Interview with Michael Johnson

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Interviewer: Michael Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Today is October 8, 2008. We're sitting here with Michael Johnson up in Carroll County. How are you doing today Michael?

Johnson: Excellent.

Maniscalco: Great. Thank you for coming and sitting down with us today. It was a lot of fun getting up here, and seeing your home so far has been just a lot of fun. We're going to ask you some real easy questions and then we'll get into some harder ones, and everything in between.

Johnson: You picked a good day for it.

Maniscalco: Good. Can you start off by telling me your age and date of birth?

Johnson: I was born June 29, 1949, so I am fifty-nine.

Maniscalco: And where were you born?

Johnson: Elgin, Illinois. I grew up out about forty miles northwest of Chicago.

Maniscalco: Were you born on a farm?

Johnson: I wasn't. I was born—at that time, that land which had all been farmland, was being turned into large residential tracts, for the few people who I guess had come back from the war, the Second World War, and were living normally around Chicago, moved out. My parents had eleven or twelve acres.

Maniscalco: Oh wow, okay.

Johnson: It was all farm ground around us, I mean it looked almost similar to what we have here today. It doesn't look like that now.

Maniscalco: How did your parents get there? Did they grow up in Elgin?

Johnson: They grew up in Chicago and on the north side of Chicago. I think my mother found the house while my father was in Germany, during the war, because her brother had already moved out there the year before and found a piece of property.

Maniscalco: Twelve acres is a good amount of property. What were they doing on that property?

Johnson: Unfortunately, they were growing lawn. This started with Olmstead and a hundred years later we were doing the same thing, and I got to take care of a lot of that lot.

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh.

Johnson: That was mowing twelve acres of lawn and raking leaves on twelve acres of lawn, and that was before vacuums and blowers.

Maniscalco: That's a lot of lawn.

Johnson: Yeah. We'd start on Saturday morning, my father and the three boys, with these big bamboo leaf rakes, and by the end of the day we'd be burning huge piles of leaves on the gravel driveway, and then the next day we'd do it again. It kept us out of trouble.

Maniscalco: So tell me, what about your grandparents? Were your grandparents around?

Johnson: I didn't know either grandmother; they both died the year I was born. Both grandfathers I knew. My father's father, Thomas Joseph Johnson, was a lawyer in Chicago, and a pretty active political, Irish-Catholic. I think Mayor Daley, as a young man, was one of his political protégés. They moved to Miller Beach, Indiana, back during the gangster era. He ran a dance hall there and did all sorts of interesting, 1930s and 40s type things. My father followed in his footsteps as a lawyer, and before the Second World War, was basically in that Chicago, states attorneys business. Probably his most famous case was to defend the "Lady in Red", after she fingered John Dillinger, but it was a lot of that sort of thing before the war you know, gangster stuff and political things.

After the war, and they had bought the property out in what's now Barrington Hills, he decided that with a family, that sort of legal practice was going to be onerous, and he joined a firm and was with the firm as a trial lawyer until his death.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Can you kind of tell me what you remember about your grandfathers being around?

Johnson: I don't remember a lot about T.J., because he was pretty old at the time and we didn't have a close relationship, but I had a very close relationship with my mother's father, Ralph Bard Sr., who was a financier in Chicago, a businessman, and in the Second World War, he was Under Secretary of the Navy. He had a very interesting career, which I don't think is pertinent here, but one thing that is pertinent is when I was about five years old, he came out and he taught me to fly fish. He is a great fisherman and a hunter, and a lot of his friends, I think were dying off at the time and you know, his grandson he knew loved fishing and hunting and whatnot, and he became like a second father for me in terms of the outdoors. We fished around Northern Illinois and up in Wisconsin. He belonged to a club up there he used to take me to, and we spent a lot of time together in a boat and whatnot. He had a piece of property down in Virginia, an old plantation that he had for, maybe he had it for twenty years. We used to go down there in the Easter holidays, and it was covered with timber and there were always two or three what they call portable sawmills at the time down there, and these were big mills, they were big circular mills. They were logged by loggers using mules and basically black mule skinners who ran the log moving operation, and it was fascinating. I was absolutely taken by it and I could watch it forever.

My grandfather liked to walk through the timbers down there and analyze the trees, and he'd mark trees that he thought should be cut, and discuss the trees. He seemed, for a man who I considered to be pretty much a coldhearted businessman, to be a different person when he was in that environment. I think it's where I first started to develop a love for the trees, and it's certainly the first time I ever saw a sawmill, and I thought it was pretty neat. I never thought I would be part of that business.

Maniscalco: What were the neat things about the sawmill? I mean you said it was really neat and you thought it was pretty neat, but what is it exactly?

Johnson: I started going down there when I was five years old, and I think he sold the property when I was about twelve or thirteen and for a young boy, cutting down trees and the noise and the machinery. I've always been very mechanical and interested in mechanical and engineering type things. It was action, and I loved watching the saw produce lumber and that sort of thing. I've always been—growing up on the property out in Barrington, I was right on a hundred acre lake, so I spent most of my time either out in the woods or the fields or on the lake. So I was always just attracted to the natural world and part of it. I knew what was in the lake, I knew what was in the mud, I knew what was in the woods, the birds, all of those sorts of things, so that was very attractive to me.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of tell me—I mean you talked about your grandparents. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Johnson: I have two brothers and a sister. My sister is the oldest, and I have an older brother and a younger brother.

Maniscalco: How would you explain your childhood, if you were to describe it to somebody? How would you describe your childhood, growing up with your brothers and sisters on these twelve acres?

Johnson: We were brought up—my parents were really good at this, when I look back at it. They didn't try to push us into any sort of mold. In other words, none of us became a lawyer. My sister was the oldest, and she tended to gravitate a little bit towards religion. She went to a Catholic school for a while and eventually went to Catholic schools in college, and was getting her Masters in Theology I think, when she had some medical problems and had to stop that.

My older brother was kind of a rebel. He was the one who fought with my father the most. I think I was the watcher, you know the one who just would go outside and go out in a boat and fish, and not make a lot of noise or not try to push the family one way or the other. My younger brother, who was two and a half years younger than me, became the businessman. He was the one who went to Princeton and Harvard and has a financial consultant business.

So it was really a pretty different group. My sister did eventually become a principal of a Catholic school, and she's still involved in a lot of educational work and theological work that way. My older brother is in Denver now, and he's done everything from real estate to private investigating. We don't always know what he's involved with, and here I am, still out in the woods. At one point my parents, in eighth grade, decided that I wasn't applying myself academically, and they had me do a bunch of tests and they decided to send me away to private secondary school, I think because they were afraid that I was going to grow up living in the woods and fishing and doing those sorts of things my whole life. That, I guess is how it turned out anyway.

Maniscalco: It sounds like you spent a lot of your childhood outside. What kinds of chores did you have to do?

Johnson: We had to mow the grass, we had to mow the weeds when the big lawnmower wouldn't cut them. So first you'd go out with the gang mowers and mow, and then you'd go out with a hand operated mechanical mower and knock down the weeds. We had to rake leaves all fall. We had to shovel walks and plow the driveway, which there was a lot more of when I was a kid. I'm not just making that up, this isn't like I walked ten miles to school, but there was a lot more snow shoveling back then, and then whatever projects had to be done on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. If dad said we were working on something, we worked on it. I gravitated towards the mechanical things. I was fascinated with engines and anything mechanical, and I was good at taking things apart, and pretty good at putting them back together. That comes with age you

know, and experience. So we did lots of work, a lot of physical work and outdoor work.

Maniscalco: Was there something that your parents would ask you to do that you just hated doing, in terms of chores? Is there a single chore that sticks out in your mind, or a couple of them?

Johnson: Well, no. I really just grew up thinking that all of those things were things that you needed to do, and I think that's put me in a pretty good stead today, because when you're trying to run a sawmill and you have eight or ten pieces of machinery that you have to keep running and four or five chainsaws and all of these things, when things start to break, it can be very frustrating. Just having that sort of philosophy that okay we've got to stop, this has to be fixed and it's got to be fixed right, and then go on, is kind of helpful to have, not that I don't get impatient. I can't remember any job that stuck out like that, that I just hated to do.

Maniscalco: What about having brothers and sisters around? Was there a job that you guys would kind of fight about; I want to do that one because it's the good job?

Johnson: My father had an interesting system, and my younger brother, who is the financial guru today, has brought this up when he's talked about it in family gatherings and things. My father had a system where he had a book, and if we were running the gang mowers, it was a certain rate per hour, and if we were running the Gravely tractor, it was a certain rate per hour, and if we were raking leaves it was a certain rate. He based those on the difficulty that he thought each job represented, and so at the end of the week or maybe every couple weeks, we'd sit down on a Sunday evening, and dad would get out the adding machine, which he loved to operate, an old you know, hand cranked adding machine. He'd figure out our hours and how many hours were thirty-five cents and how many hours were fifty-five cents. I can't remember what the rates were, but I don't think anything went to a dollar. And then he'd add it all up and we'd get our allowance. So there was some incentive to take the more onerous jobs I guess.

