

Transcription of Interview

John Newcomer

October 28, 1991

I. John Newcomer

Pat Chickering: We are conducting an oral history interview with John Newcomer and June Newcomer at their home on Bolivar Heights in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

The first interviewee is John Newcomer. Speaking is Pat Chickering.

PC: Background information Mr. Newcomer. You were born in Harpers Ferry in the year 1914, is that correct?

JN: Right, yes.

PC: Did you go to school at Harpers Ferry?

JN: Yes.

PC: Where was school?

JN: The school that is now being leased by the Park Service is the building I was in from the first grade until my junior year when they moved to the building which is now in Bolivar, the junior high.

PC: You lived in the Brackett House, is that correct?

JN: Until I was 10 years old.

PC: Until you were 10. Where in the Brackett House was your bedroom?

JN: Off the lower hallway or entranceway to the right as you come in the front door, the small room to the right.

PC: And you lived there until you were 10 years old.

JN: Till I was 10.

PC: That would have been 1924?

JN: Right.

PC: We had, when we interviewed your sister Mrs. Moore, we were talking about plumbing in the house, and I did not remember this but Michael Jenkins, who is also assisting in conducting this interview along with John Barker and myself, recalls that you mentioned there was a "big bathtub" upstairs. Could you describe it and where it was?

JN: It was in the room that I believe you have said it's still a bathroom and it was a tin liner in a wooden frame originally, and it was replaced, I do not remember when it was replaced, but it was replaced with a steel tub that was on legs that was used for many years.

PC: Am I correct that at this time there was no indoor plumbing, no flush toilets, in the house, but there was water to fill the tub?

JN: There was a flush toilet as far as I remember. I do not remember, there was still an outside toilet, but by the time I was born we had a flush toilet in the house.

PC: In that same room?

JN: Yes.

PC: And there was running water to the bathroom?

JN: Yes.

PC: Was it hot and cold running water?

JN: Yes.

PC: Okay. Interesting. The next question pertains to Storer College. Did you have, as a, at any time during your years, any direct contact with the College or the students?

JN: Only in going to ball, athletic events or to the programs that they, in the auditorium, that kind of thing.

PC: What sort of athletic events would those have been?

JN: Football is what I remember; I seem, they also had a baseball team; of course they played only the other Black schools.

PC: Were there many Black schools at that time?

JN: There was one on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

PC: Oh, my.

JN: Which is now the campus of Maryland University, and there were 2 near Baltimore; one in Lincoln up in Pennsylvania. Those are the ones that I can remember.

PC: Were there, you as a white boy going to these games, were there other white children or white young people from Harpers Ferry that would attend these?

JN: I think so, I don't remember being the only one.

PC: To, do you have any memory of discussion about you grandfather, Nathan Brackett? I'm really asking for whatever you might recall, family gossip or anything concerning the last years of his administration of the College. I guess specifically what I'm looking for is a sense of whether the family spoke about controversies that erupted during that last 20 years.

JN: I don't remember any of that. I do remember the story of grandfather being confronted in Charles Town by somebody who was objecting to what he was doing, and the man who he had, whom he had picked up off a battlefield near Winchester, intervening and saying that they would have to get him before they got Mr. Brackett.

PCL But you don't have any, any first hand knowledge or memory of hearing people in the family talk about the charges that were brought against Dr. Brackett by Clifford or, actually there were two, two groups of the,, of "troubles" that took place in the 1890s, one was about 1894 and the other was about...

JN: As a youngster I do not remember any of that.

PC: Then this is going to pretty much take care of the next question I have. Can I assume then that you really don't know why your grandfather resigned as President of Storer?

JN: That right, I...

PC: Do you have any, this again would be long before your time, any knowledge of Mr. Osgood who succeeded your grandfather?

JN: No.

PC: Who was a Free Will Baptist minister, and then became an Episcopalian minister.

JN: No.

PC: We'll jump back to physical condition of the Brackett House. While you lived in it, was it well maintained by the College? Did they keep it in good repair?

JN: I don't remember any problems.

