

Voices from the Past

Carl Johnson and Settlement of the
Upper Snake River Valley

By Carl Johnson

August 8, 1968

Tape #6

Oral Interview conducted by Harold Forbush

Transcribed by Devon Robb November 2004

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Harold Forbush- Today, it is my privilege to interview here in my office at Rexburg on this 8th day of August, 1968, one Carl Johnson who for the past many years has been a resident of this area, having actually been born in Madison County and who for the past few years has been employed by the Ricks College in their maintenance work and janitorial services. An interesting thing about Brother Johnson, when he had arrived about fifty years of age he suddenly discovered through the inducement of some members of his family, a real worth while talent that of composing poetry and in the interview this afternoon he will present some of his own poems written over the last several years. Brother Johnson is a rather meticulous man in preparing for this interview; he has literally prepared and written his remarks out. He is desirous of having a fine tape and I think this is very commendable. So without too much chatting back and forth in a form of conversation we will be real pleased to have him present the material on his life and the background on his parents and give something of his poems by the preparation which he has made. Now, Carl we are really pleased to have you here this afternoon and with that in mind why don't you go ahead and read the material you have prepared and if you wish you can digress at any time and add lib as we would ordinarily say to that which you have prepared.

Carl Johnson- Thank you Brother Forbush very kindly. My name is Carl J. Johnson. I was born the 28th of September 1890 on a one hundred acre sagebrush homestead about 8 miles directly south of the Madison County Courthouse and three quarters of a mile north of the south fork of Snake River. This rough land needed leveling and a lot of ditching. Levies had to be built across the way to get the water out of the high spots. These desert lands were valueless without water. Planning water courses or ditches was an art, a feat of engineering skill conqueror by faith, work, determination, trial and error. Small ditches were the forerunners of the large canals of today. Between 1898 and about 1912 many canals were enlarged and greatly lengthened. This reclaimed much of the desert land. The first instruments I remember 12 inch hand plow, a tongue scrapper, a two sectioned wooden harrow, a drag or level made of plank, and a v shaped tool called a go devil to help clean up ditches that were just plowed. My parents were Swedish immigrants, converts to the Latter-day Saint Church. My father, Ole Peder Johansen was born in 1862 in Valbyvestra, Sweden. He and his brother Gustov immigrated in 1884 to Logan. Father came to the Snake River Valley in 1885. My mother Louisa Johanna Ritterbaelka was born in 1848 and immigrated to Logan in 1886 and was married in 1886. On February the first in 1942, I wrote the following tribute to my mother.

“I am grateful for my mother born in far off Swedish land,
where the streams are clear and rapid and the mountains steeply grand.
Where the ocean met the skyline in a sort of mystic way,
where the sun and natures wonders chased the darkness all away.
Where the spirit of the North men chased the fears of the seas away
and opened up the vision for this land of brighter day.
As I sit now, afternoon time in the day of life so long,
I can see a sweet face smiling in the evening in the dawn.
I can hear the rocker creaking as she moves it to and fro
and she sings a little ditty that I now would scarce forsto.

It brought comfort to my heart-ache; it relieved my every fear
as it planted deep within me a respect for home so dear.
As winter follows autumn and as summers follow spring
so the routine of our farm life seemed to brew to mean most everything.
It included work of all sorts. Work of brain and brawn and heart,
which developed kindly feelings for our neighbors in all parts.
I can see my dear old mother with a kerchief around her head,
as she walks the path so sprightly to the hen house or the shed.
How she loved to see God's creatures as they moved about the farm,
when she rested for a moment from the knitting of her yarn.
I can see her in the kitchen as she sat beside the stove
and would murmur her thanksgiving for her home and her abode,
as the sandman gave his magic and he slipped away her load.
Mother taught me to be gentle, kind, and gracious to all men
and especially the down trodden, who were shunned by everyone.
How she loved to read the Era, the Relief Society magazine, the News
and then tell us pleasant stories from the papers she had perused.
Although old and bent and feeble she was always on the line
to defend the cause of Zion and its purposes divine.
Now I loved this dear old mother for the path that she showed to me
and the faith she always manifest that a man I would someday be.
And now if I could live the life she pointed out to me
I will meet her over there sometime in the great eternity."