Maniscalco: Now, as a kid getting an allowance, what sorts of things did you spend your allowance on?

Johnson: With me, it was pretty much always fishing equipment, things to do with camping. I had some friends in grade school and we would occasionally, on the weekends, go out and camp on the lake. The lake was surrounded by a lot of property the neighbors owned, which was just wild back then, and nobody minded that we were out there camping and fishing and whatnot. Things like that. Radios, you know when transistor radios just came out when I was a kid, so a transistor that I could hide under my pillow and listen to WLS late at night, when my parents didn't know, things like that.

Maniscalco: Very cool. What about school? Where did you go to school?

Johnson: I went to school in a small grade school, which was called Countryside. It's in Cook County, out there. Because all these people were moving out and had houses, there was a different school district which was separate from the town school district, and we went to a school, there were probably, usually—I think the biggest class I was ever in was thirty-two or thirty-four, in grade school. And I also, interestingly enough, went through grade school with a lot of my cousins, because another brother moved out there, they had four kids. My uncle Ralph had three, there were four of us, then there was a second cousin that had children. I think I had three first cousins in my class.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow.

Johnson: And two ahead of me and a couple behind me, and that seemed to be kind of common in that school. I know the Lattells and the Smiths, and there was a whole other related group of cousins. And it wasn't that we could all necessarily play because we were next door to each other every day, but it was a pretty close, a pretty close group. I always grew up with a fairly strong sense of greater family that way, which I think would be pretty similar as people have here today, and maybe rare for people in a more urban setting.

Maniscalco: Do you remember family gatherings then?

Johnson: Oh, certainly.

Maniscalco: What were they like?

Johnson: There were two major family gatherings. The first one was at Thanksgiving and Christmas. My grandfather Bard had a house in Lake Forest, and we would go there for dinner, always Christmas, occasionally Thanksgiving, and sometimes there were as many as fifty or sixty people at that dinner. Two turkeys you know, I mean a big family gathering, and my grandfather would always make a speech, and we were all admonished to work hard and represent the family and be successful and whatnot. Then in the summer, his brother Norwood had a property out by Crystal Lake, and I loved that property because it had a lake on it that was very well stocked, and part of the summer picnic was you know, I could go fishing out there. He was also a businessman, he was successful, and he did exactly the same thing; a big picnic, between fifty and a hundred family people there, and a big lecture before, always before. It was like the family grace was the family lecture, and he did exactly the same thing.

Maniscalco: That's pretty neat.

Johnson: So we were all admonished to grow up and represent the family and all that sort of thing.

Maniscalco: What about food? What kinds of food were you eating at these events?

Johnson: Well, at the Christmas it was standard Christmas fare; at the picnic it was picnic fare. I always grew up—the way my mother ran the household, it was one of those deals where we had pretty much the same meal every night of the week. Now we were raised Catholic, so Friday was always fish or macaroni and cheese. I think Wednesday was spaghetti night, it was that sort of thing. I didn't spend a whole lot of interest on food. My mother was a good cook but not a gourmet type cook, but she was quite good. I think we have developed a much greater interest in food, in cooking since we've had our own family. Living out here, it's kind of one of our major forms of entertainment, is to cook well and enjoy cooking, preparing good food.

Maniscalco: Neat. Now, while you were in school, you know school's a big organization but there's other outside organizations that go on, you know FFA, 4-H, different things. Were you involved in any of those?

Johnson: I was not, and for a very obvious reason. There wasn't FFA around us, because the big farming was moving out of the area as it was being taken over. I know there were some 4-H, but there was Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts and a lot of those sorts of things, and I had no interest in them whatsoever. I had a dog and a gun, and I could go as far as I wanted in any direction. I had a boat and a canoe and a hundred acre lake, and what did I need the Boy Scouts for? I mean that was like playing at what I was doing full-time.

Now my older brother was in the Boy Scouts and a lot of athletics. I wasn't as interested in athletics at the time. I thought I kind of had it all. I was pretty alone, not lonely but alone.

Maniscalco: Did you ever feel that your parents wanted you to join the Boy Scouts or 4-H or anything like that?

Johnson: No.

Maniscalco: Did they ever recommend it?

Johnson: They did want me to be on more sports teams.

Maniscalco: Oh really?

Johnson: Yeah, and I didn't have a whole lot of interest in that. My older brother was a very, very good athlete, exceptionally good, and loved baseball and wrestling and basketball and things of that nature. I was not tall. I'm actually a pretty good athlete, pretty well coordinated, but I'd been much more interested in athletics later in my life but still, on a sort of a solitary nature, you know running and bicycling basically, for health and relaxation.

Maniscalco: What sports were they trying to get you to join?

Johnson: Baseball, little league. In the summertime, until I got to be maybe in my lower teens, I didn't have any specific jobs other than all of the work that had to be done around the house. So I think my parents thought that having us, you know some of our time utilized in teams was a good thing. I'd rather be out on the lake. We keep coming back to that don't we?

Maniscalco: No, that's okay. It drives it home.

Johnson: Once you find something you like, stick with it.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Well, what about church as a child? Was it very important? I mean you mentioned that.

Johnson: Well, we were raised Catholic, so we went to church every Sunday, and not being in a Catholic school, every Thursday afternoon we went to catechism class in town. It was a big deal until we stopped doing catechism class. I mean I went to church until I went away to high school, and in fact I still even kept going to church there. At the private school there was a bus that took you into town and whatnot. Socially it wasn't a big thing.

Maniscalco: You didn't ever go to picnics or anything?

Johnson: No.

Maniscalco: Okay, interesting. Let's talk about what we're really here for, and that's the fact that you are operating a farm. You're growing trees and a sawmill. Can you kind of tell us first of all, what does it look like here? If somebody were to come here, can you kind of describe what the ground looks like and the land looks like and everything?

Johnson: Well, the land is mainly a Northern Illinois, Oak-Hickory-Cherry forest. I think it's always been forested, and I think the reason that it has been is because there are a lot of ravines running through this property, and where much of the rest of the forestland, you know where the land is flat and suitable for farming has been cleared, this never was. It was one of those pieces of property, when I looked back in the history, in the books of ownership, that was probably always woodlots.

Around Northern Illinois, I've noticed a lot of timbers, that if you go back a hundred years and you look at the plat maps, they are owned by dozens, if not a hundred people; two acres, three acres, five acres, all chopped up into little pieces. There's a big timber north of our land called the wolf timber, which was like that, which really represented people who lived in town who had interests that they could cut their heating wood every winter or in the fall, and bring it in. I think that's what saved a lot of the timbers around here from just being turned into farms.

A little more of the timber or the property. I bought some timber from a neighbor, well I bought some land from a neighbor back in the beginning of the 90s, when she sold her farm, and I have planted some of that to trees and left some of it as pasture. I put a pond on a little bit of it. We'd always continue to manage towards forestry here.

The way I bought this property was sort of by happenstance. I was working in photography. We're not talking about that, but I am a commercial photographer.

Maniscalco: We'll talk about it.

Johnson: I was doing that, and I had moved back out here. I'd been working in Chicago and I had a business that I had kind of started up, that I could do moving back and forth. I was back out here and I was looking for a farmhouse. I didn't want to build a new house, I had never thought of building a house. I was looking for a farmhouse that I knew, as farms got larger and larger and farms were bought up, that a lot of these farmhouses were cut off and could be offered for sale reasonably. I found a farmer up north of the Timberlake Playhouse here, Blaine McGinty, who had an old centennial farm, you know his family had been on the farm for over a hundred years, and he was doing a little real estate selling. He was a wonderful guy, and I met him and I said, "Do you have any houses that have been cut off?" And he said, "Yeah, I think I've got three or four that you might like to see."

It was kind of funny, because I was in my early twenties and had long hair, and he was an old, you know bald, farmer and just a wonderful man. He thought I was probably interesting you know, and something different, and he loved to talk. So we got in the car and we started driving around, looking at houses, and he had some that fit the bill pretty well. And as we came back this way he said, "I just listed a piece of property for a friend of mine." He said, "I know it's not what you're looking at, but I haven't looked at it. Would you like to take a walk in the woods?" And so we drove in here, which was a forty acre piece of timber. There was a cabin on it, a screened in cabin that the man used for playing poker and hunting deer, and there was no house or anything.

We took a walk. We walked out the back. There was a path right through the timber, from corner to corner, and we talked and I looked at the trees, and it was sort of like being back in the forests in Virginia with my grandfather. I mean it just resonated very strongly. We came back and we went out, looked at a couple more houses, and I told him, "Thank you very much." Two days later I called him and I said how much does he want for that piece of timber? He told me and I had never thought of building a house, and I kind of thought about it for another week, and I went over and I talked to him and I said—I made him an offer and bought the property.

