I think—I think I was almost eight, because I was sick. I couldn't go the first year. I must have been 9 when I went to Wapping School and graduated in '35- eighth grade.

MACRO: Did you go on from there? Did you go on to—?

JOHNSON: Then high school—we had our own high school. Our graduating class was 35—was the first class to enter Ellsworth High School.

MACRO: Then you graduated from there in '39.

JOHNSON: Forty.

MACRO: Oh, very interesting, and so that was the first high school that brought students from—

JOHNSON: East Windsor and South Windsor.

MACRO: Were there still students going to East Hartford or had they—?

JOHNSON: No, when this one opened, everybody went to Ellsworth. Some of them went to Rockville before too.

MACRO: Yes, I think I knew that. You had really known people in this part of South Windsor.

JOHNSON: We used to know everybody in town.

MACRO: That was when you started going to Ellsworth. Did you interact with people on Main Street before that?

JOHNSON: No.

MACRO: Isn't that interesting? That has been—kind of—a divide?

JOHNSON: Well—you know—the old saying is, “This side of town was on the wrong side of the tracks.”

MACRO: Was that south—over here—do you think? Was that the impression that people had in Wapping?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: Isn't that interesting.

JOHNSON: Yeah, the older people didn't associate with us at all.

MACRO: When you were in high school, were you part of a club?

JOHNSON: No, I just was—well, I worked every day at the cafeteria. Anything that was wrong—it was me. [laughs] I don't know why, but—

MACRO: Now, was that a paying job or did you—?

JOHNSON: No, this was just a volunteer—just part of my school. My schedule was so that I had study period, so I didn't have to study. I had to study, but—I mean—that was what they did with my schedule. I had home economics, and during that class and my study periods I worked doing things for the cafeteria at noontime. Then after that we had to clean up, so that was another study period. After school there was a program that I did get paid for by the government, which was—I think—it was—I'll say—\$25 for a month to clean the classrooms—dust and whatever had to be washed or whatever.

MACRO: Was that the town government that paid you to do it?

JOHNSON: No, the federal government.

MACRO: This was—?

JOHNSON: In '40 or '39, '40.

MACRO: That was—sort of—the beginning of the Depression.

JOHNSON: Oh, it was after the Depression. This was the end of the Depression. I lived through the Depression—clear through. The only thing we had was what we grew on the farm, because we had our own animals and everything and chickens.

MACRO: Did it affect you badly?

JOHNSON: Oh, no.

MACRO: You were pretty much self-sufficient.

JOHNSON: We were self-sufficient.

MACRO: Oh, well, that is very fortunate.

JOHNSON: My mother canned everything that she could, so we had plenty all winter. They stored stuff in the cellar—potatoes, apples, or whatever they could store in the cellar, so we had all of that all year.

MACRO: Do you know how much land you had—what the acreage was?

JOHNSON: Oh, don't know that. Then, in '35, we moved from that Ellington Road to the house that was on the corner of Governor's Highway. That used to be an old town farmhouse.

MACRO: By town far, you mean it was—?

JOHNSON: Where they put—

MACRO: Indigents or—?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: You were still farming then?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. My father farmed on shares with this man that lived in this house—our farm townhouse. It was a 1700-and-something—I don't remember—house.

MACRO: That is no longer there?

JOHNSON: No, it burned. When my dad died, my sister got it, and she rented it out because she didn't want to live in that shack. It was better than anything she had afterwards. Anyway, the people that lived there, they weren't at home one time, and the fire started in the attic, which nobody ever went in the attic, because it was just a trap door. There was nothing up there. It burned down while they were gone.

MACRO: Was it caused by electricity or—?

JOHNSON: No, there was hardly any electricity in the house.

MACRO: When did the electricity come in?

JOHNSON: In 1928, we had electricity at the other house—in '28. We had one bulb in the center of the kitchen and one in the center of the living room.

MACRO: That was it?

JOHNSON: That was it.

MACRO: Isn't that interesting.

JOHNSON: The radio we had was a battery.

MACRO: It wasn't a crystal?

JOHNSON: No, a regular big battery.

MACRO: Very interesting, so now, you took a bus that went over to South Windsor schools.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Did you ever go in to Hartford?

JOHNSON: Very, very seldom.

MACRO: In terms of your social life, what sort of—

JOHNSON: Nothing.

MACRO: Nothing? Wasn't there a grange or—

JOHNSON: Nothing. We went nowhere except maybe once in a blue moon, we went down to visit his mother or my mother's mother.

MACRO: Did you go to a church?

JOHNSON: Sunday school.

MACRO: There was no teenage—?

JOHNSON: Nothing.

MACRO: Did you work in the house?

JOHNSON: Oh, we had to—oh yes—inside, outside. The rule in our house was anything that had to be done—do it.

MACRO: That sounds very practical.

JOHNSON: If it meant our own house or somebody else that needed help—go do it.

MACRO: Good—that's a good philosophy.

JOHNSON: Yeah, but not for money.

MACRO: Just as a neighbor.

Pauline Johnson
March 21, 2012
Page 9

JOHNSON: As an experience—I guess.

MACRO: Well, yeah, and as your responsibility which is to help. Tell me more about your family—your grandparents, your great-grandparents. Where were they? When you went to visit them, where were they?