CJ-As children we learned to speak the Swedish language first, and then as school and church assignments taught us quickly to speak English. Under this stress we tried to forget the Swedish language. Father was a boot and shoe maker or profession. He grew up on a small farm and he knew some things of the chores and work instances of this life. His trade proved to be a blessing in his new home land as the community needed a repair and boot maker. It made bargaining for food and sustaining substance possible while he was ditching, fencing, and so on. While at Nampa, March 27th in 1942 I wrote this poem, Vision.

"O father let me see your view as it came to your eye so fine. What could you find in
harder mind in this great sagebrush sea?
The wind is cold, the spring is late,
and the drifted snow is deeply caked.
Although it's May in the mist of day,
there's not to see a blade of green insight.
The rivers rush and roar I hear,
as it splashes and tears and grows nearer year by year.
How could you hope, o father mine,
to have a part of this mighty stream make such climb?
The banks are so high, the gravel so deep, your farm so far. Who would vigilance keep
over such a new ditch where water can soak,

and gofers dig holes, the result a bad joke?
Who could envision a home in such a plight?
Who could tackle or conquer such a tremendous fight?
Who could be thankfully cheerful each night when the horses were gone and no water in sight?
Well, you could of course. I saw it each day
as you were up with the sun and pushed failure away.
You challenged the wind in this sagebrush sea
to rock your young craft of break anchor at sea.
There must have been vision I am perfectly sure
in answer to faith, hope, and prayers as of yore.
As you couldn't have tarried or hoped life to win
with all things so bare earthly chances so thin.
Some fathers made money and riches their fame
but your goal in life was an untarnished name
in Lamb's book of life
where earth's power and fame make no envy or strife.
You have paid for your passage with service in life,
with hope in tomorrow above discouragements rife.
I am thankful to God for a father like you
and pray that his blessings will carry you through
with peace and contentment ever fresh, ever new."

CJ- Our generation learned early the satisfaction of accomplishment and the absolute need of everyone doing their full share that life might be made secure. So it was soon my pleasure to help care for the stock, learn to milk, chop wood, and try to be the handy man while father did the ditching, the planting, the fencing and the irrigating. Every youngster felt it a privilege to help his elders. Our aim was to do a man's job as soon as possible. One of the big jobs was to pull, grub, and pile the sagebrush during the day time and then burn them at night. We would carry the fire on a fork from one pile to another. On April 1st 1963 I tried to express my feelings regarding some of our activities regarding childhood in a poem to my sister on her birthday, Pioneer Memories.

"Three screwy years ten and five,
you have graced the earth, you've been alive.
You have helped to clear the mists of doubt,
you have taught your neighbors what life's about.
So greetings now this special day,
it marks another milestone on life's way.
Seventy-five times has April 11th come and gone its way,
arousing memories of yesterday.
A cottonwood log cabin with a window in the west,
curtains strung on wires made room where each could rest.
Just a little south of centers did the small cast iron stove,
how we loved this frontal hearth place where we warmed our frostbitten toes.
How we loved to smell the green wood that was drying on the oven door.