PC: Cause at the time you lived in it the house was 70-80 years old by then and you don't remember the roof leaking, or anything like that?

JN: No. No.

PC: Was it comfortable in winter?

JN: As far as I remember. We expected cold bedrooms in those days.

PC: Yes. I guess we did. Summer boarding. While you lived in the Brackett House, could you tell me what memories you have of summer boarding on Camp Hill?

JN: Almost, many people took summer boarders. The Lockwood House was the largest on Fillmore Street although the Morell House was also operated as Sparrow's Inn. We took 1 or 2 families who came, the same people came year after year. And the same thing was true at most of the boarding houses as far as I remember. There were children who came from Washington to Lockwood whom I played with every summer for several years. The family would come up in time for the 4th of July and in those days of course we had excellent train service and the father would come up Friday night and go back Monday morning and then spend his 2 week vacation;

most of them were government workers in those days. He'd spend his 2 week vacation with the family; and they would go back immediately after Labor Day to start school.

PC: You say most of these were government workers, I as...

JN: There wasn't much else in Washington, in those days.

PC: Were they mostly also white?

PC: Enti..., all white?

JN: As far as I remember all the summer boarders, I don't think that the any of the Black people had incomes to spend vacations away from their jobs.

PC: Catering to a number of people on a regular basis must have meant that there was provisioning outlets around hers, for instance someone that was operating regular dairy service, or, for instance, where would an operator of a boarding house obtain the quantities of food necessary to sustain such an operation?

JN: Of course in those days we had a milkman who delivered the milk to the door.

PC: Do you remember who that was?

JN: At one time it was a man named Howell from out in the Country, and the Cavaliers did, had their dairy route for many, many years. Ice was delivered from a wagon.

PC: From a wagon, do you remember any of the names?

JN: With a scale on the back so they could chip the block of ice and weigh it and bring it in and put it in the refrigerator. I'm trying to remember who the ice... it was, the ice was made in Charles Town, in 300 pound blocks.

PC: It was made in Charles Town.

JN: Yes, in 300 pound blocks and then brought down to Harpers Ferry by truck and then delivered by wagon, I assume.

PC: Okay. That, that's very interesting because I was referring before we began to the interview to an account of an interview with Mrs. K.K. Cavalier that I had been reading in the office this morning and that states that for the Jennie Smith picnics at Island Park a 300 pound cake of ice would be delivered from Charles Town and people would chip off 5 cents worth into a papier mache cup and get the cup filled with lemonade. I guess that was like an early "slurpee".

JN: Probably so.

PC: Okay. That's interesting. So it was mechanical ice by your time, it wasn't...

JN: Yes.

PC: They weren't cutting ice from the river.

JN: No. Although there were still ice ponds around Bolivar, there were until a few years ago. And meat was delivered and cut from the wagon and weighed and brought in.

PC: Oh really? And who would do that?

JN: I remember a couple of names from the butcher shops downtown. I think Littleton was a name I think that brought meat. I remember at least 2 butcher shops downtown, and there were grocery stores downtown. There were stores in Bolivar, and I remember well the woman who was employed at one of the grocery stores in Bolivar stopped by our house nearly every morning to take an order which was delivered by Model Y trucks that afternoon. Most of our groceries came that way.

PC: About what time frame are you talking now? 1920s?

JN: It was before we left the Brackett House that I remember the... coming in to take orders first thing in the morning. She had quite a route and then the delivery truck was loaded and delivered in the afternoon.

PC: Was there a telephone in the Brackett House at that time?

JN: Yes. I don't remember any time when we didn't have a telephone.

PC: You said you, what year was it when you moved out of the Brackett House?

JN: Should have been 1924 when I was 10 years old.

PC: Do you, and then you moved to the house...

JN: The Bird/ Brady, now they call the Bird/Brady House.

PC: Bird/Brady House. I assume that summer boarding was still going on at that time.

JN: Yes.

PC: When did it die out?