JOHNSON: Well, my mother's mother—she was—well, I shouldn't say it, but—I guess—I've got to. She was an Indian. She was from an Indian reservation in Iowa. I don't know how my grandfather got up there. I don't know, because he was born in East Hampton, Connecticut, and that is where his parents lived. Anyway, they were married in Missouri, and then they came here in a covered wagon. When they came, I just don't know exactly, because nothing was ever written down—only some pictures that we see. We figured that she had three daughters before she came here, so they all came in the covered wagon.

MACRO: Do you know what tribe she was a member of?

JOHNSON: No.

MACRO: This was your mother's mother?

JOHNSON: Yes, Sara Bownes..

MACRO: Your mother—how large was that family, including the three that she brought with her?

JOHNSON: Seven—I think—I'm not sure—I think—seven.

MACRO: They had four children together here?

JOHNSON: Uh-huh (affirmative).

MACRO: That was in—

JOHNSON: East Hampton, Connecticut.

MACRO: You would go to visit them?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: You remember your visits with them?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Did you have any impression of your grandmother?

JOHNSON: Kind person, good cook, visited in two-seater, open Model T Ford.

MACRO: —that stood out?

JOHNSON: No.

MACRO: Your other—?

JOHNSON: My father's mother (Sarah Jane Post Chapman)—she was—well, they kept asking her—the family originally came from England, and they kept asking her when she came or when the family came. She said, "Did you come over in the Mayflower?" She says, "No, the second boat." [laughs] I always remember that. My two grandmothers would get together and they were both Sarah's. One would say, "Well,"—because they'd get talking—you know. My Bownes grandmother would say, "Well, that is all right. We were here to greet you when you came."—being the Indians. "We were here when you came. We were here to greet you when you came."

MACRO: It sounds as though they got on all right.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, fine, fine, because both families integrated—married into each other.

MACRO: Any other siblings marry or was it just your mother and father that got married?

JOHNSON: No—you see—my grandmother's mother's family integrated with the Chapman family, because my grandfather was in the Civil War, so when he came home, they had—let's see—two girls and four boys. The youngest one wasn't born until after my grandfather (David Albert Chapman) died.

MACRO: Where did he serve in the Civil War? Do you anything about his service?

JOHNSON: He enlisted in Massachusetts, where he was recruited from.

MACRO: He came back from the Civil War?

JOHNSON: Oh, he came back, and his brother (Lafayette) also was in the Civil War with him. I don't say just—with him, but—I mean—he was in the Civil War. They both—we just hear pieces—you know—that they both were injured, and so they were discharged.

MACRO: Where did that set of grandparents live? Were they—?

JOHNSON: The Chapman's were in Marlborough, and the Bownes's were in East Hampton.

MACRO: Now, when you were growing up, you knew a lot of the places along Ellington Road, along Buckland Road?

JOHNSON: Well, more or less just along where we lived, because we didn't get out very often. My father didn't have a car. He never drove until—good Lord, I don't know. I can't remember. We were just little kids when he had a car.

MACRO: You graduated from high school. Then what did you do?

JOHNSON: I got married 21 September 1940 to Clyde E. Johnson.

MACRO: Right away?

JOHNSON: Pretty soon. We built this house at 195 Oakland Road.

MACRO: Do you remember what year you built the house?

JOHNSON: We started it in '39, and we finished it in '41. We were married in '40. We lived with my husband's mother, Harriet Buckland Johnson.

MACRO: That was really right out of high school that you got married.

JOHNSON: You couldn't get a job for love or money. You couldn't buy a job. In '40, you couldn't buy a job. Everybody was unemployed. It was just ending up the depression. The depression didn't end until the war started, and the Pratt & Whitney opened up.

MACRO: You moved here, and—

JOHNSON: No, I didn't move here. I was born here.

MACRO: Yes—no, I mean—to this house.

JOHNSON: Oh, this house—yes, we moved in here in the end of '41—I think.

MACRO: What did your husband do?

JOHNSON: He was a farmer. He worked in tobacco for L.B. Haas.

MACRO: Where was his farm—Haas' farm?

JOHNSON: Oh, it was all over.

MACRO: Did he continue in tobacco?

JOHNSON: Well, he did a little bit of farming on the potatoes for the neighbor, and there was a vegetable farmer. He worked for them a little while, but then he went to Pratt & Whitney in '45—I believe.

MACRO: What did he do there? Was that where his career was?

JOHNSON: Yes, that is where he stayed, yes. He worked on machinery. That's all I can tell you.

MACRO: I know that this area around here was the strawberry—

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. It used to be tobacco and potatoes. Then they sold it off to strawberries. I had strawberries across the street, back there, clear almost to Buckland Road—this field here.

MACRO: I remember that. I remember when the strawberries were still here, and they were very good.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. It was (?) to go out and pick them.

MACRO: Did you ever sneak some from the—?

JOHNSON: Oh, I didn't have to. I didn't have to sneak anything. In fact, right now, if anything was in season, I would get them.

MACRO: I'd say they were very good.

JOHNSON: Oh, those are good kids; Donald Dzen's family.

MACRO: Now, I know that you are a button collector.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Can you tell me how you got involved in that?

JOHNSON: If I go back to my grandmother Chapman, she has those boys, and, of course, they had to have cufflinks for their shirts. When they went anywhere, they had to be dressed. They had a lot of cufflinks. They are not like the cufflinks they have now. They were snap-together. I haven't got any down here, but I have some. She used to give them to me to play with, so then she gave them to me. That is—kind of—how I got started.

