Oral History Project
Colonel Stone Johnson
January 6, 1995
Code: Huntley [H] Johnson [J]

H: This is an interview with Colonel Stone Johnson for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Oral History Project done by Dr. Horace Huntley at Miles College, January 6, 1995. Good morning, Colonel, how are you doing this morning?

J: Good morning, Dr. Huntley. How are you?

H: I'm doing great.

J: Good.

H: It's a pleasure to have you here. As you know, what we are attempting to do is get individual histories of people who have been actively involved in the development of Birmingham, particularly as it relates to the Civil Rights Movement. I appreciate you coming out this morning. Let me just start by asking you, what part of the state were your parents from?

J: Hayneville, Alabama, Lowndes County in the Deep South, in the Black Belt.

H: In the Black Belt. Were you born there?

J: Yes sir.

H: How old were you then when you came to Birmingham?

J: Oh…I was about four years old when they brought me to Birmingham.

H: So, you are basically, a Birmingham boy, then. Did you ever go back to Lowndes County to visit?

J: Oh, I go regular. It's a haven to me.

H: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

J: Well, I don't have any now. I had one brother.

H: Was he younger or older than you?

J: He was three years older than I was.

H: What about your parents education? How much education did your parents have?

J: My old man had a college degree. My mother didn't have but a third or fourth grade.

H: What was their occupation? Did your mother work outside the home?

J: Housewife, all the way.

H: And your father's occupation?

J: Well, he started off— His first job was teaching school for $30 in Lowndes County. Then, he got a job at Thorsby or Clanton. He worked in three or four little towns between Birmingham and Montgomery. They had pipe shops all up and down the Montgomery thoroughfare and the trains were very popular then. They had a plant in Verbena. He worked there a while and, then, the closer you get to Birmingham, the more money you can make. He moved on up then to Clanton. From Clanton to Helena and he worked in a pipe shop at Helena. From there he got with a company that was building sidewalks. They called him a cement finisher, and he worked with the cement finisher until he got his journeymanship and he got to be a full-fledged cement finisher. Then he started working in Birmingham and the company that he really worked, he told me that he really made it big on, was Milton and Erickson. One of the grandsons is a big contractor here in Birmingham now and he does a lot of work for Birmingham, but it's just Milton Company now. When it was Milton and Erickson it was two brothers-in-law. He did a lot of figuring for them. They were farmers. They come from over in the old country.

H: They're from Europe?

J: Yes, in the European country. They couldn't figure like he could, but they still used the American technique.

H: Were they Italians or Jews?

J: No, they were Swedes. They come from Sweden. He [Johnson's father] could tell you how many square foot was in any...figure any job they had to do.

H: What did he major in, in college? You said he had a college education?

J: He majored in mathematics.

H: Where did he go?

J: Alabama State [University] in Montgomery.

H: So he then became a professional cement finisher.

J: And after then, after organized labor come in, he got to be the union representative for five counties—Jefferson, Saint Clair, Etowah, Tuscaloosa and Shelby. He stayed on that job until he was eighty-six years old. I had to beg him to quit because everybody wanted him to stay, but he was way over pension age then.

H: So he was a union official when he retired?

J: Right.

H: What community did you grow up in?

J: Well, I started in Travellick on Ellis Avenue. We stayed there a year or so. Then we moved to 1005 Sixteenth Street North and we stayed there from 1924 until 1946. I bought a house on Second Avenue, [house number] 708 Second Avenue North, and we moved there about 1946. I bought the house, really, in 1941 when I was single, and I rented it out until 1946. We moved in and made a double tenement out of it. My old man and my stepmother moved next door and we had one side. After a year or two, we had it jacked up and I put two apartments under it.

H: How would you compare the different communities that you lived in from Travellick to the North side?

J: Well, where we moved in 1924 we were the first Blacks in the block.

H: Were there Whites on the block?

J: Yes. On the corner was an Italian store.

H: What was the name of the store?

J: Norman Schalaci's Grocery.

H: And that was on Ellis?

J: No, that was after we moved off Ellis. There was no store at all on Ellis at that time. We moved from Ellis in 1924 and moved to the North side and we stayed there. But at first we were the only Blacks on that block.

H: Well, what happened when you moved there? Were there any repercussions because you moved in that neighborhood?

J: Not a bit, because Milton and Erickson owned just about everything in the block. Most of all the White folks was renting. It was four White homeowners in the block and the rest of the White people were renting. There were White people living in duplex houses and the real estate companies owned them.

H: And this is Birmingham in 1924 and a Black family moves into a White neighborhood?

J: Right, but it is two Jewish families—one Italian family and another Jewish family. It was five White families and then it was a big millionaire lived in a big two-story house and had a servant house in the back. We called it the big house, because the Jones' lived there, but the rest of it was rented.

H: So, you stayed there for twenty years until 1946?

J: Twenty-two years, yes.

H: Then you moved to Tuscaloosa Avenue?

J: No, I moved to 708 Second Avenue North, one block west of Tee's Place. It wasn't Tee's Place then. That's where the Tee's boys were born—five brothers, Taylors. They were born right next door, where that driveway goes into Tee's Place. That's where their home house was. The building next to them was an undertaker.

H: So, we are seeing, then, the development of a Black community that's really becoming rather self-sufficient.

J: Well, now, when I moved there a lot of Whites was in the neighborhood. Even the church next door, which Blacks eventually bought, was a White Methodist church.

H: In more recent times when Blacks started to move into West End, Whites started to move out. Did that happen in [19]46 when you moved into your home?

J: Well, it happened slow, but, eventually, it wasn't any Whites in there.

H: How much education do you have?

J: Well, I have a high school education.

H: Where did you get your education?

J: Correspondence courses.

H: Where did you finish high school?

J: Industrial.

H: Industrial High School? That's now Parker High School.

J: Right. Dr. Parker was the principal when I finished.

H: What were your experiences at Parker? What do you remember about it?

J: Well, people don't like for me to say it, but I was shown a lot of discrimination at Parker, at Industrial.