So then I sat down and tried to figure out how to build a house, and started building, I think that fall. I guess it was in July or August, and that fall we started building. I was alone at the time.

Maniscalco: Were you—I mean, when you decided that you were going to buy this, were you buying it with the idea that I'm going to start growing trees or harvesting trees?

Johnson: The trees were already growing here.

Maniscalco: Well, harvesting trees I guess.

Johnson: No. I bought it with the idea that it was quite a beautiful timber, and that I would preserve it. I thought that preserving timber was something that might be a good thing to do. I also probably realized that I needed a little land around me, because of the way I grew up and the way I feel about the natural world, but I didn't have any real intention of harvesting trees at the time. In fact, I was more of the preservationist approach I think.

Maniscalco: Now you said you bought this land, there was no home there, and you set out to start learning how to build a home.

Johnson: Yes.

Maniscalco: So how did that—can you tell us about that process?

Johnson: I had, along with all the other things that I've learned to do, mechanical and whatnot, my dad was pretty handy around the house and of course I was pretty good with a hammer and a saw and all of that sort of thing. I used to spend a lot of evenings just making things in the basement, another almost dedicated hobby of mine. So I did know my way around some construction. I'd helped people out on some projects before.

I first sat down and designed a house, very small, because it was just for me. There were only six rooms in it, and a darkroom out the back. And then I went up to a lumberyard in Freeport and they put the design into a blueprint. Because this was a registered tree farm at the time, and it had a forestry plan, and I guess because of some of the county regulations, there were no codes that had to be followed, you know not that we didn't build to code. Then I found two carpenters who agreed to build the house, and we started building, put the basement in, and I worked with them. By May of that year, we started again in about April, you know once we had the basement in, and by May of that year we had the house closed in, siding on it and a roof, and then they left.

Now by that time I had met Patricia. She had moved up from New Orleans, where she was working, and we were planning on getting married. Once the carpenters left, we spent the next couple of years finishing the insides. I mean there were no stairs, there were no floors, there were no inside walls, doors, all

those sorts of things. So we just worked away at the house for the next couple of years, and by that time we had a child and another one on the way, so before we even finished the first part of the house, this part that we're in right here was planned. In that case, I had a very good friend I went to college with, who was a carpenter down in Champaign, who, interestingly enough, a cabinet shop became available in Chadwick and he'd always wanted to live in the country, and because I had this project, which I offered him a—he and his wife moved up here. Tom and I worked on this part of the house and built it that next summer, and he and I have built all the rest of the house as we've continued to add on to it as we had other children.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Johnson: It's still not finished by the way.

Maniscalco: Really?

Johnson: Well you look around and you can always see something that you were going to do but you never quite got finished with.

Maniscalco: Can you name some of the projects that you're looking forward to doing still?

Johnson: Oh, I don't look forward to doing any of them. At this point it's maintenance. We've already replaced the roof now and you know, replacing windows and things like that. But what I mean is there are still a couple of doorstops on closets and insides of closets that have never been finished.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned when you moved here you were single.

Johnson: Yes.

Maniscalco: And then after you got the outside of the house kind of put together, Patricia moved up here from New Orleans. How did you meet Patricia?

Johnson: We met out in Massbach, which is a little crossroads, not even a town any more, though it still has a name, up near Elizabeth. A very good friend of mine was living in the old Massbach schoolhouse there, which had been turned into a residence. He was a landscape painter, and as I was a landscape photographer, we were good friends and we talked a lot. He married a woman who had grown up with Patricia in Evanston, they were good friends. She was out visiting and I met her out here.

Maniscalco: Very cool.

Johnson: Yeah.

Maniscalco: Great. To come back to the farm. We talked about your house, but what other buildings do you have here?

Johnson: Well now we have, we of course have a garage. The next building we built was a honey processing building, because I had been—I started out with one beehive and as the bees swarmed, got more and more, and finally a friend of mine, an old man up in Schapville, decided to get out of beekeeping, and I bought all of his equipment, all of his extracting and bottling equipment, and built a building down here to house that equipment and to do the bottling and extracting. That was nice because it allowed him to stay in beekeeping for a few more years, and we went into it really full-time, on top of the photography business of course. That was a second building.

Then, since I started the sawmill business, there have been numerous additions out there. There is a building—well, that gets into how I started the sawmill. Should we jump right into it?

Maniscalco: Go ahead.

Johnson: Okay. I kept bees for many years. I think from the first beehive until we sold the entire operation, we were keeping bees for seventeen years. So then that particular building was empty, that we did the bottling and extracting in. Back in about—I can't remember the date but it was probably 19[97]—I think we'd been doing this for eleven years now, the sawmill business. Before then, I have to say that a couple years after I bought the property, I got in touch with our district forester, Ralph Eads, because this property had been part of the American Tree Farm System, which is an organization that promotes sustainable forestry, both for clean water, clean air, aesthetics, forest products, recreation. All of those are part of the Tree Farm System's guidelines, and to keep your property in a forestry program, it has to be inspected every once in a while. There are advantages to having your property in a forestry program. The main one is tax advantage, where you're taxed at an Ag rate or below.

Ralph came out. I wanted to see what needed to be done in the timber. I didn't know anything about silviculture, and I had started reading, which is basically I think how I've learned to do about everything that we do. Ralph came out and we walked the timber and he said well you know, you could do this and you could do that, and I said I'd like to start by doing a timber stand improvement of ten acres a year. TSI is, timber stand improvement is basically whatever the timber needs to get it in good shape to move ahead and grow. It's sort of like weeding your garden. If there are a lot of shade tolerant species that you don't want in the timber, you kill them, you cut them down or you inject some herbicide under the bark that kills just that tree, to make room for oaks and more desirable species to grow. You do some thinning. It's just like planting a row of carrots. You plant all those seeds, the carrots grow up, they're way too close together, you've got to give the ones that you want to grow to maturity room, both room for their roots and also more importantly for trees, light. A lot of times when you walk the forest from a silvicultural point of view, you're mainly looking up. You're looking to see if the crowns are touching, because the top of the tree, the leaves are the food factory.

That's where all the magic happens and that's where the growth—that's why the growth occurs.

So I spent a lot of time in the forest with Ralph, and he went around and marked trees that he thought should be killed or removed. We talked about planting, we talked about regenerative practices. I started reading, probably the second year that I bought the property and I've been reading about silviculture ever since. It's an interesting process because a lot of people think of tree farming as growing trees in rows, and certainly that is the case, there's Christmas tree farming and there's hardwood tree farming that way, but the tree farm system encompasses huge tracts of timber and forest land ownership. Over 50 percent I think, of all the forest land in Illinois, is owned by private landowners, and that's true in much of the country.

Growing trees, silviculture, is very similar to other types of farming; it's just that the timescale is radically different. You try to learn how to manage timber. You read about it, you try things, and it takes a long time to see if they're working. I always say that by the time you really know something about growing trees you're dead. I mean it's hard to pass this knowledge on you know? Producing timber is under many of the same types of pressures and problems that producing any living crop is today. Right away, I learned that you can't just go out and plant seedlings. Now you might say why do you have to plant seedlings, you know don't trees produce their own nuts and offspring? But at a certain point, timbers get to be very dense and the only thing that will grow are what we call shade tolerant species; your slippery elms, your box elders, hackberries, things like that, which might not necessarily be the kind of trees that you'd like to propagate. You might be more interested in your oaks and cherries and hickories, maybe walnut, some of the more valuable timber species. You might be more interested in growing maples, because of the aesthetic qualities, and that would be a good one because maples are very shade tolerant, and they develop into climax forest pretty quickly.

We also have the problem of deer, turkeys, squirrels, we're talking predation. If you don't have any acorns to grow into oak trees, you're not going to have any oak trees. You're not going to have walnuts if they eat all the walnuts. So one of the problems that we have now in forestry is that we're overrun by whitetail deer in Northern Illinois, and I mean we have herds in this timber in the winter, of sixty, seventy deer. So that's a challenge, both for them eating the seedling, eating the mast, eating and box rubbing on the saplings once they grow. It can be pretty devastating. Now you've also got—occasionally you high populations of rabbits, another reason you can't just go out and put oak seedlings in the ground. So we learn to plant seedlings and put protective measures around them, you know wire, fence or tubes and things like that. I've learned all sorts of techniques for discouraging the deer. It's been a very educational process.

Maniscalco: You mentioned kind of all the deer, the turkey, and all these things that are coming and eating the plant or causing problems eating the acorns and things. What about diseases?