Can you see the little oil lamp on the cupboard as of yore?
The water buckets on the wood bench, the water basins on the stand,
seamless sacks we used for toweling neatly hemmed by industrious hands.
Washed and ironed they had beauty; that even now I think is grand.
How about the smell of sage smoke as we burned this desert brush
after days of grubbing and piling, remember? It seemed like almost an eternal rush.
Yet what childish glee we flaunted as we scurried joyously
with the ambers from the old pile to some new one we could see.
In the darkening shades of nightfall how mysterious things would be?
Breathishly we would plant some fire that a new flame there might be.
How it pleased dear dad and mother to see us help so eagerly.
Can you see that dear old mother with a kerchief on her head
as she walked the gravel pathway with ground wheat or crusts of bread?
With her apron on her forearm sometimes filled with new plucked grass
or with apples from the orchard to make for us a good repast.
Can you see here in the evening as she hopes the dusk will stay,
as it used to in her home land where as a child she used to play?
Do you see the green fields verger alfalfa, beets and barely too
at the noon time or at sunset or in the early morning dew?
See dad walking on the ditch bank with his boots and shovel too.
He's real happy in his station even though he's not well to do.
He is more thankful than the average, he is as happy as a king,
but he's planting for his parkers and the money they will bring.
May you cherish these fond memories as you walk the path of life.
Choose the ones that bring you courage, shun the ones that smack of strife.
Keep on smiling, keep on giving. These are the virtues we all need.
May this little day be joyous is my wish in very deed."

CJ - A typical Sunday schedule between 1895 and possibly 1915 might have read thus: Sunday school 10 A.M. in morning, Sacramento meeting 2 P.M., Sunday evening early candle light m.i.a. This was changed to Tuesday about 1906 or 1909. Before 1900, Fast and Testimony meetings were held the first Thursdays of each month. Some people spent many hours in community improvement, fencing cemetery, and church lots, school property, planting trees for church and schools. Some stake projects were also in building programs; stake tabernacle, Ricks Academy, and so on. When the valley was young our fuel was the native trees, cottonwood, aspen, pine and willow. When things were properly planned, green timber, not pine, was hauled in the winter, sawed and split before spring work started. Mothers loved to use wood because it was clean. Chowder for the animals was often made from poles and post covered with straw at thrashing time. The first grain I remember being cut was done with a saw and cradle and bound in bundles with straw. This, if well done, could be hauled and stacked in round stacks. Then there was a machine called the reaper, and I cut the reign and it fell on the table and to stripe off and bundle sized piles to rebound or haul away. Thrashing wheat and oats has always been done in my day with a machine. At first all machines were horse powered. I have helped to thrash peas on a canvas with a fork or flail. The fogger and chaff were disposed of by tossing them in the breeze. The first steam thrashing machine disposed of the straw

in the usual carrier way. Finally the fan blower was invented and this was a real boon in handling straw. Planting was all done by hand. Wheat, oats, barely were broadcast and harrowed in. Potato sets were carried in a bucket. Each set was dropped individually into the furrow and then covered with a plow. Timothy, and alfalfa and grass seeds were still in broadcast; later a small broadcasting seeder was available. Butchering was all done on the farm for home use. Meats were preserved and cured at home. Salt cure, dry cure and Bryn, smoked, jerked or dried, sausage made and preserved in crocks covered with lard, head cheese, corn beef, and so on. Wild currents shared us berries. Haws were picked in the river bottoms, choke cherries in the hills. Huckleberries, wild goose berries, and some strawberries came from the mountains. Games played for fun and past time were hide-n-go seek, last couple out, run sheep run, steal sticks, dare base, old south, pop the wipe, pomp, swimming, riding horses, baseball, house parties, candy pools, horse shoe pitching, and group singing. As the community grew new ditches were made. They always posed a problem in crossing as the new soil was thirsty and the water softened the banks, sometimes the horses refused to cross.

CJ-The old cotton wood school house was soon out grown. New ones of pine logs were built in more central locations. This often caused unhappiness in the home and in the community. Growing pains are seldom pleasant. In the early school, there often was some pupil in each of the seven or eight grades, so reciting was done nearly all the time. Each had a big wood stove; lunch's put in window seals and on benches at the back of the room, and often lunch was served in a frozen state. Friday afternoon, competitive activities were used for fun, excitement, and wit sharpening. In 1902 the Lyman ward was divided. The North end of the ward kept the name Lyman; the new ward took the name Archer. This was the south and east part of the old ward. Each forward step brought the loss of some special friend or acquaintance.