H: Parker, Industrial was a Black school, what do you mean you were shown discrimination?

J: Well, if you weren't 'high yellow' you stayed in the back. I can remember in the Depression when the Y, it was like the WPA for the young folks, they paid thirty dollars a month.[1] If your people…If wasn't nobody in your family working, you could work at the school, help clean up, and they would give you thirty dollars a month. NYA - National Youth Association of America. I had a buddy, he's a nice guy, and he's real light [skinned]. His momma and daddy both are working and him and myself went to the office to put in our application at the same time and they wrote both of us up. At the first of the month, he started working. I never did start because I never did… They never did give me a job. It happened to a lot of fellows like

that, but they didn't give you no excuse. But, old common sense would tell me what it was. And, also, my buddy told me, said, 'Well, I know what happened." And I saw a lot of discrimination, even on the football team.

H: If you were not 'high yellow' or if you were Black, you simply had to step back?

J: If you Black, get back. If you're Brown, stick around.

H: What about the majorettes?

J: It was the same way.

H: So, you are saying even within the race there was color discrimination?

J: Yes sir.

H: That's very interesting. That's a topic that we are going to have to deal with at another time. But let me just ask you, when you moved to Second Avenue, what kind of relationship did your community have with the Birmingham Police Department?

J: Well, the Birmingham Police Department was all White and just to my thoughts and seeing what was going on, most of the police was Ku Klux. If they weren't, they acted like it.

H: What do you mean they 'acted like it.'

J: Well, they were overbearing, especially to Blacks. Anything you let a person do to one race, he'd try it on another. I've seen them beat White women just like they beat Black folks when they ran. They beat Black folks without reason. For a Black person, if they just felt like whipping you, they'd whip you. You didn't have to resist arrest. But, ordinarily, the way things were a White person just figured that they weren't supposed to be treated like that and when they ran, they beat them too. You could make the error they'd say you was making, not say 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir.' If you said, 'Yes' and 'No' the way you were taught in school, then the man would take the club and hit you across the head. They had hoses they used to carry, instead of 'billy sticks'. They had hoses like... It was a heavy duty hose like a water hose, but it was industrial hose and they're real heavy, reinforced. They would hit you across the head with that hose.

H: Did you ever witness any of that?

J: Oh, I have seen them hit a lot of folks. They cut up so around there, you didn't have to go to picture show. You could see all the picture show with the police and the Black community on Friday and Saturday night. Black folks didn't have but two places to go in Birmingham. That was the Elks and the Masonic Temple. City auditorium was out of bounds, but yet your tax footed the bill.

H: What other kinds of recreation did the various communities have in the Black neighborhood?

J: Oh, baseball, basketball.

H: I know that a lot of the industrial areas had different baseball teams and these teams, on the weekends, would play each other. Could you describe any of the events?

J: Oh, they had big times at the baseball games. But all your ball games… Your Blacks didn't have nowhere to play. But, they had Sloss field out in ACIPCO [American Cast Iron Pipe Company][2] and Perfection Mattress had two teams. They had a Black Team and a White team. ACIPCO had a Black team and a White team. Stockham Valve had Black and White teams. Out in Bessemer, all of these places had Black and White teams.

H: TCI [Tennessee Coal and Iron] had one?

J: Yes sir, but when integration come along then they done away with all your ball teams.

H: Why is that?

J: They didn't want to play with Blacks.

H: Rather than integrating, they just did away with them?

J: Yes sir.

H: What about community organizations? Were you a member of any community organizations at the time. Did you hold any offices?

J: No, they had a lot of discrimination in that too. If you.. they'd tell you... Blacks would tell you if you don't own your own home, you couldn't join the Democratic organization. I owned my home, but I wasn't going to brag about it and it was up before I was invited to come into some of the meetings.

H: You owned your home, but you were dark?

J: No, that wasn't it. I wasn't in the upper class.

H: So, you had a class stratification?
J: Right.

H: Well, we talked about the [nineteen] forties and moving into the fifties and we know that the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights was organized in 1956. Can you tell me, how and why did you get involved with the Civil Rights Movement?

J: Yes sir. My involvement in civil rights started early in the railroad shop. When I was hired, March 31, 1942. And when I got out there I saw such a big difference in the treatment of men and where I had been working for just a minimum wage. Really there wasn't a minimum wage. They paid you what they wanted to. They had a little union at some of the places.

H: Where was this? Where were you working?

J: I was working for Bowden Provision Company.

H: What did you do out there?

J: I was a truck driver and they had an office in Hormel Packing Company. They did most of their buying from Hormel and Hormel let them have an office there, and they stored their goods there and the guy was real nice. He treated everybody the same, but he had some kin folks would call you a nigger in a minute. But he wouldn't. He knew your name. He'd find out your name and he'd call you by your name. He wouldn't call you John, Joe, uncle and all that, but he had some kin folk that would call you anything. You see, when a fellow... It's intimidating for a man to call you uncle and he's older than you are... or John. When I went to the railroad shop... I quit working for this guy, not for any kind of race relations or treatment or anything, but finance. I wasn't making the kind of money I thought I should be making. But now, on that job there

was a difference in pay between Blacks and Whites. When I went to the railroad shop, if you're the labor, all labor made the same thing. They had a union shop.

H: If you were Black or White?

J: Black or White. If you the helper or the helper's mate, it's the same thing. But where the difference come, where the segregation come, is in promotion. You could have a high school education, and had some college through correspondence and the White man they get right off the farm, fourth or fifth grade. I've seen them bring them in by the truckload. Some farmer bring in a truck load of people that he knows from Cullman or Huntsville, somewhere up in north Alabama in the war time in the forties [1940s] and World War Two. They brought the White fellows in there by the truck load and hired every one of them. They would hire fifty men. They would be riding on the back ton-and-a-half truck like cattle, but they'd hire them. Some of them they'd hire, they would have maybe an eighth or tenth grade education. They would hire them as helpers and you were still a laborer and you would know all the work, but you didn't get the preference that you should get. So, they had a bad habit. I've seen them kick fellows just like they kick a dog. They called themselves playing. There was a young fellow just had come out of high school. He got hired out there and I see him regular, but I'm not going to call his name. He's still living—a very intelligent looking young man. And, I saw a foreman kick him and just laughed and it's something in me just reared.... at God given man. I couldn't take it. I asked, 'What y'all doing?' I called him by his name and he said, 'We just playing,' and just laughed. I said, 'The ball field is unequal.' I said, 'If y'all playing, look like you'd kick him some time to make it fair.' And the foreman said, 'That nigger's crazy.'

