

Lowell JOHNSON
Kane Co. 1999

Southern Utah Oral History Project

The Southern Utah Oral History Project was started in July of 1998. It began with an interest in preserving the cultural history of small towns in southern Utah that border the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The project was managed by Kent Powell, from the Utah Division of State History, who oversaw the collection of oral histories conducted in Boulder, Escalante, Bryce Valley, Long Valley, Kanab, the Kaibab Paiute Reservation, and Big Water, by Jay Haymond and Suzi Montgomery. Also in cooperation with the state was the Bureau of Land Management and the people of Garfield and Kane counties, with support from the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The goals of the project were first to interview long-time local residents and collect information about the people and the land during the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, the interviews were to be transcribed and copies of the transcripts were to be made available to the public at the Utah State Historical Society and at local repositories. Lastly, to build a relationship with state agencies and the local communities and provide a medium for the local communities to express their interest in preserving their own history and culture in the areas that are now included in the GSENM. Thank you to everyone who took the time to care and share their memories and stories.



INTERVIEW WITH: Lowell M. Johnson
INTERVIEWER: Jay Haymond
INTERVIEW NUMBER: One
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 22, 1999
PLACE OF INTERVIEW: His home in Kanab, Utah
SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: His experiences in Kanab and Kane County
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JH: Tell me where you were born?

LJ: I was born in Glendale.

JH: Oh yeah, up in the valley.

LJ: Yes.

JH: Very good. Tell me about that family that you were born into?

LJ: Well my father used to live at Alton, called Upper Kanab. My mother was born in Orderville. They lived in Glendale for, well, ever since I was a lad, and then let's see, it was 1962, they moved over here to Kanab and I built them a home over here.

JH: I see. Were you in the construction industry?

LJ: Yes. Yes, I was in the army during World War 11.

JH: Well, talk about your father and your mother and brothers and sisters a bit, living in Glendale.

LJ: Well, he was a farmer. He had a few sheep. He had a dry land farm out on the Glendale Bench, it's called. Out east of Glendale. I had one sister and three brothers. I have one

brother and one sister that are still alive. I don't know just what you want to hear; whether it's some of the way we lived?

JH: Yes.

LJ: Well, we just lived off the farm. It wasn't anything like it is nowadays. Very seldom did we ever go to the store.

JH: Sort of subsistence on the farm. What kind of a garden plot did you have? Kitchen garden?

LJ: Well, they raised tomatoes and corn and beets and carrots, beans and fruits. We had a lot of fruit trees on our farm--a lot of them.

JH: Did you help tend the garden?

LJ: Oh yes, that was my job--me, along with the rest of my brothers.

JH: Let's see, you went to school...

LJ: I went to school in Glendale, in grade school. And then when I was in the ninth grade I went to Valley high school in Orderville.

JH: Would you say that... I'm thinking about where you learned to do the things that you did. You learned from your father and mother. What particularly do you think you learned from your father?

LJ: Well, I guess one of the greatest things, I guess, is hard work and being honest. My father was, well my mother too, were honest, good LDS people.

JH: When you have sheep, you have to work hard don't you?

LJ: Yes you do. I remember when I was about, I guess twelve or fourteen years-old, I was out with my dad with the sheep out on the Glendale Bench and this was in June, the early part of June, I guess, and it snowed about four inches and I remember how tough I thought it was. Course now it wouldn't be so bad to be out there in a tent, herding sheep.

JH: Is there anything about your grade school or high school education that you particularly want to make note of that was significant?

LJ: Well, when I was in high school I liked to work in the shop. I've always liked to work with wood. My dad told me once that he hoped someday that I had all the nails I wanted to pound because I guess I had nails pounded in everything or every board he had. (Laughter) Always making something.

JH: (Laughter). Yeah. What were the nails like when your were growing up?

LJ: Well, they were, I can remember when they still had some of the old square nails.

JH: Mostly they were wire, I imagine though, weren't they?

LJ: Yeah, yeah they were wire nails.

JH: How did you get into the, besides the proclivity to work with wood, how did you get into the lumber business? Was there a trick that you found?

LJ: Well, when I got out of the army in 1945, I started in the building trade. In fact, I did carpenter work when I was in the army. I was in an engineer outfit.