Then my mother had the button bag, and we always played with the button bag, but I'd pick out the pretty buttons. Then—I don't know—when my son (Clyde Jr) got big enough, he got interested in buttons. Then when he was through college—he only went one year to college, and then he went into computer school in West Hartford. He learned computers from the bottom up. He had to learn how to make one. That is when it first came out. It was '61 maybe—'62, whatever. Dates are nothing in my head—only my birthdate. I keep that one in mind. They ask me what my Social Security is. I never can remember it.

MACRO: I know—it is very difficult.

JOHNSON: Then we went to the flea markets up in Brimfield, Mass, and we met this lady.

We met several ladies, but a couple of them I already knew. One of them said to Clyde, “Why don’t you and your mother come down to the button meeting? It is in Connecticut on Saturday.” We went down and that is how we got interested in buttons. He did too, and then when I was married, my husband’s grandmother had collected buttons. When she passed away, they went to her daughter. When her daughter passed away, my son inherited part of the estate, and so we bought the buttons—her collection of buttons.

MACRO: Do you know how many you have?

JOHNSON: No, because I keep buying them anyway.

MACRO: That is fascinating.

JOHNSON: Some of my buttons now are on exhibition at the Rockville Public Library.

MACRO: It is interesting—I’m sure—with any type of collecting, that you have standards and—

JOHNSON: See, we have competition, so I belong to Massachusetts State Button club. We have a small club up there, which is getting pretty large right now, and we started off with—I think—10, and it is over 20 now. That is once a month, but the others are only 3 or 4 times a year—I think. The Connecticut one I belong to, which is in Southbury—no, sorry. It is in—I can’t think. You’ll have to edit this thing—I hope. Oh, I’ll say Farmington. It’s near Farmington. Then I belong to the national organization.

In June, we have a convention that includes all of the New England states, because every state has a button club, even though nobody knows about button clubs. We have that convention that includes all of New England and New York—most of New York. Well—I don’t know—half of New York doesn’t participate, but anyway.

MACRO: That is a fascinating interest.

JOHNSON: We have that big convention, and some of it—well, it is huge, because we have it at a hotel, and we take over the hotel. No, we don’t really, but most of it.

MACRO: Now, I know that you gave some information to Nancy Gardner when she was doing her—

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I met with her, yeah.

MACRO: Also about the buildings that were in this Wapping area—I know you went—

JOHNSON: Oh, we were around. We knew all about them.

MACRO: Right, well, maybe you could help describe some of the buildings that we have lost that were in the Wapping Five Corners area.

JOHNSON: The first one would be right at Buckland Road and Ellington Road. It used to be a inn, where I presume—as they say—George Washington and Lafayette stayed there. Lafayette stayed there, and it was a farm at this period of time. During the Revolutionary War, it was an inn, but they had—the family—I don't know how it was—but they had barns and things. They had—of course, it was all horses in those—nothing else, of course. They had the stalls for all of the horses and their buggies and all of that kind of stuff. They say that, at the time that the barn was torn down, there was a plaque on the stable where Lafayette kept his horse. Wherever that ever went to—I don't know, so that was right on the corner there.

Then on the other corner, is the Sadd Memorial Library. I gave Sally all of this information about that—how it was built and how much it cost and how much the interior cost and everything. She has got all of that, but she put everything in the archives. Who can get to it?

MACRO: Well, we have an archive at Wood too.

JOHNSON: Well, I know, but this is—I don't know. Anyway, she put it in the archives. The same as the firehouse. I had all of the information—how that was built, when it was built, how much it cost, and who built it and everything.

MACRO: You gave that to Sally as well?

JOHNSON: Yeah, that's not good.

MACRO: It preserves it, and it is available to people. They can come and get that information.

JOHNSON: Now, they come to me wanting all of this information, and I haven't got it.

MACRO: Oh, I see. You'll have to direct them to Sally.

JOHNSON: Yeah, but then she says, “Oh, it is in the archives.”

MACRO: Yeah.

JOHNSON: What are you going to do?

MACRO: Yeah, well, she should be able to get it out for them. I mean—that’s—

JOHNSON: Yeah, but who has time? People are working. They’re only open—what—2 days a week or one day a week.

MACRO: Yes, that’s true.

JOHNSON: That’s not good—and it is in the daytime?

MACRO: Yes—I know. They can arrange to—I mean—and they have to phone.

JOHNSON: People that are working have got children. Grown people are—it’s too much.

MACRO: Yeah, that is difficult. Maybe we will get it all online at some point. Then it will be available 24 hours a day, for people who want to research it. Were you ever in the house that was an inn?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes—oh, not much of the house—just in the kitchen side.

MACRO: Do you know if there was—I know—a lot of them had ballrooms upstairs.

JOHNSON: Oh, I don’t know about that one. I don’t know too much about that house, but the next house down—well, there have been many things in between. There was a grocery store that was run by a Priest—you know—John Paul Priest. I’ve got that picture too somewhere.

MACRO: I think I actually have a copy of that picture.

JOHNSON: Probably—I know—

MACRO: Nancy probably took that.

JOHNSON: I had a picture of it. As I say, I give all of this stuff to Sally, so I have nothing. Then there was a big white house. They called it the Chimneys. It was a huge white house. One of the Struthers—the people that owned the corner house—some inn. She lived there. When she—I don't know whether she had moved out or not. I can't remember that, but she wanted to give it to the historical society, and they wouldn't accept it. Martha Williams had given them the land to put it on, and they said no. They didn't want it. (1976)

MACRO: Was this a brick house?