H: Talking about you?

J: Yes. I said, 'You'll see how crazy I am if you kick me.' And he said, 'Oh, the nigger is crazy, sure enough. I see he's crazy,' but he never did kick me.

H: This is in the forties?

J: Yes, that was in 1942. I had been there about eight or ten months. I asked them did they have a union. They said, 'Yes, but the Blacks are not in it.'

H: Blacks couldn't join the union?

J: They wouldn't exactly tell you that. You was in the department, in the clerical department and they had a clerk's union, Brotherhood of Railway Clerks. So, I decided on my own to talk to a union representative, because I had always believed in the union in the little jobs I had been on. You see, I had worked in both places, in the packing house and for Bowden Company. I worked for Hormel and Bowden. Hormel had the CIO[3] and they hadn't merged then. They merged about [19]46 or '47, the CIO and the AFL[4] did. But anyway, when I went to this guy, he said, 'Well, ain't no Blacks in our union,' just like that. So then I went to Mr. Louis Berry, a Black guy who was over the firemen and oilers. He said, 'Come up to the union hall' and he told me when the union was going to meet. And he said, 'We'll explain to you how you can get you an auxiliary.' An auxiliary is different from a full-fledged union.

H: Were the Firemen and Oilmen a Black union?

J: Yes sir. Louis Berry was the head of it—Louis Berry and George Henderson.

H: Were they affiliated with the CIO?

J: They were in the Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers, which was part of the AFL at that time. So they told me, 'You have to have something out of your department, but we will get you a man down here to organize y'all an auxiliary.' They wrote to the headquarters, which was in Cincinnati, Ohio at that time and they sent a man, a field representative named Mr. St. John, a White man. He came down and talked with us and he stopped at the Bankhead Hotel and when we went to go see him, we had to go to the back and get on the freight elevator to go up to his room. But, anyway, he organized a union for the Blacks in the clerk department of the railroad. But that made them have dual representation and they wouldn't give but one shop a district chairman, so that would always be a White man. That made us be under them. So if you had any kind of grievance, you would have to ... After you filed your grievance they would never be justifiable in it, and you would want to appeal it. You had to go to the district chairman which was over the White union, and if you were trying to get a promotion, he didn't want you to have it. The same folks you were paying your money to was keeping you back. But anyway, we organized and Reverend Shuttlesworth's uncle, August U. Morris, we voted him the president and we voted Regis Adams vice president and just come on down the line. It was hard to get folks to accept positions because they were afraid the company would retaliate, so they gave Morris both positions. He was the union representative and the president for the first couple of years. They would always... We would get together and have a little pow wow away from the union hall so Morris asked me, 'Why won't you take the chairman of the protective committee?' And I said, 'Well, I can't take it. You have to vote me in... I'll accept it

if y'all vote me in.' He said he'd recommend it and they recommend me and I stayed in there twenty eight years.

H: What position was that?

J: Chairman of the Protective Committee. They called it the union representative, but in writing it's Chairman of the Protective Committee and I stayed in that job... and Reuben Davis was in the Firemen and Oiler with George Henderson and Louis Berry. I got with Reuben. We had been working on that side by ourselves, so we got together where we could understand the rules and regulations. You see, a lot of fine print it's hard for a man to understand all of it. But when you have a round table discussion and you put your know-how in, and I put mine, and the other fellow put his, you can get together and work out something. So, Reuben figured how a grievance was supposed to be written up and he started to write them up for all the Blacks. I took Reuben and we stopped the folks from kicking Black folks. Some of the fellows, before they stopped it, you see, they got by [with] kicking Blacks for so long, some of them would kick White folks.

H: Some of the Whites would kick the Whites?

J: Oh yeah, if you let a fellow.... If you let your dog bite your next-door neighbor, he will go on down the street and bite somebody else. Eventually, he would bite the police when he come by.

H: Now these are usually people that are in supervisory positions.

J: Right, right. The first man I wrote up, his name was E. J. Higgins—great big, old, fat White gentleman and, boy, he acted like he had a kicking machine the way he used to kick fellows. I saw him kick an old Black fellow seventy or eighty years old, a peg leg man. His name was E. J. Higgins and I wrote him up to the master mechanic. That was the top man in the shop. The only boss he had was the superintendent and at the time I wrote him up we had a superintendent that was the toughest I ever seen. But, he was about as straight a guy, at that time, that I had ever met and he didn't have no kind of manners. He would cuss just about every word he said, but he still had more of a level playing ground than anybody I've met because the same cursing he put on you, he'd put on 'Mr. Charlie.' Well, I wrote this guy up to Mr. Richard McWilliams. We called him Dick McWilliams. He's a little fellow, but if you didn't see him you'd think a giant was talking when he spoke. He had a bass voice and he really spoke with authority. He

had authority. The company gave him authority and he used it, and when I wrote him up— You see, back in those days, and it ain't much different now in the office—

When a letter came in to the superintendent, the chief clerk got authority to open it up. All mail come in and the chief clerk would look at it and, to protect White folks, if that letter was wrote up against one of the foremen they'd put it in 'file 13' and the master mechanic would never see it. But, I wrote a letter, and the little reputation I had built for being straight in helping people, they knew that if I didn't hear from the letter, I was going to the man and ask him why. So, they took the letter and sent for my supervisor—not my foreman, my supervisor—and told him, [they] said, 'Johnson done wrote up Mr. Brighton and Mr. Brighton's going to lose his job. The company don't allow this, all this stuff y'all been doing. You've just been getting by.' Said, 'He wrote up Mr. Bryant for kicking a man,' and said, 'The first rule in the book, he's got...he's got it quoted there.'