JN: I would guess as air condition became available. In those days no one stayed in Washington if they could help it in the summer time and the train service to here was so good, many of the town, particularly Blue Ridge Summit over in Pennsylvania across the Pennsylvania line were also big summer boarding towns. Many of the towns within easy reach of Washington supported this kind of business.

PC: So then can we assume that summer boarding was still a viable entity right up through the 30s?

JN: Probably until the Great Depression.

PC: Until the Great Depression.

JN: Until 29.

PC: There's another question that's not on the list. Let's ask it. What happened in Harpers Ferry during the Great Depression, because of the Depression? Did businesses fail?

JN: I'm trying to remember. I can't remember individual businesses failing. The same stores were there as far as I know. I know that the Harpers Ferry Bank closed when the Bank Holiday came and never reopened. My father had resigned as cashier before this happened because he saw what was going to happen and could not get his Board to agree to the things he thought should be done. To the best of my knowledge the Bank's assets were tied up in mortgages which were not collectible, very much like more recent times.

PC: Yes.

JN: But the assets were still on the books, the Bank was not broke, although it was several years in being liquidated.

PC: Did people get their money back out of it?

JN: I think it was like 80%, something like that, and most of that went into the costs of the, of the settling it up. I know there were 2 employees for 2 or 3 years.

PC: We'll pass the questioning hat over to John Barker. John's got a few questions.

JN: All right.

John Barker: My questions are primarily concerned with Storer College and Storer's, with McDonald, and the College's relationship with the community. I first want to ask you a couple of general questions about McDonald. First briefly tell me just what you remember about McDonald, his character.

JN: Well, he was an excellent public speaker, of course at that age I didn't actually know much about the administration, business-wise, but as far as I know the College was not in financial problems until after his time. And the family attended local schools. The youngest, 2 of the daughters were in high school the same time I was, although ahead of me, Frank the youngest one was younger than I and of course their family was socially a little above the average school student because they were a little more privileged; the family went north in the summer time, and this kind of thing.

JB: Do you remember when McDonald resigned? The summer of 1944, I believe?

JN: I couldn't have dated it, but I remember that some of the Trustees, there was an annual Trustees meeting, some of the Trustees stayed with us during the 2 or 3 day meeting and my feeling was I think that the Trustees had decided that his administration was, what's the word, not following, was in a rut maybe, was not making the changes they felt were necessary to keep the school alive. They gave him as you know a life tenancy in the Brackett House and, I assume the College spent a good deal of money fixing it up for them, making it more comfortable.

JB: What was McDonald's response to his being asked to resign? He had been here for 45 years, he was getting up in age; he had to realize his time was coming to an end.

JN: I don't, I have no personal knowledge of his attitude about ti.

JB: Do you remember his attitude towards the hiring of a Black man to replace him?

JN: No, I don't.

JB: What do you remember about the McKinney years here at the College?

JN: They spent a lot of money doing things that were unnecessary because they were expecting a tremendous increase in enrollment which never came. They put bathrooms in the top floor of the Lockwood House and another house across from where Madison Briscoe now lives, preparing, expecting to use them for dormitories and it was never necessary. The enrollments of course began to drop and then with integration it became a school that was not economically possible.

JB: What do you remember about McKinney's resignation.

JN: At that time I had no real close association with the school. I don't know.

JB: We'll move on. I recently saw a reference to where there were in fact white students attending the College. Now this would be early on, going back to nineteen-teens here. Do you have any knowledge of white student in College?

JN: In the very early days my parents, my mother, and aunt and uncle attended the school because they were not welcome in the white schools, and then West Virginia passed a law forbidding, or making integration, segregation necessary. So they could no longer go to Storer and had to go North for the balance of their schooling.

JB: How would you characterize the relations between Storer College and the surrounding community?

JN: I was never conscious of any real friction. The students were accepted as far as I know, not socially, but as far as being around town and going into the stores and [as I said] their athletic program, their games were open to the community, and I think a good many people watched, they usually had pretty good teams.

JB: You mentioned they were accepted, going into the stores. As far as you remember, were they allowed to shop, or...

JN: As far as I know, I was never conscious of anything...