CJ-Our first schools were usually four months during the winter months, and then as monies became available as the valuation increased, the school terms were lengthened finally to six months. Recreation was fostered and produced in each community. There were programs, dramas, dances, birthday parties, and a magician show now and then. But our main stay, the thing that sustained life, made it livable, was our church activities. They built us spiritually, socially, culturally, and challenged our mentality to keep abreast with others. Our sick were cared for by the kindness by the neighbor mothers and faith in the administration of the priesthood. In most communities there were skilled ladies known as mid wives, or nurses. Their courage, faith, and kindness blessed every home many times. Some of the pioneer names that will be remembered in this part of the country is Mrs. Georgia and Mrs. Walsa Burton, Mrs. Suzanne Briggs, Mrs. Ute Briggs, Mrs. Willey of the Archer section and Mrs. Fred Robinson of the Archer section. Morticians were unknown and unheard of. The pioneers took care of the dead themselves with help of a kind neighbor. Caskets were made locally by carpenters, lined by the Relief Society sisters, and neighbors were sextons for each other. Celebrations, Christmas, the excitement of a birthday was long remembered, but this special nettle day being recorded in the book of books and written about by the great men and woman of the day. This day in which we wished happiness to all men, regardless of how little or how much we individually received from Santa, parents, loved ones. It was all part of His birthday

celebration. In our home we usually had a small cedar tree taken from the river bottom. Tallow candles were tied on the branches. Mother did special baking of the Swedish kind, ginger cookies, sweet breaded rings, and cookies in patterns available. In Swedish homes, rice was a tradition, Christmas Eve, and some special ceremonies attached. Original rhymes were to be given before you could partake of the rice. Rhymes might take on a personal attitude, be humorous, or dressed up in Yuletide attire. Cod fish was not to be forgotten. Community wise, a program filled with wit and good will, faith and better days are ahead, singing, prayer, stories of the Christ child, readings, quartets, instrumental music, speeches and so forth. Then the large community tree was unloaded. Excitement reigned supreme. Thankfully we all liked this event. Everyone having something from the tree, knowing that on the morrow all would gather again at 2 P.M. for the children's dance where moms, dads, older brothers and sisters, teachers in primary, and Sunday school taught us the life fantasies as quadrille, waltzes, polkas, sodishes, and two-steps, and the Virginia reels.

CJ-July 4th each community held its own remembrance of the national birthday. Flag rising was done early, some solute by men who handled potter and equipment. Program at 10 A.M., community singing always included the national anthem, prayer, welcome address, readings, songs, instrumental numbers, flag drills, speaker of the day, and reading the Declaration of Independence. July 24th was always celebrated with much thanksgiving and appreciation for the pioneers. Sometimes a bowery was built on the north side of the meeting house for a little comfort on hot days. Afternoon programs on July 4th and 24th was children dance, ball game, athletic contests, and horse races, and at night adults and teenage dance. Very seldom did any work on these holidays; they were held sacred as days of great worth to everyone. People felt that freedom had been bought with a great price and to maintain it constant reminding was necessary. For many years July 24th was our annual family reunion day. In 1942 I wrote a tribute to Uncle Gustov and my father,

“Greetings fathers on this day.
Tis set apart for fun and play
and reminiscence all the way
from Sweden's green to Idaho's clay.
From the humble home on the Rocky farm
where you learn to patch boots and your socks to yarn.
As you have toiled and smiled down histories trail,
you've found the sequel to the Holy Grail
was to help your neighbor without fail.
These deeds of kindness, cheer, and love
have tempered your sons and their red blood.
It's made us feel the golden rule
was here for a purpose, our lives to school.
We wonder, o fathers, how you could envision in the sand and the gravel and this
sagebrush sea
a home, a family, an empire to be.
Unless, you had vision from the eternity,