The first rule in the book said no horseplay, no wrestling, no scuffling, no stealing, no drinking at any time on company premises or you will be dismissed. So when they got the letter and they had their little conference, then my supervisor sent for me. He was the superintendent for a big Sunday school church, a big Baptist church in the community there where the shop was. He was a man you could sit down and talk to him. Lot of folks you can't talk to when they big folks. He was a big man that you could talk to, but he was on the other side of the river. He was a discriminator, too, but not as bad as some of the other folks. The little boy says, 'His bite wasn't as bad as some of the bites,' but, anyway, he called me and told me he wanted a conference with me, and I said, 'Yes, sir.'

I went into his office and he wanted to go back outside to the warehouse. 'There's a question I want to ask you and I don't want nobody else to hear it.' He said, 'Johnson, you know all our conversations you talk about saving a man's job.' I said, 'That's right.' [He said,] 'Here you done wrote up a man and he going to lose his job if we let this go through.' I said, 'We who?' He said, 'You and myself. I'm your boss and I'm his boss.' I said, 'Yes, but I've been watching that fellow, and he treat these fellows like they are dogs.' He said, 'He ever done anything to you?' And I said, 'No, but I'm my brothers' keeper. I'm head of the union. How can I represent a man and turn my head when he's kicking a man like he a dog and the man is just as humble as a lamb? I had to write him up.' He said, 'Well, what would you do to take the letter out?' And I said, 'Mr. Bryant promises me never kick another Black man on the company premises and I'll take the letter out immediately. Other than that, I can't do it.' He said, 'Well, I think we can handle that. I've already talked to E. J. so I'll call him.' He called

him. [E.J.] was in another building about half a mile from where we were. The shop, at that time, was a five-mile shop, but when I left it was a ten-mile shop. But anyway, this guy wanted to be a real heavy, but that was his boss. He said, 'Tell Johnson I said to call me." He came back and told me and I said, 'I don't want to see him. Tell him to call me on the warehouse phone. He wants to see me. I don't want to see him.' So, finally, he called and said, 'Johnson, you want to see me?' I said, 'No, sir, I don't want to see you.' He said, 'Well, I heard that you got me wrote up.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' He said, 'What you wrote about me?' He said, 'All you know. Y'all have already discussed it. You don't know how to keep your feet on the ground. You're kicking folks.' He said, 'Well, the man didn't complain.' I said, 'But I saw it with my own eyes. I represent the man. He didn't have to tell me or ask me. I wrote you up because it is unbecoming a company employee to act like you act, especially in the position you're in.' So, he said, 'Well, what would I have to do?' I said, 'The man done already told you. The supervisor told you.' He said, 'Yeah, he told me, but I want you to tell me.' I said, 'I'll sure tell you. You make me a promise you won't kick another Black man on the company premises and I will take the letter out.' He said, 'Well, if it suits you, I'll promise you that I won't do it no more.' I said, 'Well, it suits me, and I'll go take the letter out.' So when I... I worked on the first floor and the office was upstairs and I went upstairs. All the typewriters quit. There was about ten to twelve clerks. Everybody quit work, because the discussion had went on. I went to the chief clerk and spoke. 'Good morning, sir.' He said, 'Good morning, Johnson. What can I do for you?' I said, 'Well, I've got a letter up here and we've negotiated to take it out, and I want to take it out.' He said, 'Here it is. You're the only somebody that can take it out.' And I took it and threw it in the wastebasket. But, now, I never heard about another Black fellow being kicked or seen one.

H: By Bryant or anybody else?

J: Nobody else. They put a bulletin out. On the bottom he put, 'Now I mean what I say. If I catch anybody breaking rule number one or any other rule, they've got to go.' When Reuben Davis come back from World War Two, they didn't want Blacks in the steel gang talking about rebuilding freight cars for the railroad company. Those jobs paid good money. That was a top job. Reuben Davis never did get one, but he fixed it where the Blacks could get them. You see, when you go to the army— There's a proclamation [that] when you leave a job and go fight for your country, wherever you were working, when you come back you're supposed to have been promoted, more money increased. They're supposed to recognize you by seniority. So, Reuben asked for some more jobs for Blacks in the steel gang. Had no Blacks been going in it—nothing but laborers to pick up scrap and move it out the way when they tear the stuff off

the cars. So, they called Reuben a troublemaker, but all the fellows that was in Reuben's union, maybe forty or fifty, they upgraded them to helpers. And, then, a lot of them they upgraded from helpers to car repairman. That means a top grade journeyman. And, they put out a hate list. It wasn't in writing. It was word of mouth. This same master mechanic that I was telling you was more fair than anybody else, but he's the toughest guy I ever met in my whole life—

H: McWilliams?

J: McWilliams, Richard McWilliams. He told in a personnel meeting—and if you do your work in the union somebody's going to tell you what happened in the personnel meeting— And, when they got through with the meeting and everything and their conversation brought up about Reuben Davis, how he was invading the job, Whites' jobs for Blacks, then he [McWilliams] showed his discrimination. He said, 'I want Reuben Davis' job at all costs. If you have to lie on him, get his job. I want to run him off. I can't run him off for nothing. We got to have something concrete on him.' Reuben's foreman, being a Christian gentleman, Mr. McIntire, said, 'I can't do it.' He said, 'He's a good worker and I'd have to lie, and I ain't going to lie on him. He does his work.' Reuben Davis was a tractor drive—what you call a push-up man. He pushed the cars on the assembly line in the big shed where they worked on them. And, when they finished working on them, he pushed them out. It's three or four lines he had to push, but he was sitting there on his tractor—what you call 'on the minute' all the time. As soon as he finished a line—and nobody could move a line but the foreman—and we walked both sides of the track to see if everybody was clear, then he'd tell Reuben to shove them out and Reuben would shove them out. They he would shovel another line of cars in there for them to work on. But he wouldn't go along with the wrong program. And had a guy, a red-headed foreman, named Sam Hollingsworth. Sam said he was a labor foreman. Now, he wasn't really Reuben's foreman ordinarily, but when the other foreman would be off, he would substitute for this guy to have a day off. He took on the responsibility to get Reuben's job. He finally come out there one day when the regular foreman was off and told Reuben that he wasn't doing nothing and that he needed a man over here at the wheel shop, the most dangerous in the shop, rolling train wheels weighing nine hundred pounds according to the car they went under, eight and nine hundred pounds. And, they come loose in boxcars and you had to stand them up when they fall. They lined up. They were standing up and when one fell, you had to have help to get it up. [It] had the big stick in it called a wheel stick and the men catch it by their hand and two of them would catch the stick and they would pull it down and straighten that wheel up. Whoever's turn it is to get a wheel, they would catch it and roll it out and it's on a flank