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JH: Yeah, so there was army construction?

LJ: Yes. I worked on the Alaskan Highway for eight months when it was built.

JH: Oh really? We maybe ought to talk about that a little bit.

LJ: Well, we spent about eight months up there in the Yukon. We build about, oh I guess, close to 300 miles of road in eight months from White Horse to the Alaska border.

JH: Huh. Was your job working on the bridges or were you working on the equipment on the road?

LJ: Well, I drove a gravel truck most of the time; hauling gravel and of course we used the trucks for different things. I worked one bridge, the trucks had a winch on the front end of them and this winch with the help of a gin pole, they lifted the logs and other things that were too heavy to lift by hand onto the bridge.

JH: Yeah. Describe that process. You know, to get those logs wrestled around with just a winch, that's pretty...

LJ: ...well, I don't know if you know what a gin pole is?

JH: Tell me about it?

LJ: It's a pole that had one pole sticking up like this here and then there's another one that comes out this way. It has a pulley on it. It works just like, something like a crane, except this pole here, the one that comes out this way, will pivot.

JH: It acts like a boom?

LJ: Un huh. It acts like a boom. Uh huh. That's the first time I'd ever seen one of them, but we built a lot of...all of our culverts and things were built out of logs.

JH: What do they do to a log to shape it so it acts like a culvert? Do they cut them in half?

LJ: No, they were usually small poles just stacked up and made into kind of a...the poles were going this way here and then there were poles that went across the top. They weren't very wide--maybe three feet or something. It depended on how much water there was. This bridge that we built, the fact is, I've got a picture of it, it's an "A" frame bridge built over a small river; it wasn't very big.

JH: By an "A" frame, do you mean that the poles were on the bank and they went up and across to the center?

LJ: Yes. The lines go across this way here and then the "A" frame comes like this here, and then there's a cable that comes down, hooks, and goes underneath the logs, so it supports the middle of the bridge.

JH: Well that highway was sort of a monumental effort.

LJ: Well, it was at the time, and I guess it still is considered one of the greatest road building projects ever build in that short of time. We went up there in May of '42, and the road was declared open for travel on the October 22, 1942.

JH: Almost unbelievable isn't it?

LJ: Well there were seven different engineer outfits on that road. Of course, White Horse South, I don't remember know where it started, way down in Canada somewhere. There were about fifteen hundred miles of it built.

JH: I was thinking about the political problems that we would encounter today if we thought of something like that.

LJ: Well, the reason it was built was to have some access to that end of the world, up in Alaska. Because the Japanese at that time were in the Aleutian Islands. After we got the road built, that's where I went, was down into the Aleutian Islands. We built airfields and roads down there.

JH: Those were great outfits, those engineers, getting in on projects like that.

LJ: Well it was good experience for me 'cause we weren't ever in any action of any kind 'cause we had other work to do.

JH: You didn't ever really see any Japanese army or military people?

LJ: No, but we were only about sixty miles from them.

JH: I see. So you got down on the tip?

LJ: The Japanese were on the Island of Attu and Kiska. And the Island that I was on was Shemya and this island was between the two of them. Atau is the farthest Island out in the Aleutian Chain.

JH: Let's talk about some of those construction projects that you got in on after the Alaskan

Highway. You said you built airports?

LJ: We built an airfield on Shemya. It was an Island, of oh, about two and one half miles wide and five miles long. We built an airfield there and docks out in the ocean and breakwaters to protect the docks. We built roads and buildings and an aircraft hanger—a lot of different things. Most of the time we lived in tents until the later part of the time we was there and then we finally got into a Quonset hut.

JH: They hauled material in to you for the construction, I guess? Or did you use native materials?

LJ: No, they hauled it in. On the Aleutian Islands, there aren't any trees or any bushes or anything--just rocks and tundra.

JH: What did you build the breakwaters out of?

LJ: Rock. There was one high hill, well you wouldn't call it a mountain, it wasn't even as big as these hills around here, they blasted into that and got rock out of it and built the breakwater.

JH: How did they haul that rock?

LJ: We had, I guess you would call them a single axle ton and a half dump truck. That was the biggest equipment we had, was that.

JH: One rock at a time sounds like..?