an answer to prayer, and an eternal desire
to conquer a desert and help build an empire
for your families joy. Was that your desire?
O hail to you fathers for you artier and zeal
and also to mothers with hearts true as steal.
Who stood by your side and did their full share
to stave off discouragement, to ward off despair,
and plant in your children a love for the truth
and show them life's pathway in the morning of youth.
Accept of our tribute and love on this day
for the gifts that you have given that will not decay,
such as joy in life's struggle that comes everyday,
also cheer and contentment that drives fear away
or honor and virtue and faith in God's work.
We now offer homage and hope never to shirk.
May the peace and contentment of life's setting sun
fill your hearts to overflowing for work so well done."

CJ-From 1912 to 1915, I spent my winter months in the school of practical agriculture at the University of Idaho, Moscow. The Valley now was starting to mature. The urge to find and build a nest was increasing. January 5th 1916, Geraldine Blackburn of Brigham City, Utah and I were married in the Salt Lake Temple. Our home was blessed with three girls and five boys. Our oldest son left us in 1927. We are proud of the citizenship of our family. We are delighted to be grandparents to 35 children and great grandparents to eight.

CJ-At the close of World War I, everything in the Nation was geared for war. Finance, manufacturing, agriculture, then over night everything had to be readjusted to peace time. Men were coming home with the thousands, no work, no money, no buying power. Agriculture was soon on the rocks. In the squeeze that followed, many homes were lost. People sought new lines of support. The privilege of serving as assessor from Madison County from 1935 to 1940 was a worth while experience. In serving the public, one cultivates cooperation and good will. Pioneering was now history. The machine age was well on its way. The small farmer was going into industry or seeking any kind of work.

CJ-Geraldine and I spent thirty months in the land of Sweden doing missionary work for the Latter-day Saint Church from January 1952 to August 1954. Church activity has been one of the best opportunities we have had as a family. There has always been challenging opportunities to fill if we were willing. Groups both young and old are in need in leadership always. On August 19th 1956, I commenced to work as caretaker for the Ricks College. My assignment was the new auditorium. Carpenters and other laborers worked for months later after school started in September. It's been a thrilling experience to see in the past twelve years the tremendous growth in the physical facilities of the college. I attended the Ricks Academy in 1907 and 1908 graduating from the eighth grade. For nearly forty years the physical facilities remained the same. The fondest dreams of a larger school have long been realized in the present growth and expansion. From a school

of about one hundred and sixty or seventy, it's almost unbelievable there are now 3,500 enrolled and expansion still on the run with no immediate slowing down in sight for our great school. Its contributions in cultural, spiritual, moral uplift are beyond measure. Men and woman of culture and standing in our nation are not hard to find in the Ricks roles.

CJ-In closing this short sketch of my childhood and life in this great valley, I feel it a pleasure and obligation to pay tribute to a host of kind friends and good neighbors. Your contributions of determination, hope, cheer, and goodwill and cooperation have made our Snake River Valley a wonderful group of homey communities where our thrift, our neighborliness can be a great heritage to our prosperity. In connection to the church activities it's also been my good pleasure to serve on the Commons School District Board of Trustees school number twelve, before the days of school consolidation. I also served as a Board member of the directors of the Leonard Canal. In February of 1942 after a trip to Ketchum up the beautiful Wood River Valley I wrote these lines.

“There is beauty in these mountains as they raise their stately heads,
and make a place for clouds to rest after fleeting over our heads.
This massive height and ruggedness, their canyons deep and wide
augment the grandeur of the gourd that lies close by each side.
The rugged cliffs, their solid walls, their abyss from earth to sky are covered now from
foot to brow with glistening crystal snow.
I stand in awe and wonderment at the creation he has wrought.
How could one place with greater grace more beauty in one spot?
How could one say at close of day when all beauties are combined that he did not make
for our love and sake this mountain home of ours.”

On the 17th of May in 1942, I said this about the Sabbath Day.