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J: ... which it helped me out at the wheel shop. We got a load of wheels that needed unloading. So Reuben had better sense than to tell him, 'I ain't going to do it.' Reuben said, 'I was just fixing to come to you. I'm sick and I want to go home.' He said, 'Oh, you refuse to work?' He said, 'No, I'm not refusing to work. I'm sick.' 'Ah, you're refusing to work.' So he wrote Reuben up that he was refusing to work and to take orders from him. So, they fired Reuben. Reuben stayed off a year and his case went all the way to the National Railway Labor Board through appealing and he had a union lawyer out of St. Louis and they won the case in a year.

H: So he was back on the job?

J: Well, while he was off, he started teaching mechanics at Bessemer Tech or either— I'm thinking he went to Abrams first, then he went to Bessemer Tech. But, in that deal, in the space of time, they sent Reuben a letter in May, about May first and told him he had his job back, but he was teaching then. He wrote them back and said he would be back in thirty days. When school was out on May 28th, Reuben come to work on June first and whatever they owed him, he got his money and then he worked on through close to ninety days and he gave them another notice that he was resigning and went back to teach school.

H: So, then, from your activism with the union, you had basically seen and understood the way that racism worked? Then, in the [nineteen] fifties when the movement started, you were basically primed for that because you had already been doing this kind of work?

J: Well, yes. What really motivated me— Shuttlesworth's uncle was the president of my local and he was in the undertaking business on the side. They picked at him because he was in business. They didn't know he was in business, but the informers, the other Black folks, would tell them. He was an undertaker then and sometimes he would drive a seven passenger car to work back when there really were only a few seven passenger cars at that time. But, anyway, Shuttlesworth and his wife— Where I met Shuttlesworth— His wife was Morris' niece. They raised her...Mr. and Mrs. Morris. Shuttlesworth's wife was named Ruby and her auntie was named Adella. She was a school teacher and A.U. was a clerk at the shop. There was only about three Black clerks out there that were top clerks, and one of them was A. C. McClenny, lived in Titusville, a highly educated, most respected education fellow. I mean he was very intelligent. He was a dispatcher. All the train movements went out...he set up the schedule. And this man, McWilliams, when he come, he stopped this Black guy from doing all the White

folks' work. You see, he worked second shift and if anything was set up wrong at the first shift, he would straighten it out so that the book work would go in right. And when he left off of his shift, he stayed there until twelve thirty [12:30] and one o'clock and was supposed to leave at eleven o'clock and would straighten things up and line it up for the third shift. So McWilliams told them, 'Y'all going to have to hire some intelligent White folks or get some Black ones and put them on the job, because this man working and you are not even paying him.' They didn't pay him for extra work. He was just staying there to help his fellow man and he did it for years to my knowing. But McWilliams told him, 'When it's time for you to get off, leave and don't come to work [at] no twelve thirty or one o'clock like you've been coming. Your job comes on at three o'clock.

H: Who did they hire? Did they hire a Black person for the job?

J: No. The White guy that was on it was an old man. He got off of it. Then a young White guy, well educated, got on it.

H: So A.C. McClenny remained as..?

J: Yes, until he got ready to retire.

H: How did you get involved with the Movement?

J: Anyway, after so long a time, I had done a little extra work for the undertaker shop and we got to be good friends. Shuttlesworth was going to Selma University, him and his wife both, and we would go down there. I would drive the seven-passenger car, taking Morris down there, because I was one of his employees and he just used me for a chauffeur. But, anyway, I met Shuttlesworth, and he was such a likeable fellow that we got to be good friends and when they bombed his house in fifty seven [1957] or fifty eight—I've got a record of it, but I don't have it with me, and I thought it was in this book, that's the reason I brought it, but— When they bombed his house in fifty seven or fifty eight, and I went out there Christmas morning, they bombed it that Christmas Eve night. They generally do their bombing at midnight. But anyway, it was just like they bombed my house. It could have been mine. See, if you stand up, talk straight, the Klu Klux[5] would retaliate. They didn't count the law. A lot of folks don't know it, but God says you got to reap what you sow. Young Blacks don't count the law now. They don't pay it no mind. The city is reaping—no special person, the city—the power to be, because once upon a time the power didn't respect the law and they were the law. Now, these

Black boys and a lot of White boys will kill you in a minute. Right now, youngsters, teenagers, when they get to fighting, the first thing come in their mind, is I'll kill you. See, the Klu Klux used that word and method through the years and it's just reaping time. But, anyway, I went over to Morris' office that next day, or two or three days after, and we were talking about what happened and Morris said, 'Johnson, you know Shuttlesworth can't get nobody to watch his house and the church?' I said, 'Well, what do you think we ought to do?' He said, 'You've got a lot of influence with the men out here in the union and during the meeting nights ask some of the fellows to volunteer.' In the meantime, I had a good friend that was president of a mine local. His name was Will Hall. They called him John L. Lewis because he represented the miners union and he was real tough.

H: Was he a coal miner or an ore miner?