Johnson: Diseases are another very difficult problem today, diseases and pests. There are diseases that we can't do anything about, like oak wilt, which has a high mortality rate for all of the red oak species, less for the white oak species, but we see it a lot in the timbers up here. There are things like well you know, you've heard of the Dutch elm disease. The chestnut blight killed 99 percent of the chestnuts in the country in the last century. Now in both those cases we have a silver bullet, and that's the Chinese variant of each species. The Chinese chestnut and the Chinese elm are not susceptible to either of those diseases, so they have been bred to the American chestnut and the American elm, and produced a resistant tree. Now, the American varieties are being bred back, until the shape and form of the original tree is achieved, and then I think we will have American elms again and American chestnuts that we can enjoy and will grow to mature trees.

In other cases, there are things like the butternut, which is a very similar tree to the walnut and some people call it the white walnut, is susceptible to the butternut canker, which it appears is going to kill every butternut in the country. There's no variant that is resistant at the moment. The trees that are alive still produce nuts and the nuts still grow. I've planted them in the timber. In fact, before I learned about the butternut canker, I planted some butternuts and they grew about five to six feet a year. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I thought this was a great tree, but they've all gotten the canker and there's really nothing we can do about that one.

We have a disease called ash yellows, which is very hard on the ash trees, and now we have a real problem with this emerald ash borer, which is now in Illinois, after going through Michigan and Ohio and Indiana. It is a real problem, could kill most of the ash trees in the country if it isn't stopped, and so far, the quarantine methods that are being tried are almost useless. There are some parasitic wasps now that are being developed—well they're not being developed but they've been brought over from Asia, which is where the beetle came from. Hopefully, USDA is building populations up of those to release, which might be able to control it the way it does in Asia. There's a controversy there because of course, people say well why bring another species in, we don't know what's going to happen. And I say you know, this is one world. All of these things go back and forth with the billions of pallets that cross the ocean every year. It's going to get here eventually, let's bring it in here before we lose all of our ash trees the way we lost all of the chestnuts, the way we've lost almost all of the American elms, because the quarantine isn't working at all, which is obvious, but that's still, right now in Illinois is what we're doing, is we're supposedly quarantining where the emerald ash borer is. So you're right, lots of problems.

So, what are the solutions? One of the things I've been trying to do is sort of a—it's a pretty universal environmental approach, and that is since we don't know what trees are going to be hit by diseases and insects in the future, and if we also don't know what trees are going to be valuable down the line, let's increase the number of species. The more species we have, the better the chance that things are going to survive and possibly, that some species we didn't even think of are going to be valuable down the road. I mean, this has happened in fishing. You know, when you think of all of the species of fish that we eat today that no one would have thought of eating fifty years ago even, I mean it wasn't long ago that there was a fish called slime nose, that was caught in deep water off of Australia. Slime nose? No one thought of eating that, so let's change the name, orange roughy, and you know how much orange roughy is eaten in the world today. So the same sort of thing in forestry.

The other thing that I've been doing is I've been planting a lot of species that didn't used to grow well here. In the red oak family there is the Shumard's oak, which is a very large, fast growing red oak, generally thought to be too much of a southern tree for our area, but you probably know that the world is warming up, so I've been planting Shumard's oaks here. I've been planting another, a little bit more southern tree, Tulip Poplars; not necessarily the most valuable wood species, but certainly a very good secondary species, a fast growing tree, a beautiful tree. I've been planting Kentucky coffee trees, which interestingly enough, the deer don't seem to like very much, so that's been a plus. So you know, there are all of these considerations. The hard thing is, it takes years and years and years to know whether they're going to work out.

Maniscalco: Yeah. You have all these diseases and everything else that's coming in. What sorts of things are you doing to take care of your stands of timber, to try to minimize all these different things?

Johnson: Well you can't do a lot about diseases. I mean if they do have a parasitoid project, I'd love to get some of those wasps here if we have the emerald ash borer show up. It's hard to know how soon it will get here. It might be here next year, it's in Kane County right now. We have a pheromone trap out in some of our ash trees as we speak. USDA came out and they have an emerald ash borer survey now. Interestingly enough, forestry in Illinois is disappearing, and it's been taken over or what used to be forestry is being taken over by agriculture and by wildlife. This is another real problem, this is the political problem that is really hurting forestry in Illinois. As foresters retire, they're not being replaced. So now if people need forestry plans written, if they need information, they're having to go to private consulting foresters and pay for that. Our funding for the program is being cut dramatically. Our state nurseries are losing all their funds. The governor is sweeping all the money into the general fund, so it's a problem.

As a very small example, putting it in Ag is good in that they have a lot of money. It's bad in that the young gentleman who came out looking for places to place pheromone traps for the emerald ash borer, when I got here he was putting a trap up in a bitternut hickory tree. So you know, it would be good to have people who know what they're doing. I admit he was probably just an intern or something like that, but you know, you've got to know what you're doing here, basically able to identify your trees.

So other things that I'm doing are basically general things that you do for health. It's just like you know to eat properly and exercise and whatnot. Well, in a timber that means try to promote vigorous growth. In other words, thin the timber somewhat so that there's enough water and light and soil to go around. Take down the damaged trees, the trees that are dying and whatnot. Now we always leave some damaged and dead trees for the wildlife, that's just sort of good forestry, good wildlife, but trying to promote the healthiest growth possible, and in forestry that really doesn't mean fertilization and things like that because there's plenty of nutrient in the land for the requirements of the trees. Getting vigorous growth by basically allowing more light in is one of the main things that you try to do.

Now as far as deer are concerned, what I've—I mean for years I've been using tubes around my trees and various things, and it's always a tradeoff, because if you put a tree in a tube, you keep the deer off it for a while but you provide a perfect nest at the bottom of the tube for mice. This is hard to deal with because mice are perfectly cable of chewing through the tube if you put a net cap on the top. So over experimentation, I've learned that the shorter tubes tend to be less interesting to the mice, maybe they feel like they're more vulnerable, but basically what I'm doing now is planting very heavily, multiple species.

I should back up a little bit. You can't just go through the timber and plant seedlings under mature trees; they won't get enough light to grow. So what we do is if a couple of big trees get damaged, maybe a couple of big oaks get damaged, we take those down. You might look up and find that you've got a quarter of an acre open now, because these trees are so large. Maybe you look around and say okay, there's one more mature tree there, I'll harvest that as a saw tree, we'll cut out all the rest of what we call weed trees and end up with half an acre in the timber. Now normally people would say well, you should really do a much bigger clear cut than that, but we're trying to do things on a very efficient level here. We've been very successful at being able to regenerate hardwoods—and this I can show you out in the timber—in very small areas. It's kind of intensive but it's my view that if more people operated more efficiently like this, there'd be a lot more resource to go around. Don't think that we're not going to cut down all of our trees in this country, you know we are. That old, sort of manifest destiny you know, we'll never run out of our resources has really been disproved lately.

So what we do is once we have an area that's opened up, so there's light coming in, then I'll go in and plant trees rather heavily, maybe every five to six feet apart. I tend to plant them randomly, not in rows, because I like the overall aesthetic of a natural forest. We might put in five or six species altogether, then as they grow up, what I used to do is go in and mechanically clean between the trees with brush cutters and things like that, to give them all of the advantage they could. This made the plantation more like a cafeteria for deer, you know just walk by and eat the trees out of every tube as they stick out. So what we do now is we let all of the brush and weeds grow up around the trees, keep them marked either with tubes or with flags, and then go in every year or two and look and see what's competing, you know, is there an elm or a hickory that's growing up over, and then knock those down, leaving a very dense brush situation that the deer are not too happy with. It's not too easy to get through and even if they do get into it, there's a lot more to eat there than just the trees that I'm trying to propagate. That seems to be working relatively well at the moment. Tune in next year or next decade and we'll see what happens, but that's about the only thing I've figured we can do as far as the deer are concerned, because the populations aren't dropping at all.

Maniscalco: We've talked about growing trees and different diseases, and things that are coming in and attacking them. What about harvesting the trees? What's your process for that?

Johnson: Well, as I said, originally, when I bought the timer, I was thinking: Oh no, I don't want to touch this, I just want to let them grow and watch them grow. And then I started to learn about silvicultural practices. And then for a few years, as large oaks would die or get damaged in storms, I would cut them. I had a tractor, and I would just haul the logs out with a tractor, and when I had a few logs, I'd call up people who have movable band sawmills, and come in and have the logs cut, and then I would sticker the lumber to air dry it and try to sell it. I soon learned—even though I sold it all eventually, I learned that air dried lumber is not what we make furniture and cabinets out of. It needs to be dried further than that, in a kiln. I didn't do anything about that because I didn't consider it to be part of a business. I'd always kicked around the idea of maybe having one of these band sawmills, and go into it in a little bigger way.

It was about twelve or thirteen years ago, a big storm went through, I mean a big one. I went out in the timber the next day and I probably counted a hundred cherry trees that had been broken off at the forty or fifty-foot level.

Maniscalco: Oh my gosh.