JOHNSON: Yeah. It was a huge house.

MACRO: This was all in the area where the town center is now, right?

JOHNSON: Right—right straight along on there. Then, beyond that was a real old dilapidated looking house, and they had a—kind of—a garage and everything there. That used to be the original Wapping Post Office.

MACRO: This was down on Ellington Road?

JOHNSON: Yeah, right.

MACRO: South of the—

JOHNSON: Yes, just south of the center—even before you got to Clark Street. It was all right there together. When they gave up that post office over here, it moved over here to Snow's station. They had a gas station and a grocery store.

MACRO: That was on Oakland.

JOHNSON: It was all Ellington Road (now Oakland Road)—I guess—at that time.

MACRO: Oh, I see, yeah—before they blocked that part off.

JOHNSON: Yeah. Anyway, and that's where the post office was for a long, long time. It was on—what they call—a star route, so we got mail from there twice a day. They had

Pauline Johnson
March 21, 2012
Page 18

to go to Buckland and pick it up and bring it up. Then they had to come to the post office to get their mail. I don't remember if they delivered it on the way or not. I'm not sure of that or whether they had somebody deliver it. The post office was at Snow's station. When Mrs. Snow could no longer do it—I don't know whether she was ill or whether he passed away. I don't remember, but then it went to—oh, they knew she was giving it up, so the people that lived on the corner was Judd. He built a brick building between his house on the corner and that white house. He had the post office there. Then when he didn't want it any longer, it went out to Burrell's Center and Bob Burrell ran it.

MACRO: It has jumped around.

JOHNSON: Yes, and that was the last of our Wapping Post Office, because they built the big new one on Sullivan Avenue, then we had to go to South Windsor for town mail.

MACRO: I see, so you had your own post office.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: Now, back to the Chimneys—when was that taken down? Do you remember roughly?

JOHNSON: I guess—when they started building that whole area up. The house came down and everything.

MACRO: That's a shame.

JOHNSON: That whole bit came down clear to Clark Street.

MACRO: That is a shame to lose all of those. Now, do you remember anything about the house that is across from what is the community center now—the little brick building that it was—I think—connected with maybe the Methodist Church when the Methodist were there? (House was built after Methodist Church burned down.)

JOHNSON: Do you mean where the community church is now?

MACRO: No, it is across that little exit road (Community Road)—you know?

Pauline Johnson
March 21, 2012
Page 19

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: Sullivan comes down this way, and there is a little thing here. Then there is a house on that corner; NW corner of Ellington Road and Community Road.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: Was that ever a store or a—?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I lived in that house—I don't know—several months, and I never knew it was a saltbox house. I never knew it until just lately. Coming down, I said to Clinton, my friend—I said, "That was a saltbox house." You look at it, and you can tell—of course, it has been redone. My husband's mother lived there—bought that—and it was—yes, that store that was across the street—that I told you—John Paul Priest (Norman's father) owned the store. Billings bought it and he had his store there. I don't know—I guess—it is when they started tearing everything up. I don't remember that part, but when Clyde's mother bought that corner house, she had a dormer put on it, so it took away that saltbox look. That is where—before that—the Billings lived in the house, but they had a store on that front where—I guess—it is an office now.

MACRO: Yes, it is, but is that a very old house, do you know?

JOHNSON: I don't know. I really don't know. It must've been, if it is a saltbox.

MACRO: Yeah, interesting, because—

JOHNSON: Yeah, I don't know.

MACRO: That is very interesting. I thought it was an older house than it appears now. I know that out Buckland Road, there is a house that the Buckland's—?

JOHNSON: Oh, that is out on the corner, but the house across the library—and then there is a house right behind the Library. That is a very old house, but I can't tell you the date or anything like that.

MACRO: You remember that one?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, I've been in that one several times, yeah.

MACRO: It is one that is a little bit yellow now? I think they've painted it yellow.

JOHNSON: Oh, no, it is a little white one—just right behind the library and it is trimmed with green. It is a very old house, but it is very quaint inside.

MACRO: Yes, it is a pretty house.

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: Now what about—was there anything where the little restaurant is now, next to the Sadd Memorial Library.

JOHNSON: That was Snow's store. That is where the gas station was and the—

MACRO: —and the post office.

JOHNSON: —the post office, and the food—well, they had groceries.

MACRO: Was it as it looks today—pretty much?

JOHNSON: Pretty much.

MACRO: That is also very interesting.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: You don't how far back that structure goes?

JOHNSON: I don't know.

MACRO: This was in—what—the '30s—?

JOHNSON: Oh, this was in the '40s—'30s, '40s.

MACRO: —that it was a gas station, the post office, the grocery store and garage?

JOHNSON: Yes, longer than I can remember—I guess—because Mrs. Snow's daughter—I mean—Marion—she was my age. We went to school together.

MACRO: At the Wapping school was right across the street?

JOHNSON: Yes, so at noontime, she would go home to lunch, and she would take me with her.

MACRO: Oh, that's nice.

JOHNSON: Yes, so even—well, when we were grown up, I was married and lived out here. I used to walk down when the school was still there. I would walk down at noon to help them—just to be there. I didn't do much work, but to be there when the crowds of kids came in, because some of them would come in, buy penny candy and get their lunch. She made the most delicious tuna fish sandwich I ever could eat, and I've never had one better.