“The day the Sabbath day has dawned with pungent crispness calm and sweetness too.
Even nature seems to feel a deep respect that's true.
The trees, the shrubs, the flowers, and the dew
hold out unspoken reverence this day for me and you.
The thanks I feel I do not utter as I go
but simply sing in heart beats deep and low.
With positive reassurance he will know
my reverence too can unspoken flow
as with his priesthood's mighty caravan I go.
Where hands clasp and their love I feel although a stranger in their midst, I see life's
purposes clearer now as with the group I meet
and find them struggling just as I to place sin beneath my feet.
With kindness and a thankful heart
lest I forget the repentance part
and feel that I can do alone
the things for which He did atone
and paid a price great for me that if I serve through eternity
I still should be in His kind debt

for things undone that I regret.”

Another thought for the Sabbath.

“The sweetness of the Sabbath’s here.
I feel its peace and joy sincere.
It bids me join in song and prayer
with friends and kin both here and there.
God in his wisdom gave this day of days to learn His plan; that we might show by works
sincere
our thanks for this our mortal sphere.
Life has taught us in the past,
we need reminding of our tasks.
We need encouragement anew
in faith and hope and vision too.
We need to know our neighbors view,
feel his pulse and struggles too
and learn how he in faith has won
his master’s peace for work well done.
Now Father, upon this lovely day,
may I in prayer and homage pay
the tribute of my heart and let man see and know
that in my heart is perpetual youth,
a living testimony of the truth
sustained and kept alive while here
by observing the Sabbath from year to year.”

HF- Brother Johnson those are delightful poems that portray a tremendous amount of meaning. Don’t you have one or two others that could share with us and present a little of the background, the thing that motivated you to write these sentiments?

CJ- Thank you Brother Forbush. I have a little verse here I wrote regarding our Country’s Birthday. I was up in Lewiston and I was all alone on the 4th of July. I was working for the state and I was mighty lonesome. I walked from our state over into the adjoining state and then came back and put these things together. My Country’s Birthday,

“In 1776, my country came to be,
was just a little tiny tot so wee,
was hard to see.
Some other nations big and strong looked at us with contempt.
While others thought we’d surely grown and fill the continent.
Our father, patriots were poor but true.
They knew the price and gave it too,
to make this land a safe abode,

an emblem for the liberty road.
A place for safety and retreat
where none should come and vengeance meet.
So help me father true to be
a valiant son of liberty,
a man of courage and of might,
a man who's heart is for the right,
a man who loves to see fair play
and will hold that torch to light the way
while others struggle on."

CJ-There might be another one to that I might give a little background on. The river in Idaho Falls was in deep canyons of solid rock. It looked like a little stream there but it was a mighty one and although it looked small and looked like it would be easy to handle, it was a treacherous thing and hard to cross. In fact, it was impossible to cross there right by the city. Eventually, the city built a dam and they constructed it and it's made a mirrored lake. I have a few words I'd like to add by way of a poem, The River, Eagle Rock, yesterday and today.

"The naked canyon is no more; it's forbidding those to who even touch respond.
Flowers now of every hue adorn its rugged face as grass is green and creeping vines
make a pleasant resting place suggestive of the culture transplanted here anew.
As time have changed so also have the seasons lost the nature of the desert true
and God with man has now subdued this mighty monster too.
Treacherous fords and icy bridges too
are now seen only in life's memories anew.
Its swirling pools, its flooding rage
are but memories now of pioneer days.
Man stretched his hand again we see a triumph, yes a victory.
The surging, rushing, boiling stream has changed now to a mirrored dream.
Beside this placid, lovely lake
a steeple, a church, yes a temple for humanities sake
is built to our God and lo, which blessing are bestowed
upon mankind who choose the road
lighted by Elijah's star
of service to kindred's near and far.
O God of mercy, God of right, may thy truth's, thy knowledge be our light
to eternal homes and heavens bright."