J: Coal miner. He lived next door to the Ballad House. I used to know the name of the house. The lady that owned the house owned the taxi company and they called the house...it had a special name and it was two doors from St. Johns Methodist Church on Fifteenth Street and Seventh Avenue North. But anyway, I went hunting Will Hall and told him the circumstances. And we had another fellow, a union-minded fellow named George Walker, and we all got together. The Lord fixed it for us to get together. We got up a watchmen group. In those days, you couldn't have gotten by calling it a watchmen group or a security group, so they had the Alabama Christian Movement going. They just wrote us up as 'ushers' for the Christian Movement. But ordinarily, we were security men and that's the way we got together and started watching the church.

H: How many men were involved with this group? With the watchman group?

J; Well, really, it was a lot of men and they fixed it where you didn't have to stay but three or four hours when you first started off.

H: So you started by watching Shuttlesworth's home?

J: Right, and the church. The first parsonage they blew into splinters on the first bombing. That's when they left Shuttlesworth lying there on the mattress. And God being who He is, just one girl in the family got one little scratch on her cheek. Nobody else got any scratches at all and that was the girl next door to this one...uh, Ricky. That's her nickname. Now I know her name, but right at the time…We called her Ricky so long...

H: There was one time when you had diffused some dynamite. Can you tell me about that?

J: I'll tell you about that. They had got so bad out there. This J. B. Stoner, he was the chief bomber. He would ride around all night in a yellow cab and that made me to know the Yellow Cab Company in some kind of way was tied with the bombing...that is, some of the entrepreneurs that owned Yellow Cab. No driver could drive a car around with one man all the week, all night every night.

H: Did you know J. B. Stoner at that time?

J: No, I really didn't know too much about him. I had seen him on TV talking about [how] Black folks ought to go back to Africa, ought to be shipped back to Africa and a whole lot of stuff. But, anyway, he'd ride around in that cab and we could see... You know, keep seeing a person's face regular, you can remember it. I had never seen him walk. I didn't know he was crippled until one Sunday evening when we were out there watching. In the daytime they had a program at the church and Reverend Shuttlesworth was in the church, in the office of the church. He was living in the new parsonage then, across the street, and he come from home and come right towards us and spoke to everybody and passed a few words and went on to his office. A little while, Stoner come up walking. He had parked the cab around the corner and he had a limp. One leg was longer than the other. He had a shoe with a lot of heel to it, and sole to lengthen it out, so it give him a kind of even walk, but he still walked with a limp. We were sitting across the street at Mr. Robert Revis' house. On his front porch he had it closed in and a heater and everything for us to sit there and watch the front of the church. The next-door neighbor, Sam Smiley, had a garage in the back of his backyard and we had a watchman station there. To watch the back of the church, we had men in the church at the back windows. But it's hard to see a fellow if he gets close to the building. That's what happened when they planted this bomb that I'm fixing to tell you about. But at the Revis' home there was four of us sitting there: James Russell, myself, Will Hall and another miner used to sell peanuts and sell them. He ran a store out in Pratt City and we just called him Peanut Seller. I don't know his name. But, anyway, we were all sitting there on the porch and it might have been somebody else. I know it was four or more. And one of Mr. Revis' daughters come in. Her name was LaVerne McWilliams at that time. She had come back home to stay with her mother and daddy.[6] But, her date brought her in around twelve o'clock, around midnight, in a brown Chrysler automobile. I never will forget it and when she got out the car she said, 'Y'all going to sit there and let the church burn up?' 'Burn up? What you mean?' She said, 'See? Look at the smoke

coming from the side of the church.' That was the bomb. It was in a fresh paint can and by the fuse being lit that made the paint smoke. We hadn't seen the smoke. They had somebody just set it there, and we didn't see who sit it there.

H: You didn't see any cars pass?

J: Well, the cars had passed, but somebody walked up— You see the alley was right behind the church and they just walked up and got close to the building and set it down. It was on Saturday night and a lot of folks were walking at that time. But, anyway, we rushed out, Will Hall and myself, and we got up close to it and you ever heard what a fire cracker says? Well, the dynamite says it the same way. The shorter the fuse gets, the louder the sound like a rattlesnake. But anyway, I says, 'John L., that's some dynamite.' He says, 'I know it is.' Him being experienced with fuses in mines, he says, 'Yeah, it's some dynamite.' He says, 'Let's get it.' And both of us reached for it about the same time and caught the bail of the five-gallon paint can and walked about eight or ten feet and set it in the gutter. The street wasn't paved then. It had a little ditch going by and we sit it down in that gutter of the ditch and backed off maybe eight or ten feet and it went off. But, as we were coming from the house where we were at the watch station to the bomb, I said, 'Somebody run in the church and tell them men to come out quick. It's some dynamite out here and we don't want the church to be blowed away and they in there and kill everybody in there.' We forgot about ourselves. We were looking out for the other men. And about the time they got out there, a fellow named Elijah Dawson—we called him 'Lige—he come up and say, 'What's the matter?.… BOOM!! He was about ten feet from it, and he was the only one who got a scratch. A little shrapnel of steel hit him on the cheek. Now it blowed all the glass out the church and for five or six blocks around dishes broke on the folks in the pantries and windows broke out of houses as much as seven and eight blocks, but the church still stood.

H: Were you standing when it went off?

J: Oh, yes. I was standing about, maybe, seven or eight feet from it. As soon as I set it down and backed up and—at the same time, while we were doing that, those other fellows were coming out the church—and about the time Dawson got down there to see what was going on, it went off. We had a lot of fellows I could call by name that never did come back. But you can't think hard of a fellow, because nobody can take the fear out of your heart but God. It had just frightened a lot of them to death and when some of them went home and told their wives about it, the women didn't want them to go back anymore. But John L and myself— It got real thin

after that second bombing, but the men eventually come back. The Lord had always sent somebody else there. I can remember when it got real thin and it was a fellow, I can't think of his last name. I had never seen him at the church, but he lived two or three blocks from the church.

H: Which church?

J: Shuttlesworth's church.[7] His next-door neighbor, they were buddies and they would always come by there and speak. They were nice guys seemed to me. 'How you fellows doing?' We'd speak, 'Fine. How are you all?' They started to watching after they saw we needed somebody and, then, eventually, it built back up.