Johnson: We have beautiful cherry here, and they tend to be rather brittle, and I was just devastated. I mean there were not cherries but there were oaks and hickories and whatnot too, that were damaged. I came back in and Patty and I were talking and decided that I'd either have to bite the bullet and hire a logger to come in, and around here in general, loggers are not that careful. It tends to

be, loggers go around and they offer farmers a little bit of money to log off that draw or that piece of timber or whatnot. Farmers have always succumbed to it because farmers don't know the value of the timber resource today. That type of logging is really detrimental to tree farming, to the resource, because they go in and they take the best trees and they leave the junk trees, and they run over everything else. It's just like a small town, all of the smart kids moving out every year, you know pretty soon you've got a town of idiots, pretty soon you've got a worthless timber, you know?

Maniscalco: Yeah, yeah.

Johnson: So I decided to do what I kind of thought of doing, and that's buy one of these band sawmills. I knew that to do that, if I wanted to sell the lumber that I needed to take it a little bit further, so I bought a band sawmill, not a very expensive one. I decided to keep it permanent here. I didn't want to start a new business or anything. This was just a hobby which was part of taking care of my timber. I had all these trees, I figure I had a year or so to harvest them and clean them up and whatnot. I built a thirty-two by forty metal building and built a kiln in the back of the metal building, a dehumidification kiln that would dry about four thousand feet of lumber. So I knew that if I could get everything working, that I could produce some pretty good quality lumber. And then I bought from—a friend happened to have for sale, a very large, twenty-four inch planer, which is a surfacing machine that you know, you can plane the lumber with afterwards, and I set to work.

I'd always been interested in machinery and old trucks and things. I have been, over the years, buying old, junky Dodge power wagons and restoring them, and one of them that I had restored was an old Wrecker, a 1949 Wrecker, and that became my main logging vehicle, because with a boom and a long cable and a truck that could go almost anywhere, you could reach down into the ravines and pull logs out and things. I bought an old loader. I started out just using my tractor, but I realized that that wouldn't do it after a while. I bought an old huff loader, 1963 variant, put a lot of time and effort and work into it and got it up to snuff, and started working on this. I thought it would be a hobby. I thought I would just take care of the timber, work on it in my spare time you know? I worked on it pretty straight that summer. The photography, time I could devote to it fell off quite a bit and I think it was the middle of September that our first load of wood came out of the kiln. First you saw the lumber, then you air dry it, and then once a certain amount of moisture gets out, you kiln dry it. I put it in the ole honey house, which we now call the boardroom. All the lumber is standing up there so people can go through it, and we immediately sold all the lumber. So I thought, Well that's pretty good, and people said well when are you going to have some more of this or that. So I went out and looked at the timber in terms of trees that were over-mature, trees that were damaged, you know that sort of thing. I mean there was still a lot of damaged timber out there. And I never stopped. I just kept sawing and then people, when they saw the lumber we were producing, they asked, "Well

what if I bring you some of my logs?" So we'd say sure, we'll custom saw with you, we'll share you know, however you want to work it out.

So we had a business without even trying I guess. I ran that by myself for probably four years, and about that time, I had a couple of ruptured discs and a few other problems that go along with working with logs. A man came by and was looking for work, just the right person, and I hired him and started teaching him to saw, teaching him how to run the kiln, teaching him about directional felling of trees and how to handle a chainsaw and work safely and things. He enjoyed the work immensely, and it isn't necessarily easy work. It's extremely physical, back-breaking, and we also work in all weather, sort of like farmers do. We work when it's ten below and we work when it's ninety-eight degrees. It's rare to find someone who wants to work that hard and is interested in doing all of these things, and he really is interested in going at it.

Steve worked for me for seven years, full-time, so then I could do a little more work on the photography, though I still put in at least half-time if not a full weeks' work in the mill business and the timber. Steve helped me plant and do everything that we did. And this May, he and his family moved over to Iowa, so I'm back as a one man operation.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow.

Johnson: That's caused a number of problems. The first thing that I did was I sold my old sawmill, and I bought a much larger, more hydraulically operated mill, both to save my body, because I knew I couldn't survive working with the other mill, that had given me ruptured discs and various other things. This other mill is large and I can saw faster with it, and the attempt now is to keep up with our production, our customers, and still have some time to do other things too.

Maniscalco: Well, great. I'm kind of wondering, what is the market for lumber? How do you kind of break into that market?

Johnson: I don't know how—I know how we did it. We just put a few ads in the local newspapers, and that was pretty interesting too, to see where our customers came from. The market here is mainly—there are a number of small cabinet shops that make custom furniture and kitchen cabinets and things. I would say we deal with about twenty of them, and people come, and this is important. They'll come about thirty miles, not very much farther than that, because lumber is heavy and time is important, and most people aren't going to put half a day into hauling lumber back. The other thing that happens is farmers tend to be people who know how to build things, and farmers have time in the winter, and there are lots and lots of farmers, especially retired farmers, but you know working farmers who do things in the winter like build a new set of kitchen cabinets. Retired farmers, who are good woodworkers, who say well, I

built a bedroom set for my first grandchild, now I'm going to build one for the next. And you know, we just see these people come back time and time again. There are lots of people around here in the country who know how to build well, and that's really who our clientele is. Some of the shops, a couple of the contractors.

The other thing that we do, which has more to do with being interested in forest utilization, is I saw lumber out of every species of tree that we grow. I think in the boardroom right now, there are probably twenty-four to twenty-five species. We have three different kinds of elm, we have two kinds of ash, we have three kinds of oak. We have box elder, which a lot of farmers consider to be the worst junk tree on the planet, but box elder is beautiful wood. It's an ash leaf maple, that's a soft maple. It had some beautiful red in it, nice figure. I could almost say I have yet to find a wood that I don't like, you know once you learn how to process it. I also consider it to be very efficient, sort of an environmentally sound, to be able to produce usable lumber out of lots of species. We also produce lumber in short lengths. If a tree has a big crook in it, rather than saying that's no good, it's firewood, we'll cut two five foot logs out of it and produce five foot lumber and sell it at a discount, because when you're making furniture, when you're making cabinets, rarely do you need a twelve-foot board, you know you're just going to cut it up. So if you can learn how to process it to a high quality standard, a short board, you can certainly encourage people to buy it by discounting it.

So what we're trying to do is utilize the resource in an efficient manner, and we're constantly introducing people to new species. As an example, sycamore is not a tree that grows here naturally, we're right on the northern border, but there are a lot of sycamore around, they were planted in the towns and whatnot, and whenever we get one, even though we realize that loggers won't even touch them, because plane saw and sycamore is a wood that twists and bends. If you quarter sawn sycamore, it has a beautiful quarter saw flake. It looks like lacewood, which is one of those exotic woods that's imported for fine furniture and marketry and inlay and that sort of thing. So we quarter saw sycamore now, and I'm always looking for sycamore logs. It doesn't grow in my timber, but if I can ever find one.

And then what we'll do is when we have a wood and one of our customers hasn't ever used it, we'll give them some, try this, suggest ways of using it. We have a lot of people who come in and all they've ever used is red oak, and I'm a little sick of people buying red oak, red oak, red oak. So I'll way, well why don't you try something else and they'll say well no, you know, the house is red oak, the floor is red oak, the trim is red oak, the furniture is red oak, the toilet paper holder is red oak; nope, I think it will be red oak. And I'm thinking, This is the most boring thing I've ever seen. You look around this house and you see probably twenty different woods in here. So the way we do that is we rib them a little bit, we give them a hard time, but we also give away a little wood. Try a little cherry, try a little of this, try a little walnut. Oh

no, walnut's too dark. Well, did you know that walnut lightens with age? No, I never knew that. So then we go out and show them our boardroom sign you know, but we're always working to try to get people to utilize more species.

Maniscalco: You were describing a board a minute ago, and you were describing some very interesting characteristics. What kinds of characteristics do you look for in a piece of wood?

Johnson: As far as a piece of wood is concerned, I think that's more for the customer. A log in general, if you're looking for valuable logs, the biggest, roundest, smoothest logs at the bottom of the tree are the most valuable, you know they tend to be what we call veneer. In Northern Illinois, we have some of the best white oak, red oak, walnut, and I know a lot of people would disagree, but I would say cherry, in the country. By far, some of the best white oak and walnut. In fact, I know loggers who have moved from Wisconsin now, down to Northern Illinois, just to follow our walnut.

In general, these markets for logs are controlled now by not the United States, but by China and Japan, and to a lesser extent Europe. China will pay money for walnut that I couldn't pay just for sawing it up into logs. Japan pays tremendous amounts of money for good walnut. China is discovering white oak now. The last few years it was cherry. Now the cherry prices are dropping of a little bit as they go to other species. We tend to not want to pay those prices in the United States. We tend to buy lower grades of lumber, you know save money on them, cut them up when you're making furniture and stuff. I don't sell veneer logs though. When we have a veneer log, I saw it up into lumber, and I saw it up into lumber that's of unusual size or quality. In other words, an interesting thing is, in this timber, when I bought it, there were three walnut trees in forty acres. Now, my neighbor across the road has a high percentage of walnut. I don't have a clue why that is the case, so walnut is one of the things that I started planting a lot of, but it also means that I would not have any walnut to saw for my business. So all of the walnut that we have in our business comes from people we buy logs from.