MACRO: This is Mrs. Snow?

JOHNSON: Old Mrs. Snow, Clara, and she was quite laid up with arthritis, and she could hardly get around, but she would make sandwiches.

MACRO: That is wonderful. I'm just trying to think. Are there any other activities that went on around this area now? Oh, we were talking about the Buckland?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, that goes way back, before the Revolutionary War.

MACRO: That grey house?

JOHNSON: Not that grey house—that was built later. It was a big farm. To start with, the man that was in the Revolutionary War—I don't whether he was a captain or an admiral or something in the War. I've got his picture somewhere. When he was mustered out, they never gave them money. They gave them land. I can't think now. My son—if he was here, he would tell you, but, of course, he's not. He got all of that genealogy stuff. Of course, Sally's got my copy, and I want it back. She hasn't got it copied off yet. I'll probably die before I get it, because it should go to Manchester.

MACRO: Now, this is the Buckland family?

JOHNSON: Buckland family—because he was given hundreds of acres of land. It went way beyond the South Windsor line—to the South Windsor line on that side, all around to the railroad tracks in Buckland, clear into North Manchester. It took in all of that territory from—well, I'll say—it is the Tolland Turnpike now—from there, clear up to where the brook is that goes under the road at Buckland—the quarry where the red stone is—everything.

MACRO: Isn't that interesting.

JOHNSON: They had a big farm. They grew potatoes. They grew everything—vegetables, because they took them to market.

MACRO: Tobacco—did they grow tobacco?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, they grew tobacco—everything.

MACRO: There's a grey house on the NW corner of Deming and Buckland.

JOHNSON: That's it.

MACRO: That is quite an early house—I understand. I haven't been in it.

JOHNSON: I can't tell you. Well, they've ruined it now, because they changed it all over. That house was built after it was—I wished I had my pictures here. It was a little gambrel roof. No—let me see. No, it was a saltbox house on that corner. That was the Buckland house.

MACRO: All right, now we're back. We had a small pause for the mailman to deliver mail. We were talking about Buckland Road—I think.

JOHNSON: Yes.

MACRO: —and the Buckland house there.

JOHNSON: There was a—I don't know how far we got. There used to be a saltbox house there.

MACRO: Where the attorney's office (John Woodcock) is now?

JOHNSON: Yes and the family got too—well, I don't know how many rooms are in that saltbox, because I never was in that one. Whether the family got too big—there were only three children in 20 years, but—I guess—they had hired help too. Anyway, they took that house and moved it up onto Deming Street, next to the gambrel roofed house and then built this big house. I believe Seth Buckland built this house.

MACRO: Do you know what era that was?

JOHNSON: I have no idea.

MACRO: It is not the saltbox anymore.

JOHNSON: No, the saltbox was moved to Deming Street, but they had other houses for the hired help. There was only one left there that I can remember, and that was the Birdsey's gambrel roof house. It was when we lived there. I can't remember what year it was. We had a terrible, terrible thundershower. Lightning struck it, and it burned up.

MACRO: That was the—

JOHNSON: —the gambrel roof—so that cleaned up all of those houses along there. They didn't have anything left there.

MACRO: It is interesting, because I understand that in that little grey house, there is a beehive oven and some—

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, there was everything.

MACRO: It has got to be fairly old.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Nineteenth century, anyway.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Now, the mailman—while he was here—mentioned your home remedies. You'll have to—

JOHNSON: I won't remember—or you'll know I'm lucid.

MACRO: Tell us about what some of your home remedies are.

JOHNSON: He had an awful, awful cold, of course, I told him what to do, but of course, they wouldn't have the ingredients today that we had when we were kids. My father and the men always went trapping and they got skunks. They wanted the fur. They trapped for the hides, because they were very expensive at that time. They'd take the fat out of the skunks and render it, so you'd just get the oil, so we had bottles of skunk oil. When we had awful, hard colds, that's what we got rubbed with—skunk oil and turpentine.

MACRO: Oh, wow. Did it work?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah—every time. If anybody has bronchitis, if they get a dose of that, it will go away and you won't get it again.

MACRO: Isn't that interesting? I suppose the fumes from the turpentine helped.

JOHNSON: I don't know, because the skunk oil didn't smell. Of course, I don't know how much you put in, because we just never measured anything—just put stuff in. That is what we got rubbed with if we had a bad cold.

MACRO: What are some of the other—are there any other things that you told him? He seemed to be—

JOHNSON: Oh, Lord, we go into so many things, I don't remember. We used to use a salve—not a liquid—but it is a stick—like a stick of—it is harder than wax, but it is a medicated stick. You light it with a match, and if you have a bad cut that won't heal, put that on a Band-Aid. Well, of course, a lot of people just drop it on—hot-hot—but I always say put it on a Band-aid and put the Band-aid on it as quick as you can. He would come in with these slivers or cuts or something and get my stick out and—

MACRO: You still have some?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Is it still available today?

JOHNSON: No.

MACRO: I can understand why he consults you.

JOHNSON: Another thing is, when you have a cold or anything, and your throat gets sore, give them ginger.

MACRO: Raw ginger or—?