LJ: Well, sometimes that's about all they got on it. When I worked on that, I loaded the trucks, well, I set the choker around the rock and then the crane lifted the rock into the truck.

JH: You ran the crane?

LJ: No, I was the one that set the choker. No, I didn't run the crane. I had a good opportunity to learn how to run all that equipment but I chose to do carpenter work. When I was on the highway, I drove truck all the time and then when we got down to the Aleutian's, I told the First Sergeant I'd like to do carpenter work, so that's what I did mostly from then on.

JH: Uh huh. Describe some of those jobs that they put you in that carpentry role?

LJ: Well, one I remember, and I guess I won't forget it, is when we were pouring footings for a building. I think it was a metal building that was just put together with metal parts. And I remember having to stay up all night. We had covers over them and kept fires under them to keep the cement from freezing. So I had to stay up all night and keep the fires going so the cement wouldn't freeze.

JH: How deep would you dig those footings to protect them from the frost?

LJ: Well, we didn't go down but only maybe two feet. Maybe not even that deep. The frosts down in the Aleutian's isn't quite that cold. It's cold and miserable and windy. In the Yukon, I think the coldest temperature was down around 55 to 60 degrees below zero.

JH: But nothing like that in the Aleutian's?

LJ: No. It doesn't get that cold down there.

JH: Maybe the ocean current protects it?

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LJ: Uh huh. Course on the north side of the island is the Bering Sea, you know, and the south side of the island is the Pacific.

JH: Did they call that the Gulf of Alaska? I wonder.

LJ: Yes, I guess. The Gulf of Alaska, I think more probably up north towards Kodiak.

JH: Yeah. I think you're right.

LJ: I spent a little time on Kodiak, and then from there we went to Adak. Adak was one island that the Japanese were planning on landing on it and taking it but it got so foggy that they couldn't find it and that's the only thing that saved that island. I've got a book here about the Aleutian's.

JH: I wanted to ask you about the footings that you were working on. When you mixed the cement and put it into place, what kind of equipment did you use? Did you have a large mixer or a small batch mixer or?

LJ: Just a small batch mixer and then we had a wheelbarrow.

JH: Irish buggies?

LJ: Just a regular wheelbarrow to take the cement to the footings.

JH: So it was pretty simple stuff?

LJ: Yeah, we didn't have a lot of heavy equipment. Of course on the airfield they had D-8 cats with a carryall behind it. And then they had graders but they didn't have a lot of the

equipment that they have now. The dock that they built there, they had a regular pile driver.

JH: It gets serious when you work on a dock, huh?

LJ: It's kind of spooky to get out there and walk across a board four inches wide by that water.

JH: Yeah. (Laughter)

LJ: I wouldn't want to try it now. (Laughter)

JH: I'm with you. (Laughter)

LJ: Yeah, when you're younger, why, I can see now why they have young people in the army.

JH: Yeah, good idea. You said that you moved to that new place and I've forgotten the name that you used? From...

LJ: ...you mean in the Aleutians?

JH: Yeah, in the Aleutians?

LJ: Shemya.

JH: Shemya. And then you went where?

LJ: Well it was after we got through on Shemya that I came back to the states.

JH: I see.

LJ: That was at the end of 1944. So we were down in the Aleutian Chain about two years and eight months on the highway. Just before we got ready to come home and leave the Aleutian's, a storm hit up there and it washed that dock completely out and the breakwater. We went down there the next morning and there wasn't hardly anything left of it. So in order to get back to the states, they flew us from Shemya to Kiska, and then we got on the ship there and came back to Seattle.

JH: Well nature has a way of teaching lessons, doesn't it?

LJ: It sure does. Yeah. I never realized how strong the water was. Right along the road that we built around that Island of Shemya, there was a huge rock, oh I don't know how big it was, it must have been ten or twelve feet high and probably that big around. And that rock was gone the next morning after the storm.

JH: Amazing.

LJ: Of course, we didn't realize it had stormed like that. Even though we didn't live very far from the edge of the water, the island was only just that small, it didn't leave a lot of room for...

JH: Right on the edge of a mistake there.

LJ: So the water's pretty strong. Pretty well proven by this last hurricane they had on the east coast, in North Carolina.