JB: You don't know of any particular store in the Harpers Ferry area that was for whites only?

JN: Never conscious of it.

JB: What sort of establishment was there for the Storer College students to socialize? Was there a place on campus that you know of? Or any place in town where they congregated for social purposes?

JN: I can't remember anything around town. I think that there were parties occasionally and the only place that I can think of it would have been was in the dining room of the Myrtle Hall which

was the girls' dormitory but the dining room, the school dining room was in the basement, in the ground floor there.

JB: I'm going to shift the focus of these questions a little bit, to more of the community and race relations. Do you remember any active Ku Klux Klan activity in the area in general?

JN: I heard a little bit about it but I was never conscious or close to any specific events. No.

JB: It certainly isn't something that was reported in the newspaper.

JN: No.

JB: Do you know if any prominent Harpers Ferry or Bolivar citizens, were there any known to be active Klan members? I'm talking 1920s, 1930s period when the Klan nationally was quite active.

JN: I did not know of any and there were some possible rumors but nobody...

JB: Yes. How did Storer interrelate with the other Black institutions in the state or in the area?

JN: There were no other Black institutions in the state so far as I know. Institute, yes, down near Charleston—that was too far away for athletic contests. I'm trying to remember the names of the schools that did come. But there was nothing in the state...

JB: What was the state of West Virginia's involvement with Storer College?

JN: It was financially supported because there was no, they were required to educate them, the Blacks, and there was no other school in this area. SO they supported it financially until integration was effected.

JB: What emphasis if any, you might not be aware of this because you were not that closely involved with the College, but what emphasis, if any, was placed upon Black culture, or were students at the College educated to encourage assimilation of white culture and values?

JN: I think the curriculum was pretty much, in early days it was, included everything from gardening and money management, and housekeeping, because slaves, of course, did not read and write it started there. In the days when I was familiar with it, it was, they taught the standard curriculum of English and Latin... Latin was taught there, and math and the usual social studies; I was never conscious that there was anything, was any particular subject with regard to race relations or social...

JB: What was the entertainment; you talk about often enough, some of the white community attended entertainment events or functions at the College. Were these reflective of white culture or did the College have a jazz band?

The programs I remember as a child would have been cultural programs, speakers... or the College choir was very good, music teacher was excellent and the community did come for that kind of recitals. I remember a speech by a man from Tuskegee...

JB: Booker T.

JN: Booker T. Washington, at one time. And they were on, a they booked this kind of thing quite regularly.

JB: Do you have any recollection of when the speech by Washington took place?

JN: Not really, no.

JB: What about the NAACP? I know from a letter I've read that, I think it was in the 20s, a student wanted to establish a chapter at the College and McDonald, he suggested maybe the time wasn't right for that.

JN: I didn't hear anything about that.

JB: Let's move on. The Library fire of 1927. Were all the books lost?

JN: My wife can answer that better than I can.

JB: Okay. Well, 1 more question, and this might be somewhat before your time as well. DO you know anything about a 1924 demonstration by some Black students at the College and the subsequent departure of some of the students?

JN: No.

PC: That's interesting. Because that would have occurred when you were 10 years old.

JN: Yes.

PC: And we were hoping you might...

JN: Sorry about that!

JB: One more question. I should have asked this earlier. It sort of relates to, ties in with the McKinney era.

JN: I was of course by that time not close to the College at all.

JB: In 1950 DuBois, his name appears on the program for the commencement exercise, and I just wondered if you remembered him being here in 1950.

JN: No.

JB: That about does it for me.

PC: We'll resume after the tape changes.

[Tape Change]

PC: Going back to a couple of things from the earlier part of the interview. You stated that you played with some of the same children summer after summer; boarder who would come.

JN: Yes.

PC: Where would you play, and what sort of games, what sort of things did boys or children do for fun in the summer?

JN: The big yard between the Brackett House and the Lockwood House with, there were volleyball nets put up, hide and seek was a big game in those day, particularly about dusk, I don't remember particular games but I know the yard, croquet, I don't remember anything else. I think the Lockwood had a tennis lined, grass court up on that level spot there for summer use.