JOHNSON: If you put a teaspoon of ginger in a cup of hot water, a little bit of sugar, and sip it. Then we have cough drops. I call them cough drops, but they're a ginger drop, and it is hot. Take that, and it's gone.

MACRO: For sore throats—I'll have to—

JOHNSON: If you feel a cold coming on, if you can get a hold of—even your ginger. Sally's husband swears by it. He buys the powdered ginger in quart jars.

MACRO: Really?

JOHNSTON: He was sick one time, and Sally—I was talking with her—and he was coughing, coughing, coughing. She said, "That is the way he does day and night." I said, "Sally, haven't you got ginger?" "Oh, yeah," she says. "Do you mean for cooking?" I said, "Yeah—like what you cook with." I said, "Put some in a cup, some water, and a little bit of sugar, and give it to him." In a little while, he stopped coughing.

MACRO: You don't know quantities of how much you put in?

JOHNSON: No, I never—I don't measure.

MACRO: Just a spoonful?

JOHNSON: Well, you could put a spoonful, and then put the water—of course, the stronger it is that you can take, the better it is.

MACRO: Yeah. We're going to try that. That sounds very good.

JOHNSON: At the last button show, one of our ladies—she was there and I was talking with her. She says, "Oh, my throat is so sore." She said, "I think I'm coming down with something." She is—I never can say the right word—anesthesiologist—the one that gives you the dope to put you to sleep at the hospital.

MACRO: Oh, an anesthetist, yes.

JOHNSON: That is what she is. I said, "Lucy, don't you know what to do?" She said, "I don't." I say, "Okay," so I had my pocketbook there, and I gave her one of those ginger drops. I said, "It is going to be hot." Everybody was standing there listening—you know—and pretty soon she came over and she, "It is good. This is gone."

MACRO: Where do you get ginger drops? Can you still get those?

JOHNSON: Not very often. When I go to Pennsylvania, I get them. We used to get them at Christmas Tree Shop, but the ginger drops they get up there now—whenever they get them—they're nothing. They're just a piece of candy.

MACRO: They have to be pretty strong with the ginger?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: Does crystallized ginger do the same sort of thing?

JOHNSON: Yeah, that will help too.

MACRO: Very, very good.

JOHNSON: It's the same thing. You got your sugar and your ginger and your saliva. That's all it takes.

MACRO: That's great to know. Are there any other little secrets you have there that you—?

JOHNSON: I don't know, because I just go along and do it. See, my mother was the Indian part, so that is how we were brought up—on that kind of remedies. We never had a doctor. I never had a doctor until I had to go for a blood test to get married. I never went to a doctor.

MACRO: Do you think that your mother got a lot of this information from her mother?

JOHNSON: I think it was just the way they were brought up.

MACRO: Yeah, that is very interesting.

JOHNSON: I never thought about it, until I started—well, it is in me to know what to do.

MACRO: Yes, and the simpler remedies that are available.

JOHNSON: Yeah, because we never went to a drugstore for anything. Another thing, when we had bad colds, we had, of course, wood stoves. She always had a little kettle of a dish of some kind. She always had onion and brown sugar in it cooking. If we get to coughing too much—like in the night, she would give us a spoonful of that. It would be really like syrup.

MACRO: This was your mother?

JOHNSON: Uh-huh (affirmative).

MACRO: That's a good remedy.

JOHNSON: My father would come in with cuts on his hands from—deep ones—you know—have to have it stitched. She would stitch him up.

MACRO: Really?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, we did everything. The only time—I guess—she ever had a doctor was when she was giving birth, and she did have a doctor then. Well, he came, but everything was all over by the time the doctor would get there, because they had to come from East Hartford or Hartford. There were no doctors in town.

MACRO: How did you notify the doctor? Did you have a telephone?

JOHNSON: We never had a telephone. One of the neighbors (Earl Hayes) had a telephone, so somebody had to go down to use the telephone.

MACRO: How did the doctor get out? Did he have a car?

JOHNSON: Well, I don't remember. I do remember them telling me October 10th—the day I was born—they put the wood stove up in the living room to keep it warm. My dad and Sally's grandfather went hunting in the snow, so they tell me that. Then one year—I don't remember what year—they were again dates I don't remember. It was in the '70s—I think. We went to the shore for my birthday. Coming home it snowed.

MACRO: Very different from the weather we've had this year.

JOHNSON: I know. No one ever remembers anything like this.

MACRO: Yeah, it is amazing. Tell me a little more about your father's hunting and what he did with these animals—where he sold the—

JOHNSON: Oh, of course, the furriers came out from, probably, New York. They'd line them up on certain days or certain time of the year. They saved up all they had. They had big boards—different sizes for different animals that they stretched those skins on and let them dry. Then when the furriers came, they'd strip off the furs from the boards and—

MACRO: He was trapping—

JOHNSON: Oh, they did everything—even our food. We received the rabbits and the squirrels and the birds. I remember once they cooked a skunk, but they could have many times, but I didn't know.

MACRO: Did you ever catch groundhogs?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes—very good. Yeah, they were good, but at a certain time of the year.

MACRO: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: Do you remember? Was that in fall?

JOHNSON: No, it is usually—why I remember—it is the haying time. That is when they would get them, but you've got to be careful when you dress any of those animals. They have a gland that you've got to be careful that you don't hit that gland when you're dressing them. Otherwise, it spoils the meat.

MACRO: Did your mother do the dressing or did your father?

JOHNSON: No, my dad always did it.