JH: Let's take that experience that you got up there and bring it back to Kane County and talk about what you did after the war.

LJ: Well, when I got out of the army, my brother, he spent some time down in the South Pacific during the war, and after that, after we both got out, we started, there wasn't much work around so we shingled houses and put siding on, doing a lot of carpenter work and that's where I kind of got started around here, just doing little jobs and I worked with another young man here in Kanab. We were partners for a while in construction, building motels and homes and things. And then in 1956 he decided he wanted out of it so I bought his share out and that's when I started the store, the lumberyard and hardware store.

JH: What did you call it?

LJ: Kanab Construction to start with. Then we changed it to Kanab Construction and Lumber Company. We were in the store, oh, about sixteen years and during that time I was building homes too all the time.

JH: Who minded the store?

LJ: My wife.

JH: Oh yeah. Good.

LJ: She knows more about lumber and hardware and buildings than most men do. Yeah, she's the one that kept things going and I give her all the credit for it.

JH: Uh huh. How did you work with the community on construction projects? What I'm thinking about is business practice. Did you work up a contract and they signed and you signed and that's what it was?

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LJ: Yeah. Most of the time I'd do the plans for the-home or the motel or whatever we were building and then I had a Utah general contractor's license and we just had a regular contract, construction price. We stayed in the store until we sold it in 1972. We lived right by the store. Our home was right by the store. At that time we came over here and I built this home in '72. So we've been here about twenty-seven years.

JH: It's been a nice comfortable home, I bet.

LJ: It sure has. Yeah. We've enjoyed it. I still do a little work out in my shop. I have a little shop here. Of course I don't do anything very big anymore.

JH: Yeah. Well it looks like this outfit that you've got here would be ideal for that. You can sit down...

LJ: ...I have a stool out there that I made that has casters on it and it made it so it raises up and down and that's what I take out in the yard to work around the yard or out in the shop there.

JH: Sounds ideal.

LJ: Right now I'm making things with sand.

JH: Huh. Do you put adhesive on some place and scatter sand for decoration?

LJ: Well not that way. I have one right over there behind you that I've done.

JH: I see, in glass.

LJ: It's all inside of glass. What I do know is, the sand is all glued to the inside of the glass. It's

just kind of a hobby to keep busy doing something.

JH: Right. It looks artistic to me.

LJ: Well, if you'd like and you have time, I could go out and show you what I've done. But you probably got a lot of other things to do.

JH: Well, we do have a couple of other appointments. Let me ask you about this construction business--back to the cement. What kind of a cement supply was there in Kane County?

LJ: Well, all of the cement came in here in bags--100-pound bags.

JH: You had your own mixer?

LJ: Uh huh. For a long time, until they got the ready mix here. Yeah, I had a mixer that I owned and it would mix about two wheelbarrows full at one time, so we'd have, oh, maybe three guys shoveling the gravel and the sand in the mixer and two guys running the wheelbarrows. That's they way we poured a lot of basements. In order to pour a basement, we'd make a walkway all around it so it wasn't dangerous.

JH: Did you put rebar?

LJ: Oh yes. Yeah, we always had rebars, we called them "jaybars", coming out of the footing and then of course you'd tie longer pieces of steel to that and go through the wall.

JH: Where did you acquire your lumber? Was it local wood?

LJ: Well, we used to have a sawmill down here in Fredonia. Of course they modernized it to the

point where they had ban saws so they could cut-any size log.

JH: Did they make finished lumber for you?

LJ: Oh yeah, they kiln dried a lot of the lumber and had a planer. That was a big operation down here.

JH: Did you work with the Whiting Brothers a bit when they were in there?

LJ: Uh huh. Yeah. I knew most of them.

JH: What about other products? With the lumberyard you could keep a supply?

LJ: Well, a lot of our lumber came from down here and then I drove my own truck to Salt Lake And bought from Boise Cascade and Salt Lake Hardware and a lot of places up there. So I drove my truck up there probably once a week or once every two weeks or whatever we needed. It depended on what other construction that was going because there were other contractors too that worked here.

JH: You were selling to those other contractors as well as your own construction stuff?

LJ: Uh huh. Yes.