Now I don't go to loggers for walnut, but what happens is, as trees get damaged in town or more likely today, people hate cleaning up under their walnut trees, and they have their walnut trees cut down in town. Now frequently, this reduces the value of their lot, but the loggers and the veneer buyers won't touch town trees because they almost always have some kind of metal in them, you know somebody's driven a nail into them or far worse, over the years. So we get a lot of those trees, and a lot of them are super veneer quality trees, they're big, round. Once again, I don't mind dealing with a little metal, you know we can work around it, we can buy new bands and whatnot, but we have walnut here that is twenty-one inches wide, absolutely flat and clear. We also look for things like unusual crotches and odd looking logs, which we'll then saw thick slabs out of, frequently leaving the natural edge on it, and then very carefully air dry and kiln dry those and surface them.

There's a whole school of furniture building that uses natural edge slabs. There's a man, who is now gone, named Nakashima, whose daughter runs his studio today, who was a Japanese American, and he was a genius at using this kind of wood in his furniture. His furniture is sold at auctions today for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and we produce a lot of that kind of wood. Now, that's a little more difficult because you asked before where our customers come from. Most people around here don't have a clue how to use that, so through a website, we get a little more advertising, a little farther a field, and we do have people from Madison, Chicago, Rockford, occasionally across the country, who will call us. The local people will come out and buy this sort of thing, and it's frequently the part of the tree that you wouldn't saw into clear lumber. In other words, the bottom couple logs, without any branches, make clear lumber, like these boards would be here; you don't see any knots in them. The interesting thing for the big slab lumber is ones that have big branches coming out, where you have an interesting figure in the crotch and things like that. A lot of times you'll match them, you know when you cut two of them together, they'll be mirror images, and we call that a book match. We look for things like that. I also look for it in the one inch lumber too. Whenever there are interesting patterns, we'll keep those together throughout the process, and then sell them as pairs in the boardroom, so that if you're making paneled doors, you could have those two boards matched in the panel. Our whole kitchen is made out of book matched cherry. We don't charge any more for it, it's just a more interesting way to build furniture.

Maniscalco: There almost seems to be an art form to what you're doing.

Johnson: Well, because I think I started out as a photographer and someone who is really concerned. My photography tends to be very concerned with composition and resolve, balance, all of those sorts of things. It's hard for me to produce a board that isn't getting close to perfect. I mean this is like a handicap, it's like a ball and chain. You know most people would say oh, it's good enough, oh no you can leave a little bark on the edge, that's okay, in the grain. I say, no we don't do that, we do it like this.

When you open up a log on the mill, it really is interesting. Ninety-five percent of the time I know exactly what I'm going to see, you know there's enough clues in the bark, but five percent of the time it is just absolutely fascinating. And then, as you're sawing the log, what we do here is what's called grade sawing. A lot of people will just square up a log, get the bark off, and then saw through it, into boards. But if you have a defect, say a split or a knot coming up or something like that, that's going to be in all the boards. I mean what we do is we keep turning the log, maybe we'll cut half of it off, stand that one up and cut it this way and cut the other one flat. We're always trimming off knots, but we're always looking for the way to get the highest quality out of the material. Now I know that that isn't necessarily the best capitalist approach, you know you're supposed to get more material in and get more material sold and then cut down more trees and whatnot, but we're

trying to run this business on a sustainable basis versus the timber. So I'm not going to go out, even though I'm low on red oak, and cut down all my red oak trees just so that I can fill the boardroom. I'd rather go up to Wisconsin, where I know a couple of places that are sawing red oak all day long, and buy some extra from them and put it in our boardroom, than go cut down trees that don't need to be harvested yet. Believe it or not, it's hard for me to cut a tree.

Maniscalco: How is it taken by other people who are in the logging business, when you show up and you say, I want to buy some red oak from you so I can saw it into boards? Is that a common occurrence? Is it common in the industry?

Johnson: Well, I mean what happens here in Illinois is there are loggers who are going around logging properties, and then selling the logs to various buyers around the world. Still today, in Northern Illinois, the loggers definitely, the timber buyers, have the advantage, because people don't know what they're selling. I mentioned earlier that there's this American Tree Farm System. Patty and I are members of the tree farm system, we're actually members of the Illinois State Committee for the tree farm system, and we produce the newsletter, which is called *The Scoop*, for the tree farm system, we publish it here.

One of the things that we try to do here in Illinois, because it's not a big industrial forestry state, is we try to educate people about the value of the timber resource, and that really means educating farmers, because as I mentioned before, farmers are pretty used to just letting some logger log it off you know, a couple thousand dollars go pretty good. Well as an example, my neighbor across the road came to me one day and he said, "This logger was here and he said that he wanted to cut my walnuts on the north side of the timber over there, and he'd give me nineteen thousand dollars. That's a good deal isn't it?" And I said, "No, that's not a good deal." And he said, "Why not? I'd be nineteen thousand dollars ahead." And I said, "Because your timber is worth more than that." And I hadn't even looked at it except from the road. And he said, "How do I get that?" And I said, "Well, you have to hire a consulting forester today, because our state forester has retired and there is no one." And he said, "Well why should I spend money when this guy is going to give me nineteen thousand?" I said, "Do you have the nineteen thousand?" He said, "No, I don't but the guy said that he'd cut the logs, bring them out in the field, and bring in people to bid on them and he'd guarantee that I'd have at least nineteen thousand." I said, "Who is he going to bring in to bid?" He said, "Well, people who buy logs." I said, "How do you know who those people are? How do you know this guy hasn't talked to them?" I said, "What's he getting out of it?" He said, "Oh, he gets half." I said, "Wait a minute. You're giving him half to cut down these trees and pull them out into the field? He can do that in a day and a half. You're going to pay him that much money for that?" He says, "Oh well…" I said let me give you some advice here. I gave him the number of a consulting forester. Believe it or not he called him up. The forester charged him about five hundred dollars. The forester went in and took the marks off of half of the trees that this logger had

marked. He sold the remaining trees for forty thousand dollars. He then got—my neighbor started with a plan for planting and got him in a forestry plan. That's the difference. He thought he had a good deal. He didn't have a good deal at all. He got a forester involved, he had somebody knowledgeable, and that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to teach farmers that you can't just let people have their way with the timber every year. If farmers actually had the time and knew about it, they'd realize that some of the methods that we use, timber stand improvement and management and whatnot, would greatly increase the value of the timber every year. You literally can go in and do a TSI and have a thinning harvest, and fifteen years later you can go have another harvest and have still, after that one is done, more valuable timber left. It's just a matter of management, and that's what we're trying to educate people about.

Maniscalco: Now you mentioned you're part of an organization, a forestry organization. Which organization?

Johnson: The American Tree Farm System.

Maniscalco: The American Tree Farm System.

Johnson: There are other ones too. There's a local organization here, a forestry organization in Illinois that we belong to too.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of tell me a little bit about these organizations and what their purpose are?

Johnson: There are a number of them. A very popular one is the Walnut Council, which tends to basically be interested in walnuts, something that they are, I think changing now, because a monoculture of walnuts is not a good idea, just like a monoculture of anything is very susceptible to all kinds of problems. There is the Tree Farm System, American. There's the Illinois Forestry Association. They all have different purposes.

Northwest Illinois Forestry Association is a local one that has been surviving in Illinois for about twenty-five years now, which is kind of interesting. It's just a local landowners group that our district forester, who is retired, started twenty-five years ago. Some of the organizations do field days, you know educational. Tree Farm certainly does, Northwest Illinois does. The Walnut Council has a big field day during their annual meeting. Almost all of them are educational, a lot of them are hands-on in the timber.

The Illinois Forestry Association is new, and it's a separate organization because once we all started to realize that forestry was something that was disappearing on a state level, which is sort of a political decision, we needed an organization that could, without any state dollars, do some lobbying, hire some people to talk to Congressmen, put out position papers, try to explain to the public what's happening to forestry in Illinois. Frequently, forestry has

been set up as being in conflict with agriculture. They are in terms of dollars, looking for dollars, but they certainly are not in terms of land utilization and things like that. From our perspective it's almost a joke, because forestry budget in Illinois is probably less than one percent of what's spent for Ag in Illinois. I mean you know, especially from what you've been going through, that agriculture is king in Illinois, and the industry and farming is a huge lobby with lots of money. Forestry is just a little drop in the bucket, but that doesn't minimize the importance of having healthy forests in Illinois.