MACRO: That is fascinating. They would use the skunk fur?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah—any animal they saved the fur—like the squirrels and the rabbits. Oh, yes. They had different sized boards, especially the red fox.

MACRO: Oh, yeah. That was very popular, I'm sure.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, and the raccoons. I don't think they ever cooked a raccoon up that I ever knew of, but, of course, today—I guess—they eat that too—some people.

MACRO: That is so interesting because now people have gotten so far away from that kind of—

JOHNSON: Then in shad time they used to have—what they call—I don't know if they do now or not—the fish that came up in swarms. They used to go down, and you could take a bushel basket or a basket and just scoop them up and take them home and they dressed them and salted them down layer by layer with salt. Then in the wintertime my mother would bring them up, soak them overnight in cold water. The next day, she would fry them. They were so bony that you would almost prick yourself with the bones—like a shad. When you cooked them, after they've been salted, the bones disappeared. I mean—they dissolve.

MACRO: Were they dried when you salted them?

JOHNSON: No, wet.

MACRO: No, but did they become dry?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: You reconstituted them?

JOHNSON: Yeah, just like the Indians used to do when they caught them. Of course, that's going back in history of this country. They would travel from Maine to Saybrook, leaving the women in all of these tribes—leave the women along the way—like at a pond, which—I believe—there was a big pond here for this one, because of the dam there. You find Indian stuff in that garden, so evidently, that is where they camped.

MACRO: On this property?

JOHNSON: Yeah, in our backyard.

MACRO: Oh, really? I know that we've told stories of the Indians who lived on along the Connecticut River.

JOHNSON: Yeah, you know about that side, but you don't know this side.

MACRO: Yeah, but no, they supposedly moved away from the Connecticut River back inland in the wintertime. I don't know.

JOHNSON: The story they told about here—they would move down from Maine—followed the line down the ocean, because they had salt—and leave the tribe and the women here. I suppose they use the salt water to salt them. I don't know how they did that—or they smoked them. I don't know, because when they came back in the fall, they used to pick them up all the way along, because they would do all of their fishing down on that way for the different kinds of fish. Of course, the brooks—they could get the little different things.

MACRO: Were the fish in the brooks and the Connecticut River?

JOHNSON: Uh-huh (affirmative). I don't know about the Connecticut River. All I know about is just here.

MACRO: Your father would collect them here along the Podunk or—?

JOHNSON: Do you mean to trap them?

MACRO: No, the fish.

JOHNSON: Oh, no. You would have to go to the Connecticut River. They come up in the Connecticut River, about the same time as the shad.

MACRO: In the spring?

JOHNSON: Yeah, in the spring.

MACRO: Were there other fish that you had?

JOHNSON: Oh, well, sometimes they'd get the shad in the spring, and then—I don't know if we had much fish otherwise.

MACRO: Was there any fishing in the Podunk—down by where the mill was?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes, but I don't remember my father ever going fishing.

MACRO: Was there an ice—

JOHNSON: —an icehouse.

MACRO: —an icehouse there?

JOHNSON: Un-huh (affirmative) and they used to cut the ice, yeah.

MACRO: —at the pond.

JOHNSON: —at the pond, yeah.

MACRO: There was somebody who took it around?

JOHNSON: Let me think now. They used to cut the ice. Well, wait a minute. We'll go back a little bit. For the grist mill, the water was used to turn the wheels. There is no electricity, of course. They had a sawmill that went across that bridge. It is not the one that is there now, of course—but they went across the across the bridge, and then they turned and the saw mill was here. Of course, the river was down here. It had nothing to do with this mill—I don't think. I don't know just how that ran—with just a driven system or not. I don't know. My father had all different arrangements for power. Anyway, they used the sawdust. They saved all the sawdust from the saw mill—saved all of that, so in the wintertime, they would take it up to the icehouse. They cut the ice. They tell me I don't remember, but I do. It went up a slide that went up into this icehouse. When they packed the ice, they put a layer of ice and then a layer of sawdust in between each layer.

MACRO: That lasted over the winter.

JOHNSON: A lot of it lasted through the summer.

MACRO: Oh, it did?

JOHNSON: Yes, of course.

MACRO: That is where you got the ice for the iceboxes?

JOHNSON: Of course.

MACRO: They cut it from the mill pond there?

JOHNSON: Oh yeah. You couldn't go too near the dam. You had to back; just the same as when we went skating. You couldn't go certain length from the dam. Oh, yes, it used to get very thick—very thick. They had the equipment. They had saws. Well, they marked them for the cakes, and they would have these saws that—up and down. Then they had horses that pulled the cakes up to the slide.

MACRO: Was that located back behind the pond?

JOHNSON: Yes, well, it was on—see, it is so different now than it used to be. Where those houses are along that bank of the river—that bank there now—it's high. Of course, they dug it all down and everything—but that is where the icehouses were. They tell me I

shouldn't remember it, so I saw Russell Burnham one day. I said, "Russell, you're the same age as I am. Do you remember the icehouses?" "Of course," he says. "I used to go up with my dad to get the ice." I said, "Good, I'm not dreaming. They tell me I shouldn't remember it." He says, "Of course." He remembered them, but nobody else seems to remember. There were no pictures or anything, but Sally says she thinks she has got a picture of the icehouses, but I don't know. I never saw it.

MACRO: That's fascinating. Was it delivered by horse?