JH: That sounds like a good deal to me. That sounds like a perfect operation.

LJ: Well, we had a good business there. We didn't make a lot of money but we made a living.

JH: That's what's important.

LJ: Yeah.

JH: When it came to moldings and that sort of stuff, did they come out of Fredonia too?

LJ: We had a molding mill here too--up above town. And he, oh, I don't know how many, I don't have no idea how much molding he made. But he'd buy his lumber mostly from down here. Of course it all had to be kiln dried.

End of Tape One, Side One

Begin Tape One, Side Two

JH: Let's change directions just a little bit and talk about things that you did other than work on construction or in the store. Were you involved in the community in other ways?

LJ: Yes, I served four years on the City Council here in Kanab and then I served two years on the Kane County School Board. Of course I've always been active in the church, the LDS Church.

JH: Always plenty to do there.

LJ: And then I've been involved with Cub Scouts and things like that. I don't know for how many years. I used to make the plaques for the Pinewood Derbies. I don't know how many years I made them—fifteen or twenty years, I don't know, until it got to the point where I couldn't do it very well anymore.

JH: How big was your family?

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LJ: We had three children--two girls and a boy. Our son lives here in Kanab and I have a daughter, who lives with her husband in Cedar City, and then a daughter and her husband that live in Orem.

JH: Do they come down occasionally?

LJ: Yes, they do. We have a cabin just north of, well do you know, did you notice the KOA campground as you come up the valley? Well, we have a cabin up there by that KOA under those pink cliffs. So they just love to come down to the cabin. Yeah, some of our grand kids, they think that's the only place.

JH: Did you build that cabin?

LJ: Yes. You go up there, right in between the Ponderosa Pines and, yeah, it's beautiful up there. We built about thirty years ago when things were a little cheaper. If we had to build it now, we'd never make it.

JH: What's your water supply like up there?

LJ: There's a spring up on the hillside. We don't have electricity but we do have water.

JH: What about the ownership of the land? Is it on Forest Service?

LJ: No, the canyon that we built in was privately owned so he subdivided it and we built. I bought two lots from the subdivider. So we have a one forty-third share of the water there. Everybody does.

JH: Do you maintain the system as an association?

LJ: Uh huh. We do now, yes--that and the roads.

JH: That's nice. With the construction of the motels and so on in Kanab, you'd get acquainted with the business community pretty well?

LJ: Well, I used to know everybody in Kanab, but I don't anymore. When we were in the lumberyard, why of course we got acquainted with everybody, but most of the people we built for were fairly close friends and people that we knew.

JH: Contractors would come in on the road and the airport and they'd trade with you, I guess?

LJ: Uh huh. We used to do a lot of business with the movie companies.

JH: Oh yeah. Let's talk about that a bit?

LJ: I guess the biggest one they ever had was when they filmed "The Greatest Story Ever Told." I guess we hauled material to them every day for a good month, anyway. A lot of times my wife took the truck, a small truck we had, and hauled the lumber.

JH: Did they have carpenters? Or did you go out and build stuff for them?

LJ: Well, they had their own carpenters, but I've worked on some of the sets and built some of them for them. I went up to Duck Creek once and built a little log cabin for them.

JH: Up in the Quakies, huh?

LJ: Uh huh. Yeah, we've worked with a lot of the movie companies.

JH: That's an interesting aspect of work like that. Did you ever have any difficulty getting your money from a contract like that?

LJ: Well, on "The Greatest Story Ever Told", there was a sub-contractor come in to furnish the homes for the people that worked on the sets out there. We had a little trouble getting the money from him. In fact, I think they finally ended up beating us out of a little. But as far as the movie companies were concerned, why we never had any trouble with them, as far as money.

JH: Let's carry that same question over to your work here in town. Did you ever have difficulty collecting?

LJ: Yes we did. We, I don't know how many thousands of dollars we lost on poor credit.

JH: Huh. How did you deal with that? Did you ever go to the Sheriff?

LJ: Well, we tried to put liens on things but it didn't amount to much. But you know, some of the people that, when we sold the store, some of the people that paid us, were the ones that couldn't afford to pay us. They didn't have much money. But they were honest enough to pay us. And the ones that could have paid us were the ones that were dishonest. So you find out who your friends are and who aren't.