Another thing that I'm looking at today, as we start to develop these biomass industry, you know plants, cellulosic production of alcohol and things like that. We could very quickly cut down all the trees in this state. I mean let's say we have a bunch of big bioelectric plants and somebody is going around saying to a farmer, how about you clear that draw down there, and we'll give you eight dollars a ton for the cellulose. The farmer said sure you know, then bang, off it goes. There's another gully with no trees growing on it. Maybe another state with no trees producing oxygen. Another state with no trees holding moisture, another state with no trees stopping the wind. I mean, trees are important. Sometimes I consider myself to be like the Lorax. Do you remember the Dr. Seuss book?

Maniscalco: Go ahead, tell us.

Johnson: *The Lorax*? Well, it's an odd Dr. Seuss character, and there are these Truffula trees that the Lorax loves, and somebody comes along and says they can make something out of them, I think they call them sneeds or something, and pretty soon they want to make more sneeds and more and more, and pretty soon the Lorax is a guy who says, "I speak for these trees" and he's trying to save them, and of course he can't. They cut the last one down. And you know, it's almost like a joke when you think of forestry, but when you look at the country and you look at what we've done so far, and I mean even the Pacific Northwest and up and down British Columbia, it is staggering, the rate at which we're using trees today. So we try to educate people about that.

Maniscalco: I kind of want to switch gears and talk about your photography.

Johnson: Okay.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of tell us a little bit about how you got involved in photography and how that all started?

Johnson: Photography was really easy. I think I got involved in it because I told you earlier that I have always been interested in mechanical things. I was sort of thinking about mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, something like that, and when I went away to high school, I met a kid right away, who worked in the darkroom, and I thought that was really cool. He showed me how to develop film, and so I started taking pictures and developing film. I got

pretty good at being a printer, you know printing black and white. Once again, I've never taken a course in photography in my life. I've just done it and talked to people and read about it. And then in school I of course did the photography for the yearbook and the newspaper and all that sort of thing, and that gave me a lot of practice.

One of the things that I really liked about photography was working in the darkroom, and that might lead you to believe that it's something like being out in a boat by yourself on the lake. A darkroom is a place where you're with yourself. It's quiet, it's very dark and very peaceful, and you sort of are working on a project, you can just sort of tackle it at your own pace, at your own level. I never thought of it as a business, but it was something that I always did. Wherever I went, I'd made a darkroom. I'd be in college, if I was living out in a house in town, I would take a bedroom and make a darkroom out of it. I always had a darkroom or access to a darkroom.

I think it was the—I'd gone to a couple of colleges and I was here in Mount Carroll, at Shimer College. I wasn't crazy about college because I didn't know what I was doing there. I didn't have something that I wanted to study and achieve. There was this draft lottery. The Vietnam War was going on at the time, and the first draft lottery I had a very high number, and I realized that I wasn't going to get drafted, so I left school the next day and I went to Chicago, and I found a job in a commercial studio, and that was great. I really liked that. It was a big studio, we did huge room sets, and with eight-by-ten and eleven-by-fourteen inch cameras, thirty, forty, fifty lights on an entire room set, you know where you're selling furniture and things, lots of hands-on, lots of mechanical, interesting problems. A lot of small product photography, some fashion, but really interesting problems like how do you photograph a bunch of silverware on a table, where the latest batch of silverware is hanging in the air in front of it. I want to tell you, photographing silverware is hard because it reflects everything that's in the studio. Glass does the same thing. All of these sorts of things. There were interesting photographic problems, interesting lighting problems, interesting mechanical problems, and just solid work all day long. I did that for about a year, and then I quit that and started up my own business. I was trying to think—I still, I had been out here you realize, and I decided that I wanted to live out here. I was interested in the landscape, I had taken some courses in art history, and I pretty much knew this is what I wanted to do. Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, you know work was really important, was selling well in the art market, and so I was just trying to develop something that I could do and then come back out here and work on the landscape.

I hit upon doing reproductions for galleries and museums, because back then, all of that was done with ektachrome, basically slides, and a lot of them were big, eight-by-ten inch slides, and the color correction was difficult. A lot of times you had to change filtration with different exposures, and I was really good at it, and it was something that I could do without having to have a lot of

equipment. It was sort of like what you have here. I needed a camera, a couple of lights, some polarizing filters, know how, and you could go into any gallery or museum, do the work, come back out here and do whatever processing you have to do. So once I got that business going, which took about a year, I moved back out here and started doing that from here. And it was then that I found the property, built the house. The darkroom was the first thing to be finished, and did that driving back and forth to Chicago two or three times a week to do photography business, while the rest of the time I combed the landscape looking for landscape imagery. It took a few years before I had my feet under me with the landscape and I had a body of work. Then I started traveling the country, going to galleries and things, looking for people to represent it, places to show it, and that took a long time.

Maniscalco: Gosh, there's lots to talk about with the photography. What is your approach? Let's say you decide today we're going to go out and take a picture of a landscape or something. What is your approach to doing that?

Johnson: Well, the thing that gets me going fastest is maybe storms. I love that sort of that sort of chairoscuro you know, of the light, the strong lights and shadows and blacks. But really what happens is, when I'm going around in the world, in the neighborhood here, I see things. I see things all the time. My aesthetic tends to be 17th Century Dutch and Finnish landscape tradition. They were the best landscapes ever I think; Ruisdale, that sort of thing. So I do see the world in terms of compositions and constructs, and for me it's another one of those sort of ball and chains that you drag around; things have to be composed, they have to come to a resolve at the end, the image has to work that way. So it's sort of a constant battle, but really it's light that's the magic. You can see all of the potential compositions that you want, but light can make almost anything eloquent, if the quality of the light is a certain way.

I do a lot of barn interiors and granary interiors and things like that, natural light. I'm looking for those specific, sort of dusty qualities in the light. A lot of times, if there is—like right now, we've got the beans being harvested, the corn has lightened up a lot. When you have a lot of light on the landscape, it makes for good landscape imagery. It's easier to make the space appear to be three dimensional. A day like maybe tomorrow, when the cumulus clouds come out after this front went through and we have lots of light coming down and shadow on the land, that gives you all kinds of possibilities for composition. Frequently, my images are as much or not more so sky than land, and I'm looking for compositions in them. I'm looking for like maybe a shadow in the foreground and some light in the middle ground and then maybe some pattern and light taking you into the distance, something in the sky relating to it; all of that sort of thing. So it's not hard for me to find images. It's hard for me to find perfect images. So I might be out and see something like today, in a perfectly blue sky above. Okay, well that probably won't work, but that doesn't mean it doesn't get catalogued. And then maybe a week from now, maybe next spring, there's this fabulous sky in the north

and I think wait a minute, remember that field or that stream or something that I saw, go back over there and see if it still works. It's one of the interesting things. Even though you know, when you look around and you see images from other parts of the country, I mainly work here in the Midwest and I mainly work in these couple of counties. So over the years, I've had an opportunity to go back to things over and over and over again, and eventually, you end up with a body of work that's pretty specific. I mean, I wouldn't want to put myself in the same boat, but it's sort of like a writer like Faulkner, just working in that one little place and that one area that he describes so brilliantly over and over and over again.

Maniscalco: And one thing I've noticed from looking at a lot of your photos; they're always in black and white.

Johnson: They certainly are.

Maniscalco: Why you know, why is it?

Johnson: Originally, when I started really working at this and showing in galleries and whatnot, back in the early 1970s maybe, black and white was considered to be the fine art medium. The color processes were all fugitive, you know they wouldn't last. People were concerned with longevity as photography moved into museums and things. These prints here, they're silver gelatin prints, they're archivally processed, they're selenium toned, they're designed to last hundreds of years without any special care. Even today, most of the color processes couldn't come close to that.

Secondary consideration; must less expensive. Back when I got started, after chrome, dye transfer, C-prints, all ridiculously expensive, especially at this scale, and this scale became sort of important for me because as photography was being considered purchasable, consumable as a fine art, in the early seventies, you buy an Ansel Adams or an Edward Weston print and it was still an eight-by-ten inch print, maybe a sixteen-by-twenty at the most. Well Americans weren't really used to putting a little print like that on the wall, you know they want to put something big over the sofa or something like that. So that was the size consideration.

Probably the most important consideration is just abstraction. If you're making a visual statement, I found that it could be more powerful and maybe more easily controlled if I was doing it in black and white, you know the disparity between the light and the dark, the delineation of the composition was a little clearer, a little more impact in black and white. I had done, early on, some eight-by-ten ektachromes of the landscape, and people would look at them and they'd say things like, Wow, look at those greens, oh those greens just, oh I just can't believe it, they're just so—I said yeah but what about the image? Oh no, the color is just so great. And I say, but I'm interested in the image. I'm interested in the way people look at the landscape. I'm interested

in the development of space and the relationship between the objects, and the arabesque that goes through the land and up into the cloud and brings you back to this point of light on the land. The fidelity of the color was something that a lot of viewers just couldn't get by, so it's black and white.

Maniscalco: Now what kind of cameras are you using?