JOHNSON: Oh, it had to be.

MACRO: Around town—and people would just order what they needed.

JOHNSON: Well, the iceman would come around. You had a card. Well, I can't remember—a card you put in the window, if you wanted ice. If you wanted milk, you put the card of milk in the window. Usually we had regular delivery. Well, we didn't have delivery.

MACRO: You had your own milk from your—

JOHNSON: We had a lot of milk.

MACRO: There were dairies around in the area too—in this part of town.

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, there were lots of dairies. I don't think there are any left now.

MACRO: There was a Collins had a dairy—didn't he?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah—Collins and Stoddard and Foster's—I don't know—some of the others up in the northern part. They—I think Anita Wafers. Now, you're picking my brain too far back.

MACRO: Well, I know that—

JOHNSON: Yeah, there were many. I don't know about South Windsor, but—I mean—Main Street—this side of town.

MACRO: It is very interesting to me that there is such a clear divide between the two sections.

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, there always has been.

MACRO: You would have thought that the Ellsworth School, which brought everybody together, would've helped that a little bit.

JOHNSON: Well, it did a little bit. Even so, they were too standoffish—a lot of them.

MACRO: Yeah, that's what I understand. I did not grow up in South Windsor, so I am—

JOHNSON: If you'll notice—even now—something is going on, even if it is historical over on this town of side. Very few people from that side come over.

MACRO: Really?

JOHNSON: Uh-huh (affirmative).

MACRO: At this library?

JOHNSON: Uh-huh (affirmative).

MACRO: I wonder why.

JOHNSON: I don't know, because many of the older people are gone. It would be new people coming in, but they've still got that tradition.

MACRO: Well, it is interesting to know about that and to know how people perceived what the situation was, but it persists—a lot of it.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MACRO: Do you have any other things that you'd like to talk about that you—?

JOHNSON: I have nothing—no, nothing. It is all up here, but I don't know what to say. I mean—there is nothing—I can't say exciting.

Pauline Johnson
March 21, 2012
Page 35

MACRO: Everything you've told me has been very interesting, and I think it gives us such a sense of what your life was and is. I mean—you're very active with your buttons.

JOHNSON: Oh, yes.

MACRO: I appreciate very much your sharing all of this with us. There may be things we want to follow up with in the future.

JOHNSON: If it is up here—

MACRO: —you can share it. Well that is just wonderful, and thank you very much.

JOHNSON: You are very welcome.

[Audio ends at 72:57]

INDEX

B

Billings.....	19
Brimfield, MA.....	13
Buckland family.....	21, 22, 23
Buckland Road.....	11,12, 15, 18, 19, 22
Burnham, Russell.....	33
Button Collecting.....	13, 14, 26, 34

C

cafeteria.....	5
cellar.....	6
Chapman family.....	10, 11
Chimneys(The).....	17, 18
church.....	8
Clark Street.....	17, 18
Civil War.....	10, 11
Collins family.....	33
Connecticut.....	1, 9, 10, 15, 33, 34
covered wagon.....	9

D

dairy farms.....	33
Deming Street.....	23
<u>Depression</u>	6, 12

E

East Hampton, CT.....	9, 11
East Hartford, CT.....	4, 27
East Windsor, CT.....	4
Edlund, Sally.....	15, 17, 21, 25, 32
electricity.....	7
Ellington Road.....	1, 6, 11, 15, 17
Ellsworth High School.....	4, 34
England.....	10, 12

F

farm.....	3, 6, 7, 12,33
father [Frederick F. Chapman].....	1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 12, 27, 29, 31
fishing.....	28, 29, 30, 31
Foster family.....	33

Freitag, Gertrude.....	3
fur trade.....	28,29

G

gambrel roof.....	23
garden.....	2, 6
ginger.....	25, 26
Governor's Highway.....	1, 6
grandparents.....	8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 27, 28
grist mill.....	2, 32

H

Hartford, CT.....	8, 27
home remedies.....	24,25,26,27
horses.....	3, 15, 32
hunting.....	24, 28, 29

I

icehouse.....	31, 32, 33
Iowa.....	9

J

Johnson family.....	11
---------------------	----

L

L.B. Haas.....	12
Lafayette, Marquis de.....	15

M

Main Street.....	4, 5, 33, 34
Marlborough, CT.....	1, 11
Massachusetts.....	14
Missouri.....	9
mother [Sarahbelle Bownes Chapman].....	1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 29

N

North Manchester.....	22
-----------------------	----

O

Oakland Street.....	1, 17, 18
---------------------	-----------

P

Pennsylvania..... 26
Pleasant Valley School..... 3
Podunk30, 31
post office17, 18, 20
potato farming.....12
Pratt & Whitney.....12
Priest, John Paul..... 16,19

R

radio.....7
Revolutionary War15, 21, 22
Rockville, CT.....4, 14

S

Sadd Memorial Library15, 20
saltbox house19, 22
sawdust.....32
sawmill.....2, 32
school bus..... 3, 7
shad.....29, 30
skunks.....24, 28, 29
South Windsor, CT.....1-35
Snow family..... 17, 18, 20, 21
strawberry farm.....12, 13
Stoddard family.....33

T

telephone28
tobacco2, 12, 22
Tolland Turnpike.....22
trapping28, 29

V

Vehicles.....3, 11

W

Wapping, CT.....5, 15
Wapping School.....3, 4, 21