PC: Can I assume from what you're saying then that you would pretty much play with these summer boarder children, but right up there on Camp Hill. Would you ever all get together and go down into town?

JN: I don't remember it.

PCL During this period, your father was with the College, is that correct?

JN: Yes. He was the Secretary/ Treasurer.

PC: Did he teach?

JN: No.

PC: When he became cashier at the Bank, was he still Secretary/ Treasurer at the College?

JN: He had been cashier at the Bank before he became Secretary/ Treasurer. He became Secretary/ Treasurer following Aunt Lu's death. The job she had held. In later years.

PC: Then in the period from when the family moved to Harpers Ferry after your grandfather's death, and before your father became Secretary/ Treasurer after Aunt Lu died, what was your father doing in that period?

JN: As far as I know he was the cashier, he followed Uncle Scott Lightner as cashier...

PC: At the Bank?

JN: At the Bank. My mother taught classes.

PC: Your mother taught classes.

JN: Yes. Home Ec and some others.

PC: But your father never taught at the College.

JN: Not as far as I can remember.

PC: You mentioned some butchers. Do you remember any names in Lower Town?

JN: Hardy, Demory store but I don't believe he was a butcher; I'm not doing very well on that.

PC: That's okay, that's okay!

JN: It was up Shenandoah Street on the right hand side.

PC: Up Shenandoah on the right hand side. When you say “up Shenandoah on the right hand side” are you talking about the side away from the river?

JN: Yes.

PC: Thank you. This is casting your mind back. Do you recall ever hearing about a family named McGraw?

JN: I remember the name, but that’s about all.

PC: That’s all. You don’t have a personal association with the McGraw name in any...

JN: No.

PC: Buildings or legends in Harpers Ferry.

JN: ‘fraid not.

PC: I’ve got a name now I know you have some memories of, and that is the Dorans.

JN: Yes.

PC: Okay. Can you tell me where the Dorans were in business when you knew them?

JN: It was the buildings, adjoining buildings, from the corner where the road used to go down under the railroad track to the old brewery and creamery...

PC: Okay.

JN: The Doran store was on the corner where you’d turn but back towards the town.

PC: There are several buildings there. There’s one on the corner...

JN: Yes.

PC: A stone building. And then there’s a double building next to it that’s brick.

JN: I think all 3 of them are Doran buildings. I looked the other day when I went by, and as far as I can remember...

PC: Did the Dorans live there?

JN: So far as I was aware. I never knew... see, the youngest child was called Willie and was at school ahead of me. As far as I know they lived somewhere in those buildings.

PC: I’m gathering from what you say then you didn’t socialize or associate with them.

JN: No. They were older than I.

PC: They were older than you.

JN: The daughter was, there was a daughter that married John DeLauder who was older than I, and willie was 4 or 5, 3 or 4, years older than I at least; in high school that’s quite a difference.

PC: Oh yes, it's a very big difference. You were a Camp Hill person, they were Lower Town people.

JN: Right.

PC: Did Lower Town people and Camp Hill people mix, socially?

JN: I don't remember. I used to know where several people lived, but this was, they came to the same school, of course, and when we went downtown, so and so lived here and so and so lived there, but as far as I can remember I don't remember any of them coming up and joining in the games we played around the Lockwood and Brackett House.

PC: All right. That's fairly significant, because there must have been a lot of children living in Lower Town at that time. Or were there?

JN: There were 2 or 3 good sized families.

PC: Could you give me some of those "good sized families" names?

JN: Crums,

PC: Crum?

JN: C-R-U-M.

PC: C-R-U-M.

JN: LaRue.

PC: LaRue. Where did the LaRue's live?

JN: On High Street on the left side going down the hill, and the shoe shop was on the right side, in later years one of the older sons had a barber shop on the left hand side.

PC: This is all on High Street?

JN: On High Street, yes.

PC: Okay. We thought we had a reference to some tailor setting up a pressing business... between LaRue's store and... I'll look this reference up. You gave me 2 big family names, Crum and LaRue; were there any others?