JH: Well, those are interesting lessons, but sometimes cost us.

LJ: Well, to bad we have to learn them, but...

JH: Tell me about your service on the school board? Talk about that a little bit if you can.

LJ: Well, that was during '70, '71' and '72, I believe. It was a good experience. Some of the problems that came up make you wonder whether you're doing the right thing or not, a lot of times, but I guess if you're honest about what you do, why...

JH: That was wartime. Did that influence or impact your service on the school board--the Vietnam War?

LJ: No, I don't think the Vietnam War had too much impact, of course kind of forgot about a lot of that stuff. When I served on the City Council; that was back in the late '50's. The wife, she spent two years on the school board too, but that was just back, it's only been about four years ago I guess. But things are a lot different than they were then, when I was on the school board. They've got more, I guess you can blame it on the government regulations, I don't know what else.

JH: I think society generally is more complicated.

LJ: Well, when we started that store in 1956, we started it, I guess you could call it, on a shoestring, a pretty slim one at that, but you couldn't do that now days. You'd never make it.

JH: When you acquire a business license, the community requires that you not put yourself forward in a way to deceive the public, and I guess that means quite a few different things doesn't it? What, I was thinking about putting in displays and that sort of thing for a retail business, did you build cabinets and that sort of thing?

LJ: I built most all of the display shelves and things we had in our store. Well, to start with, you couldn't buy what you wanted. It cost you a lot more money. So I built a lot of that stuff. We painted it ourselves. Of course if you compared it with today, why, it probably wouldn't

look very good.

JH: Uh huh. (Laughter) I bet it looked great then?

LJ: Well, it did, it did in those days, but things are displayed different now days.

JH: You've seen an evolution in the paint that's used too, I imagine. Can you comment on that?

LJ: Well, you know, that's something I've never been able to understand about paint. Several years ago we went to that BYU, where they displayed that stuff from Egypt, some of that stuff there, the paint they had on that, I'd like to know how they did that.

JH: It's lasted pretty well, hasn't it?

LJ: Of course it may not of had the use and abuse, but even then, it still withstands a lot better than paint does nowadays. These ads on TV nowadays, where they say paint will last a lifetime are, I'd like to see one of them yet that will do it.

JH: You think they might be guilty of false advertising?

LJ: I don't know whether paint is any better now than it was back in those days.

JH: Maybe the advertising is better?

LJ: (Laughter) Yeah, I think you've got it right there. (Laughter)

JH: You know, that leads me to ask a question about tools. You've seen a remarkable change in tools. Hand tools, for instance.

LJ: Well, when I first started doing carpenter work, there wasn't such thing as a skill saw. So I've built house where everything was cut with a hand saw--all the rafters. And that's another thing, I'll bet you there isn't a carpenter today that could flat lay out a roof with a square.

JH: Or a staircase.

LJ: That's right. They just don't know how to do it. I've forgotten a lot about what I knew about framing square, but I believe I could still go out and cut a rafter though.

JH: Yeah, I remember reading books about it. I never did work as a carpenter much, but I can remember some of the formulas that they provided to help you get through those processes. It sure looked simple, once you understood what they were saying, but you don't really want to invent the wheel every time you go to do something. What about, I was thinking about the use of an electric drill verses brace and bit, or some other kind of an auger. Can you describe how it changed for you in that respect?

LJ: Well, it made it a lot quicker and lot easier. When I first started doing carpenter work here in Kanab, I think of two homes here, if you had to cut a door off, you'd cut it off with a rip saw, if you drilled a hole through for the lock you did it with a brace and bit. Now days you can take a drill and one of those hole saws and you get it done in about two minutes. It's a lot quicker, and all the doors are mortared with a router machine. Back in those days you took a chisel and did it.

JH: Yeah, it's a lot quicker. The idea, I suppose is to make money for those tool manufacturers, but it sure helps the carpenters as well.

LJ: Well, it speeds up the contractor's work a lot and...

JH: The process of working with plumbers and electricians, and that sort of thing, do you have any comment about working with those other trades in your experience?