H: But while you were watching Shuttlesworth's church, they were also bombing in the area that's called Dynamite Hill. Did you watch homes up there as well?

J: Yeah, I didn't really have a station up there but they,... Robert Cole called me several times when the cars would be driving by the houses. You probably know Robert. And the people never did give Leroy Galliard the credit he should have gotten. He had two-way radios in his station wagons. He had a plumbing company. Galliard furnished the two-way radios for the watchmen on Dynamite Hill. A lot of times, we would leave Shuttlesworth's house and go by Dynamite Hill and help them out. I know it was a straining job, but we never did get tired and I figured later on in life that God just wouldn't let us get tired. We weren't getting much rest. But let me tell you this first. After that bombing, **Jet Magazine** come along. Will Hall was on pension and **Jet Magazine** wanted to interview both of us. I wouldn't let them interview me because the job I had. Not being afraid, but you had to use your head. They would have framed me and got my job. You see, they would put a smear on you like the folks tried to do Richard Arrington. They have done everything in the book to smear Richard Arrington, but when God's in the plan, it's hard for you to smear a fellow. Hard. I watched it. You read your Bible, read Joseph, 'a chosen man of God to save his people.' When God puts a man in a position like Dick Arrington, you can't hurt him. We're not talking about Dick now, but I had to bring that in there. Anyway, when **Jet** come along and everybody come along say, 'Man, you'd be known all over the world.' I said, 'I'm working for a cause, not for an ego.' When you go to work talking about an ego trip, no, God won't be in that plan. You'll use the little that you have. But, they wrote it up in **Jet** and I had a lot of criticism. Folks said, 'Man, if I was you...' 'But,' I said, 'You're not me. If you was, you'd be out here helping to watch Shuttlesworth Church.' Members of the church even told me. I said, 'Man, how come you

won't come out here and watch your own church?' And, then, a fellow that worked with me at the shop, he still living, he told the assistant superintendent that I was out there watching and that was a slur to get my job. Any kind of excuse back in yesteryear they would get your job. And that's what they would use. It's what you call a backlash. A lot of folks were afraid. But I never was afraid because I asked God to give me a good job. And the way he give it to me [was] through my wife, and every once in a while she'd take credit now. She'd say, 'You know, I got you that job out there.'

H: Why did she get you the job?

J: Well, she was working for the master mechanic at that time—at his house.

H: She was working for McWilliams?

J: No, McWilliams wasn't a master mechanic. Before him. Theodore Cramer. He was quiet and easy, nice, but he believed in discrimination too, cause he didn't in promotion. Anytime a man don't believe in you getting equal pay, it don't matter how nice he talk.

H: It doesn't mean anything?

J: No. You see, it's your livelihood that really counts. But, anyway, my wife recommended me and would tell the lady about me driving on the road and going out of town and be so late coming in and working these long hours with straight pay, no overtime or nothing, no vacation. So, she told her husband and he told me to come out to the shop. I went out there and he hired me. That's where it come in at. I asked the Lord, but that's the way it come in.

H: During the movement, I know you were very busy protecting the various houses and doing a lot of different things. Were you ever arrested?

J: Well, yes and no. I was harassed. A lot of times I would leave Shuttlesworth's house on Sunday morning. As soon as daylight come, we would leave and the police would be waiting on you. If you went out Twenty-ninth Avenue, the man would get behind you and trail you. You see, they knew my car. The man would give me tickets and say I ran a stop sign. I'm looking right at him sitting in Bruno's. You see Bruno's used to be on Twenty-fifth Street and Twenty-ninth Avenue in that little burnt building. And he used to have a three-wheel motorcycle sitting right in the door. You could look right in his face and you pull right up to the stop sign.

Now, I'd look like a fool running a stop sign, looking in the police's face, but he would still give me a ticket. 'Boy, you run that stop sign.' I said, 'No, sir.' 'I'm a liar then.' I said, 'Well, I didn't run the sign.' He said, 'Well, I'm going to give you a so-and-so ticket anyway.' He would give me a ticket for running a stop sign. I'd pay it, but that's what you had to pay. That's the price you pay for freedom.

The man followed me one day. They had it set up good from Shuttlesworth's church all the way past where this policeman sat. When I turned on Twenty-fourth Street— It's a Southern Amacite Company. They make this amacite what you put down floor tile. It's like concrete but they call it amacite. It's finer ground. But, anyway, it's a watchman sit there in a little shack and they stop you right there at the shack and the watchman come out there with a shotgun. All of that is to intimidate you, like they're dangerous and ready to kill you. Police would draw his gun and search you. They had searched me many times. The watchman is right up with them. But, now, a lot of these companies didn't know their employees was participating in that kind of stuff. They used their own authority. When the big man over the mountain sleep— See, a lot of rich folk didn't even know that the folks was being treated that bad and, then, a lot of them had the same idea. But, that's just the way it went. I was stopped one night.

The first night we had the mass meeting at Sixth Avenue Baptist. Sixth Avenue Baptist was sitting right where Cooper Green Hospital is. I had a brand new [19]66 Buick and my old man and my wife and his wife and another person, there were five of us in the car. After the mass meeting, we walked down on Fifth Avenue. There were so many people at the mass meeting that you couldn't get a parking space on Sixth Avenue, but we walked down to the car and got in the car. As soon as we got in the car, before I could crank the car up good, I turned the key and just as soon as it started, the police pulled up on a motorcycle right up alongside of me. He said, 'Gimme' your driver's license.' I got my driver's license out. 'Your lights are too bright.' He wrote me a ticket up for bright lights and I hadn't even cut my lights on, but I had to pay that ticket. But that was the price we had to pay. And, a lot of folks, their eyes come open. You see, Wallace is paying the price for keeping folks from having their freedom. You see, God don't let you by. He said, 'Let the wheat and the tares grow together.' You see, that's the reason when a man treats you wrong, you don't kill him. You forgive him. The boss man got the payroll and he is going to pay off.

H: You had mentioned to me that your wife drove.

J: Yes, my wife used to drive.

H: But she doesn't drive now? Why did she stop driving?