JN: There was a Kaiser family, not a big family, but there were 2 girls in the picture there.

PC: Did they live...

JN: They lived downtown, and I think they lived up on Church St... Public Walk, up in that little area somewhere. One boy was a schoolmate of mine, his mother was in that picture there, Mrs. Edwards was on the left. He was an only child as I remember, no he had a sister who was a little older than I.

PC: Do you remember Kaplon's Department Store?

JN: Oh yes. I think I bought my first suit there.

PC: I was going to ask you to tell us about Kaplon's store.

JN: It was the only department store in the area, so-called department store, 2 floors, clothing I don't remember anything but clothing. Abe was, as he was commonly know, was the storekeeper, and the family lived in the house on top of the hill next to the Appalachian Trail where Kip Stowell now is. There were 2 daughters and when I was, there was a girl living with them, I believe from Cumberland who was a cousin or something, went to high school here, was maybe a year behind me in school. Another family downtown on the right hand side where the restaurants and gift shops are now was Kern, K-E-R-N, one of them was a classmate of mine and 1 or 2 younger and a couple of girls older, and then the Rileys lived in the first house below Public Walk, first house on the right after you get around the bend. He was a railroad engineer and he had a son and 2 daughters, son and 1 daughter were older than I and the younger girl was a little younger. There was another Kern family was cousins of this Kern family lived in the building down on Potomac Street where... shop now, where Shirley Daugherty when she had her restaurant was in that building.

PC: Mike, do you know which building he's referring to?

Michael Jenkins: The Iron Rail or the Iron Horse?

JN: It's the farthest one up on the left, next to the railroad car, next to the caboose there.

PC: Which building is that, Mike?

MJ: I think it's the Iron Horse.

PC: The Iron Horse. Okay. So we can locate that.

JN: He was the, that Kern was the blacksmith, whose shop was just beyond, in that open space on the left in this picture. [refers to painting on wall]

PC: When we say this picture, for purposes of the tape here we're referring to a picture in the living room looking west on Shenandoah Street from about what we call Market Street, is that correct, Mike?

MJ: More the Master Armorer's House.

PC: You think it's more the Master Armorer's House?

JN: Yes. Master Armorer's House does not show but it's up-street from there.

PC: Okay. But we are looking west on Shenandoah Street. So the Kern blacksmith was on the left.

JN: Yes. The shop say way back in and of course he did horseshoeing and the steel tires on wagon and buggy wheels and when my little scooter got all bent up I took it in and he straightened it up for me. He had children who were all a little older than I. One of his sons is the Thomas Kern who is in the building business over here on the other side of Charles Town

now. Thomas B. Kern. One daughter was a classmate of mine in high school who is now living in Charles Town.

PC: You said you took your scooter to Kern's to be fixed. You would go to Lower Town, then.

JN: Yes.

PC: You weren't forbidden from going...

JN: Oh no. My dad was the cashier in the Bank and I would go down, we went usually down the little path that came down the stone steps I can't remember but that was the quickest way from the Brackett House downtown.

PC: Back up to the Dorans. What sorts of businesses did they operate?

JN: The store sold everything. Horsecollars, clothing, food,

PC: Food? Perishable food, or...

JN: Well, things like molasses and vinegar and that kind of, of course almost nobody carried vegetables in those days, but the staples, that kind of, and there was a good story or two about...

PC: Okay.

JN: You want them?

PC: Sure!

JN: Mr. Billy seldom spoke above a whisper. And almost nobody was allowed behind the counter. And he would spend interminable time looking for the thing you had asked for because all these places that it might be stored. So one day he was busy with a customer when a friend, a man who is a good deal older than I, but he was young at that point, came in with jug to be filled with molasses. In those days of course the molasses came in a hogshead or a barrel with a bung. And Mr. Billy says [affecting accent] "Raymond, you may go back in the back room and fill your just. That will be all right." So Raymond did. But Raymond had a slight speech impediment, and when the jug was full he came rushing back out. [affecting accent] "M M M Mr. Doran, Mr. D D Doran your mola mmm molas Mr. Doran" "Raymond, perhaps if you can't say it you can sing it." [now singing] "Mr. Doran, your molasses is running away."