LJ: Well, I guess we'd just work along with them and have them on the job at the right time when they need to be there to get the electrical and wiring and plumbing done. It's been, oh, four or five years, I guess, as Building Inspector here in Kanab. Then I've been the Building Inspector on the high school down here for the County. I was also was the inspector on two or three different HUD housing projects. You learn a lot by just watching other people work, doing it the right way and the wrong way.

JH: Do you occasionally run into the contractors that want to cut corners and cheat on the specs?

LJ: Well, not so much here. People have been pretty honest about building. Sometimes they'll try to use a lower grade lumber. But most generally though, I've found when I was on those housing projects and on the school too, that they followed pretty close to the architect's designs. Of course if they don't they don't get paid.

JH: Right. I wonder too if there's the element of the specification sheet being right there in front of them so that they know, other words, if they don't really have a discretion...

LJ: ...no, they don't have much, well a lot of times a lot of that stuff is pretty obvious too. I remember on the school house down here, they had one column that was coming up as a support column and they called for a certain size of steel coming out of the footings and they didn't put it there. So they ended up drilling down into the concrete and doing a lot of extra work to bring that up to specs.

JH: Sounds like a stomach ache to me. Those were hard lessons.

LJ: I remember one wall down there that they built; this wasn't really the contractor's fault, it was the brick supplier's. When they made the brick they had a slight curve to them like this here. So when they laid the brick in the wall, every one was curved like this here and that mortar joint was joint was just like that. They tore that whole wall down. And it had reinforced steel in it and concrete. It was a double wall. You've got two layers of brick, one here, inside and outside. When the architect saw that, boy, the walls came down. So it cost them some money. Of course the brick supplier, that was part of their fault too, you know.

JH: Well, those are not happy stories.

LJ: Well, you know, a lot of that could be eliminated if people would just watch what they're doing and have the right attitude about doing it right to start with.

JH: In that particular case, is it possible that the brick supplier either bought or had the bricks made with someone who was just trying to get by?

LJ: Well, no. The brick company in Salt Lake that made those bricks had furnished other bricks for the building and they weren't that way, but this one batch they brought down had that slight curve to them, so I think he is the one that had to foot part of the bill. I don't know how it ended up. I wasn't concerned about that part of it anyway.

JH: Well, an inspector's job is essential.

LJ: Well, it's too bad we have to have it. We've got a lot of rules and regulations that we've brought on ourselves--like the seat belt law. We have to be forced into doing it when it's our benefit to have it on.

JH: It's funny to hear people talk about how awful it is to wear a seat belt because it maybe, wrinkles their dress? (Laughter) I was thinking what it would be like, how wrinkled their dress would be if they ran into something.

LJ: Uh huh. Yeah. Well, we shouldn't have to be forced into doing things. We ought to be honest enough and conscientious enough to do it ourselves.

JH: Well it makes sense.

LJ: Especially when it's for our benefit. That's the same as putting up a good building. I was thinking about those buildings over there in Taiwan. Seeing some of them leaning like they are. They must have had some pretty lax building codes there. Of course that was a pretty strong earthquake.

JH: You know, I thought when I saw some of those pictures, those buildings were leaning more than 45 degrees, but they were still intact in the upper floors. Now that says to me that that's a pretty strong construction to leave them in tact like that?

LJ: Except for the bottom part where it let it go.

JH: That's right, but I wonder if the force of the quake can be blamed for the failure, I don't know.

LJ: Well, they may not have been able to build, sometimes I wonder if we can really build good enough to withstand an earthquake.

JH: That's right. Some motion, I understand, is sideways. And some is like this. It might have sheared off with that kind of motion. But it was a curiosity to me. I have enough

engineering experience to at least think about it, although I don't have any answers.

LJ: Well, like you say, if they had that motion like this here, it's hard to tell. I don't know that we'll ever know.

JH: The one that shocked me in this same respect, were the ones in Turkey. And it looked to me like it was malfeasance on the part of the builders. The lack of reinforced concrete looked really striking.

LJ: Well, when I was on that building project out here, those housing projects, I had to take a slump test on every load of concrete that come in to see if it passed the code or not, which is about twenty eight hundred pounds. So maybe the concrete wasn't...maybe it didn't pass.

JH: Do they require a low slump concrete, just enough so that it will be plastic and fit into the form?