J: She stopped driving when we saw the police intimidating Black women and she couldn't stand it. She said, 'Y'all talk about non-violence and I hear Reverend Shuttlesworth and Dr. King say slap you on one cheek and turn the other.' She said, 'I read it in the book [Bible], but I couldn't stand it.' She said, 'If somebody snatch me out of my car and hit me across the head, if I don't have nothing, I'm going to grab them and bite them. I ain't going to drive any more, because if somebody treat me like that, they would have me to kill. I can't stand that.'

H: So she never drove since?

J: She said, 'I ain't driving no more,' and she hadn't drove since. That was in [19]63.

H: What church were you a member of?

J: At that time, I joined— I was a Macedonian. But, when I bought on Second Avenue next door to a church and they treated me with so much hospitality and just kept inviting me, and then the preacher asked me to join, I just joined. My wife wanted me to stay where I was, but she said I was stepping down in a little church. I told her you can serve a little church better than you can a big one. So I joined Mount Calvary.

H: Was your church actively involved with the movement?

J: Later on. At first, they did like the other churches. The preacher said, 'The folks didn't want the movement here,' and 'I ain't going to let it come,' but when he left and we got a good country preacher there...

H: Who was the one who came in?

J: Prince Jenkins. He is as country as watermelon, but he is real spiritual and he's a young man who was interested in freedom. He asked me, 'Johnson, how come you don't get the movement to come to our church?' I said, 'If the folks would accept it. The pastor before you, him and five or six folks that he catered to, they said they didn't want the movement here and they didn't let it come.' He said, 'I want it and I'm going to talk about it today.' He got up and he said how much good the Alabama Christian Movement was doing and he wanted them to

come to the church. He said, 'As soon as I can get them to come, I'm going to invite them whenever they get ready.' He said, 'I'm letting y'all know now. The Movement is coming.'

H: This is after the [19]63 demonstration?

J: Yes, that was about '67, '68 or '69. But, anyway, we started meeting at our church. I told the secretary, which was Miss Georgia Price, and she talked to Reverend Garner. They were the two that selected the places to go. Then they started to come to our church.

H: What was the reaction of your father and your wife to your being so active in the movement?

J: Oh, my old man, he— That just suited him fine. My wife never did kick on. Of course, she went to all the mass meetings. She was right up in it just like I was. But, she just wasn't active as I was. But she went to all the meetings. Just about every Monday night, if she wasn't sick, she was there, and she hasn't been sick that much to my knowing.

H: Mr. Johnson, I know we can spend another two hours and I think we are going to have to do that because you have so much to say. But let me just ask you if there is anything that you have not stated that you would like to end on today. But, now, we are not ending, because I'm going to do this with you again because there are a number of issues that are vitally important and we really just touched them.

J: Well now, I'm going to give you the high part. What— Really, one of my really top motivations was Fred Shuttlesworth. He could explain God's idea of freedom so well that it would just take away the fear from your heart. And, the confidence that he had in the Lord God— And he could really explain it. And he did. One of his sayings was, 'If I was in an airplane without a parachute and God told me to jump, I wouldn't ask him no questions. I'd jump.' When he would make those statements, the spirit would be very high before. He knows when to make them and it was touching. And he motivated the folks until we started to have some more mass meetings. You see, that's the only way you get your information and that's the only way to touch the folks. A lot of folks, a lot of preachers, are afraid to preach the truth. They are afraid they would get hungry. You'd be surprised. In a lot of churches, even in the White church, if the preacher tells the truth, he had to go. A lot of folks can't stand the truth. So, the Bible says the truth would make you free. So that's what makes a lot of folks not free, because they don't hear the truth.

H: Let me just ask you just one final question in relation to Reverend Shuttlesworth. We know that he's a courageous individual and all those things we heard about him. You can say that he was really attempting to give his life for the movement and that we realize. There were some who criticized him, who said that he was a dictator and he thought that it was his movement. As a person who worked very closely with him, how would you react to that?

J: Well, you see, somebody got to lead and he was a leader. You can't have but one head. A lot of folks, after Shuttlesworth knocked down the big trees, the big oaks, out the way, then everybody wanted to lead, especially the ones with the ego. When a man got an ego, he wants the office without work. In other words, there is a lot of labor in it, a lot of sacrifice, and a lot of folks wouldn't have done what Shuttlesworth done. I've seen Shuttlesworth—And I'm not going to drop the fault on nobody. I'm just going to lay it out there—I've seen him go out when a lot of folks was in jail, when you needed money. He would go to New York, California and all over the United States to preach and come back and put that money in the Movement and he didn't have nothing. A poor boy a long way from home. And I heard other preachers tell him, 'Fred, I wouldn't put all that money in the Movement. You preached and that's your money.' He'd say, 'No, I preached in the name of the Movement. I was representing the Movement and I'm putting this money in there.' But, you see, that was God's program. What the other fellows was showing me, if they were the head of it, they would take as much of the money that they wanted to. Now he didn't have nothing. But, see, God paid him later. He rewarded him later. He's in good shape now and he got it honest. You see, when you don't get it honest, you can't keep it. He got it and he keeping it.

H: Okay, well, we certainly appreciate your time and I would like to just say that I want to do this again, because there are a number of issues. There's a labor issue that we need to deal with and there are other issues within the Movement that I'd like to hear about as well.

J: Whenever you get ready, no problem.

H: Thank you, sir.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1] The 'Y' was the NYA or National Youth Administration, a New Deal program established by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration in effort to provide America's young people, Black and White, with

opportunities for employment and development. For more on the NYA, see John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (p. 101-102).

[2] American Cast Iron Pipe Company is usually referred to by residents of Birmingham by its acronym, ACIPCO—and most commonly pronounced as "ci-py-co."

[3] Congress of Industrial Organizations

[4] American Federation of Labor

[5] Ku Klux Klan

[6] See BCRI interview with LaVerne Revis Martin (Volume 19, Section 3).

[7] Bethel Baptist Church, located in North Birmingham's Collegeville neighborhood.