[laughter from all sides]

PC: What was Raymond's last name?

JN: Lancaster.

PC: Lancaster, okay. Raymond Lancaster.

JN: One of the other stories they tell was the lady who came in for a spool of #100 thread. After looking and looking Mr. Billy came to the counter [affecting accent] "I'm very sorry. I can't seem to find any #100 thread, but I could give you 2 spools of #50."

PC: We had a reference in the newspaper to Billy Doran's or William Doran's furniture store. Oh, this would have been when you were quite small, 1918, 1919.

JN: Well, I didn't know he carried furniture. I knew about a lot of other things, but not furniture.

PC: I suspect that you would only have been 4 or 5. There was something slightly confusing in the paper that they had sold their entire stock, and there was a closing business sale. And then lo and behold the next year you read that they're still operating in the same place.

JN: It was probably the furniture line that they went out of. Because I don't remember any furniture there. But Mr. Billy had a reputation for not letting you get out of the store without selling you something. Whether it was related to what you came for or not...

PC: This is off the topic, but in some notes that we discovered this morning, just located today as a matter of fact, there was an interview with Mrs. K.K. Cavalier in which she stated that Mr. Wentzell and his sister, Mr. Wentzell who was the tobacconist... again this might predate your time. But the inter... the notes we were reading said that Mr. Wentzell and his sister were both albinos.

JN: Hmmm.

PC: It's not the sort of thing we picked up in the newspaper. I was just wondering if you could confirm this.

JN: Wait a minute now. I think that Wentzell lived... the Wentzell I knew best was the one that had the store near the school that I went to, but this one I think lived in the big brick house just beyond the little Harpers Ferry Park; it sits up on, way up above High Street there, and I have no idea who's there now. But as you come to the little road that cuts through the Park or behind the Park it bumps into that house where that Wentzell lived, but I don't know anything about them.

PC: Okay. Going back to the Dorans. After William died in 1925, Mary Ellen kept the store going, is that correct?

JN: Well...

PC: They did sell out, but I also gather that she also continued to operate a store.

JN: Probably. I can't remember much about that. She was the sister.

PC: Yes.

JN: Because when we used to go to the movies they only had one projector in those days, so while they were changing the reels the commercial slides came on and it was W. & M.E. Doran.

PC: Where was the movie?

JN: On the right hand side of Shenandoah Street. It was operated by the Catholic Church as something to do for the kids.

PC: It was operated by the church?

JN: [affirmative sound]

PC: Ah!

JN: Father Curren.

PC: Father Curren.

JN: C-U-R-R-E-N. A-N. I think.

PC: Is that, that turns out then to be a common local name.

JN: No this is not, the other is K-E-R-N, this is Curran. No he was not a local person.

PC: Was the building a Church building?

JN: They owned the building. It was a brick building which has since been taken down. It had been a school at one time I believe, but when I was a youngster we went to the Wednesday night serial and the Saturday night Western, if we could make it.

PC: What did they charge?

JN: I think a dime.

PC: And there would be slides in between?

JN: When they changed the reel. I don't remember any other except the W. & M. E. Doran. That would be on the screen when they were changing the reel.

PC: That's interesting, because I don't recall seeing much advertising in the newspapers for their stores, ever.

JN: Well, I don't remember it either.

PC: Many of the other stores would advertise, but I don't think I've seen, except for a couple of going out of business sales. Mary Ellen bought the Master Armorer's House in 1929. Did she, did the whole family move into it? Do you know anything about what happened at that point?

JN: I can't say for sure, no.

PC: To back up, excuse me...

JN: No, go ahead.

PC: To back up from that, do you know anything about the people who had the house before the Dorans bought it? It was owned by Mrs. Hurst.

JN: It was called the Hurst House when I was young, but that's all I know about it really, I guess.

PC: Do you have any recollection of anyone living there?