LJ: Well, it can't be too much. If it's too dry then you get too much honeycomb. So it has to be, I don't remember now what it is. I should remember it.

JH: (Laughter) Well, it's just fine point, we don't need to elaborate on that. The specifications around here were probably only with public buildings, where you had a need for high specs? How did you carry the requirements that you saw in motel and home construction? What were the requirements that you more or less imposed on yourself?

LJ: You mean as a building inspector? Or a contractor?

JH: No, as a contractor.

LJ: Well, I always tried to, we didn't cut down on the cement, put in gravel, because I've seen too much concrete go to pieces. So we tried to put it in there honestly so they were good footings.

JH: Is there any alkali problem around here that you have to deal with?

LJ: Well, a little bit. We've got some clay out east of here that's impossible to build on. It moves. There's a Holiday Inn out here. They built it on some pretty shaky ground and they've had problems ever since. Even though they went down and put big columns of concrete and they've still had problems. But it's in an area where that clay is and it's built on it. I don't know, it's not very smart.

JH: You know, there's a building here in town, I don't know if it's still standing, it's the old library. It's showing signs of being on that clay.

LJ: That's kind of in that clay area--up at that end of town. But I don't know, that's pretty sandy. When we built here in Kanab, I ran into lots of different kinds of soil. Gravel and, so I don't know about that library building. It's been there a long time.

JH: Yes it has. But that east wall is almost separated from the rest of the building. It's amazing.

LJ: Well, I tore down an old adobe wall once here in Kanab and I was amazed at how strong it was. How well it was built.

JH: Had they re-enforced it some way?

LJ: Oh no. There wasn't a bit of, a little bit of straw in it and that kind of thing.

JH: Straw is different from rebar.

LJ: Some of those walls are pretty sturdy. I don't know, I wouldn't be surprised, if that old library building will be standing for a lot longer. But to say it was safe to be in might be another thing.

JH: The problems that are faced by contractors and builders, maybe we could include local government agencies, they rely on experts. You were one that they relied on weren't you? As a building inspector, you were a person that knew.

LJ: If anything went wrong, why it was the Building Inspectors fault.

JH: I surely appreciate the chance to come and talk with you. I've enjoyed it a lot.

LJ: Well, I hope it's been helpful in some way. I've enjoyed it.

JH: That's a great part of your life. I'm thinking about your Aleutian experience and the Alaska Highway. I have a book written by, I think it was a Colonel or the son of a Colonel was running the show on that highway. I worked in the construction business, so I was interested particularly in that project. It's an amazing story. Dealing with permafrost and that kind of material, speaking of foundation material. It's a technology all by itself.

LJ: There are places on that highway up there where that permafrost so bad that the only way they could get the road across it was to take trees, oh about that size I guess, and lay them across there, they called it corrugated road. When we dumped gravel on it, sometimes we'd have to put a lot of gravel on there to get it to hold. Otherwise I don't know what they would've done. I've seen some of those D8 cats that were buried clear up to the top of the tracks.

JH: Yeah, that's a disabled tractor. (Laughter)

LJ: (Laughter) It sure is.

JH: They could turn a wheel, but it wouldn't grab anything.

LJ: No it wouldn't. Just spin it. Well, it was a good experience for me. I was lucky. I don't know how I was fortunate to get in an outfit like that. A lot of soldiers had a pretty rough time of it in those places where they had to fight.

JH: Yes.

End of Tape One, Side Two

End of Tape One, End of Interview

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Interview Agreement and Deed of Gift

In view of the historical value of this oral history interview and my interest in Utah history,

I, Lowell M. Johnson
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knowingly and voluntarily donate to the Utah Division of State History the audio tapes, any transcription, as well as any and all copyrights and other rights, title and interest that might exist. I also permit the Utah Division of State History full use of this document for whatever purposes they may have.

Interview Description

Date of Interview Sept 22/99

Primary Subject Growing up in Glendale /sheep herding /
war / coming home & getting trapped / Carpentry

Other Topics Working on the Alaskan Highway; WWII & equipment used;
Community involvement; Tools New & Old.

Number of Tapes _____

Signature Lowell M. Johnson Date Sept 22, 1999

Address _____ Phone _____