Johnson: The main camera that I use is a five-by-seven inch Deardorff view camera, which is an old wooden camera, a dark cloth over the head, film holder.

Maniscalco: Oh, wow.

Johnson: Five-by-seven inch pieces of film. It's the way to go for this sort of work because when you use a view camera, what you're seeing under that dark cloth is the image projected on a flat ground glass. So automatically, the image is projected flat for you. It's not like you're looking through a viewfinder here and you don't realize everything that's on the side.

This is interesting. In digital photography today, now everybody is using the screen, and suddenly people are—I mean the way people see, the way people compose their photographs has changed dramatically. I haven't heard anybody write about it but it's clear to me. It used to be you'd look through that 35 millimeter view camera and maybe decide you wanted a little more of the world in, and all you end up with is a picture of uncle Joe, who is about this big, in a great, big frame. Well nobody would do that when they're looking at this screen today, because they realize right away what they're not looking at when they're looking through the viewfinder. The view camera, you're doing that right away. Usually there's a grid on the ground glass. The image is upside down and reversed, which is really good because it further abstracts it. So you're looking at it more in terms of how it works graphically, how it works in terms of masses and lines and balance, you know things like that, than how it looks literally. So that's an advantage.

Another major advantage for what I do is that a lot of times I'm trying to expand or contract the range of tones. I think you've seen one of a barn interior with light coming through the cracks. You know, you're looking right at that light that's coming through the cracks, it's bright white, but the boards are not black, you know it didn't go into a silhouette. The boards and the interior and the floor still have that very dusty quality of light, and that's strictly because of the way that piece of film was exposed and the way that piece of film was developed. It's developed to severely compact the range, and that's a distinct advantage in using sheet film. Each piece of film can be developed to get you closer to the range of values that gives you the best print. And then in the darkroom there are certain things you can do, but it's a lot better off if you can get most of it on the film to start with.

Maniscalco: Now, let's just play a little imagination game and imagine you're a person buying a picture, a photograph. What are the qualities in a photograph that you're looking for, to purchase a photograph?

Johnson: Well, what are the qualities? I look at it in terms of a work of art. I mean, it's something that has to work visually for any number of reasons. It could be design, it could be—it is rarely specific place, and I realize that most people still look at photography as something that is either a photograph of a place or a thing. For me, I couldn't care where the place is and I couldn't care what the thing is, but the image has to work. It has to be a good design, the landscape has to work. There are two Ansel Adams photographs on the wall here. One is a flat frieze that works strictly on terms of design, and the other one is a distant landscape that works in terms of space and stormy clouds and light coming down and whatnot, but I really can't tell you until I see an image, because it might be a very modern image that I like. Needless to say, it needs to be well made, well printed. That does not necessarily mean sharp. In the view camera it's interesting. You think of a 35 millimeter camera or a digital camera today, that it used to be a problem maybe to stop action, if you were doing action shots. With a view camera, we always have that problem, because one of the things you do with a view camera is you can close the lenses way, way, way, way down, F-64 or F-90, or suddenly you find that you're shooting at half a second even though it's broad daylight. So if the clouds are going by pretty fast or if the wind is blowing the trees, you've got a movement problem. A lot of times I just say the heck with it, the grass is moving, it's going to be blurred. The image is what's important, not the fact that the image is sharp. Sometimes my images, coming from the aesthetic that I do, are relatively painterly. I just consider that to be a little bit of an advantage.

Maniscalco: Interesting. To kind of come back to farming again now, I was wondering if maybe we could talk a little bit about agriculture in general and some of your feelings about agriculture, especially in Illinois. What do you see for the future in terms of agriculture here in Illinois, especially since you're doing something that's very different.

Johnson: Well, I think probably the biggest issue today is energy, and whether or not we are going to be able to devote vast acreages to creating agricultural products that can be used as fuels. I know you can do it, I know right now it needs to be subsidized, but whether or not that takes too much land out of production for food, how it affects other energy considerations. The one that I brought up about biomass energy, if you're burning no crops once again, I know that a lot of those plants could use switchgrass. If that takes over a lot of food crop area that's going to be a problem.

Monoculture is always a problem from an environmental standard. I think there are a lot of problems with agriculture out there. I think also, that as farms get larger and larger, and are managed by either larger corporations or

fewer individuals, that the decisions that are made become more significant. When you have lots of farms that are smaller, you end up with a lot more approaches than you do when huge tracts are being managed by fewer people, and I think that that's always safer. It's sort of, like I'm talking about adding more species to my timber; I do that because there's sort of a natural cushion in that, and I think the same thing exists in farming in terms of the size of farms. I don't think anybody's going to turn the clock back as far as industrial farming is concerned, but I just see it as a consideration, and I sort of wish there were a way to get some of the huge money considerations out of farming. A lot of farming, it seems like they're only looking forward to the next harvest.

You talk about corporations today and one of the problems is they're just looking to the next quarter, and I do think that we need to look a little farther ahead. We started to make ethanol out of corn and instantly, the Federal Government has a program now where they're demanding that a certain amount is going to be produced every year. Well, when corn was up at seven dollars that was impossible. Well now corn has dropped back, so now maybe it's possible, but I mean those were knee jerk reactions related to probably lobbying efforts and individual state efforts and maybe big corporate, like ADM efforts, that happened way too quickly, with far too little oversight.

Maniscalco: You've brought it up a few times about different federal policies and federal reactions. How are you feelings about federal involvement in agriculture and forestry?

Johnson: Well, federal involvement is going to go to the people with the most political power, which is really the most money. That's one of the reasons that forestry is having so much trouble in Illinois. I actually could have said a couple years ago, that I have no involvement with federal money, but we did have one little piece of property down in the south, where a stream went through, and we ended up utilizing a federal program which is a riparian conservation reserve program, and we planted some trees down there on that, which I think is very helpful. I like that program. I don't have any major feelings one way or the other. I just wish that short term profitability wasn't what drove the programs in the market so quickly, because I think that the financial crisis we're in today, we're about to be in a crisis for the auto industry, because they have had their head in the sand for so many years. After that it's going to be credit card debt. These are all things that everybody who is paying attention knew was coming. Everybody was pretending they weren't going to affect them. Agriculture is going to have its problems too, it really is, but you know, I mean agriculture is just so significant, especially in this state. I don't know, I don't have a crystal ball.

Maniscalco: You've mentioned a lot of the difficult things, you know the weather is always difficult, going out and working, the disease, different animals preying on your trees, some of the policies that the Federal Government comes up with

makes your life difficult. What are some of the things that make you get up in the morning and go out and do this job?

Johnson: It's fascinating. It's a treat to be able to do what you want to do. It's a treat to be able to go out and be part of the natural world. I know a lot of farmers who talk about the farm life, and I think I'm talking about the same thing when I say that I love being part of the whole business of growing things, watching things grow really. You're not growing anything yourself, you're just helping them along.

When I was a beekeeper, I realized very quickly that hive management was more trying to figure out what the bees needed more than anything else, and then giving it to them. How you could get disease out the way, how you could get them more comfortable, how you could give them more room in the hive, how you could give them more pasturage, and if you could make the bees happy they would make you happy. The same thing is true with most agriculture I think, you know you're trying to let plants grow as well as they possibly can. Now in trees we don't do as much genetic work, though there are supposedly super hybrid trees and whatnot, but everything about the timber can be fascinating, and it isn't just that we're only out there looking at producing timber trees. We're out there hunting mushrooms, looking at wildflowers and so many other things that are enjoyable about the timber; enjoying the wildlife, keeping bird lists, things like that. Compared to working in the city at a job in a factory or sitting in front of a computer terminal just isn't a question.

Maniscalco: I have one more question for you, and it's the question that I ask everybody, and that's the fact that this an oral history interview, and it's going to be archived in the Illinois State Museum. It's going to be around for a long, long, long, long time. One day down the road, somebody might walk in and say hey look, there's grampa Michael up on the shelf there, you know one of your great grandkids or grandkids. What do you want to put in this interview for them?

Johnson: Well I wish I had some grandchildren, but since none of my children is married yet, I'm not sure that's going to happen. I think some of the things that I just told you are the most important things. Patty and I are trying to operate a business and grow trees here on a basis that's sustainable. We're trying to show people how you can produce a living income, not cut down all your trees at the same time, keep changing the parameters, keep changing the species, working with our neighbors. One of the things that we do a lot is somebody's got a tree they think might be able to get something out of, we get something out of it and [for them] we pay them money for it too. You know, those sorts of relationships, that sort of business, being very concerned with what we take out of the land and what we give back, I think are the most important things that we've learned, and if we could pass those on that would probably be the best.

Maniscalco: Well great. Well thank you very much Michael.

Johnson: You're very welcome, thank you. And we didn't even talk about kids did we? You can ask Patty about that.

Maniscalco: We'll ask her about that. We had to leave something for her.

(end of interview)