JN: No.

PC: Then you wouldn't have any recollection of, there was apparently some sort of a little bit of a scandal that went on in the late 20s when the estate of the owner was contested in court by his, someone who purported to be his wife. Mary Ellen got it in 1929, and this was a question I just asked you which I think you answered in the negative, that you didn't really know whether the whole family moved in then.

JN: I'm trying to remember. I can't say for sure now.

PCL Okay. We also from another source had gotten the idea that there was a female member of the family who never left the house.

JN: Of the Doran family?

PC: Yes.

JN: I would guess that was Willie's wife.

PC: Willie's wife.

JN: I never saw or heard anything of her, sitting up on the porch, one of the porches, it's a little hard to determine which one. And I've also seen references to her taking trips back to Cumberland or down to Washington. But I was just curious. Apparently she was a bit of a mystery in the town.

JN: Yes. As far as I know, I never...

PC: There was an account of a birthday party that her daughters and son gave her when she was well up in years, this was in the early 50s that said she still regularly attended Mass. We also, another account stated that, not Mary Ellen, Willie's daughter.

JN: Let's see, what were the daughters' names?

PC: Had multiple sclerosis. Do you know anything about that?

JN: I think I heard something, but I couldn't say much about that.

PC: Okay, Do you know anything about Willie, William, or Billy, the younger?

JN: The son?

PC: No I really don't. Somebody in town might, but I don't.

PC: You don't know whether he's still alive or not? He would be in his 80s.

JN: Considering my age, and he was older than I.

PC: Last firm information we have on him he was teaching in of the Catholic College in Washington.

JN: I don't know. Last time you mentioned something about a garage. Behind the... I'm wondering if it was Billy's own garage. Because the only time I ever saw the car which he owned, it was moved to get out of the way of the, probably of the 1936 flood, and it was an

ancient brass bound something, brass radiator, and it was stored there all those many years and I never saw it on the road.

PC: Oh really. Now this would be...

JN: Behind the...

PC: The father, then.

JN: Yes. And this would have been a car that he had owned and was garaged behind the store there somewhere all those many years and the only time I ever saw it or heard about it was when they moved it to get away from one of the floods, and I would guess it was the 36.

PC: I think that comes to the end of, Mike, could you stop the tape please?

MJ: See if there's anything more on the floods.

PC: Oh yes, okay. Any other flood recollections, at random? What got destroyed...

JN: I remember going downtown the back way, down the stone steps, in the flood of 1924 when I was 10 and seeing a boat tied to the iron pillar which was on the corner of the Bank building which the Park service has now rest... built the corner back out. At that time the entrance to the Bank was on a little tiled areaway, and there was a steel post holding up that corner, and there was a boat tied to that post and I picked up an oil can that was floating by and sold it to somebody for a dime which I think was the first money I ever earned! The flood of 36 of course was the one that really isolated the town and left it stranded for 2 years until they worked out the arrangements to pave the... or to plank the railroad bridge, by the time they got the Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Department of Highways, the railroad involved it took 2 years to get that done. Harpers Ferry was a dead end for those 2 years.

PC: But the railroad still came.

JN: The railroad came through but there was no way to get a car across the river. You went up to Shenandoah Br....up to the Bloomery or you went over to Hagerstown, or Shepherdstown to cross the river.

PCL Did that really have adverse affect on business?

JN: Oh yes. The Hilltop and anybody who was dependent on any type of a business was, the service station...

PCL Would, that was of course during the Depression, also.

JN: Yes.

PC: Are you telling me that that really put a stop to Harpers Ferry?

JN: It pretty well killed downtown.

PC: Killed downtown! I'm glad you said it, I didn't want to! Yet people like the Dorans stayed in business.

JN: I guess they did. I was in school during the flood of 36, I was at Michigan State.

PC: When did you come back, when did you return to Harpers Ferry?

JN: When I graduated in 37 and worked in Baltimore for a year, and then began to work on Cliffside, the Motel. We opened in 39 out there.

PC: You and Mrs. Newcomer.

[End of Interview]