Interview with Patricia Johnson

AIS-V-L-2008-082

October 8, 2008

Interviewer: Mike Maniscalco

Maniscalco: Okay. Today is October 8th, 2008. We're sitting in the home of Patricia Johnson. How are you doing, Patricia?

Johnson: I'm doing fine.

Maniscalco: Great. It's very nice of you to let us come here and share your home with us and everything else; it's been a lot of fun. I'll ask you some very easy questions, and we'll work into some harder questions, and easy ones, and don't worry, you can't get any wrong. (laughter) So you're going to do great. We'll start off: what's your date of birth?

Johnson: April 2, 1945.

Maniscalco: Okay. And where were you born?

Johnson: In San Francisco, California.

Maniscalco: Really? Now, at one point, your family and yourself came to Illinois.

Johnson: That's right. My mom and my dad both actually were from Illinois, but my father was in World War II, he was in the Navy, and he was stationed at the Alameda Naval Air Station, which is on the east side of San Francisco Bay. And I was born—my father was still in the Navy, because the war wasn't over until August, and I was born in April. And in about October, when they were all decommissioned and sent away, they moved back to Chicago, and I was brought up in the Chicago area. Lived in Chicago for about five years, and then I lived in Evanston. I went through the whole Evanston school system.

Maniscalco: How old were you when you were living in Evanston then?

Johnson: We moved there when I was in first grade, so I must have been six. I was probably six.

Maniscalco: So where did you live in Evanston? Were you living on a farm, or—?

Johnson: There are no farms in Evanston. It's a suburb of Chicago. It's the first suburb on the lake north of Chicago. It's where Northwestern University is. In Chicago, we lived in apartments. In Evanston, we lived in a house the first couple of years, in southeast Evanston. And then we moved into an apartment. We lived in apartments until I was I think a junior in high school, and then we lived in houses for a couple of years, and then I left. And my parents moved back into an apartment. Evanston still is full of great big three-bedroom, two-bath apartments. A lot of them are the same; they're like U-shaped, with a little courtyard, and there would be three, maybe five banks of apartments. We always lived in the front, so we always had a view out the window of what was going on on the street. Right near the lake, I kind of grew up at Lake Michigan, at the beach.

Maniscalco: Oh, really? Okay. So you're there with your mom and your dad. What about your grandparents?

Johnson: My father's parents lived in Chicago on Lakeshore Drive in a great big apartment building that they had lived in for years and years, in probably a twelve-room apartment, a great, big, huge apartment. My grandfather worked for Container Corporation of America, which was a corrugated container company. My dad and his brother George both went to work for that company also, and it eventually became, [Owens] Illinois, for its [forest] products division. My dad stayed with them; my uncle left, and went to work for Weyerhauser. And by that time, my grandfather had died. My grandfather died when I was five. It was sad.

Maniscalco: What do you remember about him?

Johnson: He was incredibly generous. He loved all of us kids. There were five grandchildren. My dad’s brother, my Uncle George had three sons, and Dad had a daughter and a son. So I was the only girl. And my grandfather loved us. He played with us all the time. And my grandmother lived to be ninety-four years old, so I got to know her very, very well. And she was always the same. It was always, "Well, give me a big hug before you leave, because I could die before I see you again." And then I'd see her the next day, you know? She grew up in LaSalle-Peru, on a farm kind of thing on the edge of town. Her father had a hardware store, and my grandfather came down from Wisconsin, and went to work there. That’s the best I can figure out; I'm not really positive about that. And she was one of seven or eight children, and he wooed her, took her off to Chicago. My grandfather was just wonderful. My mother loved my grandfather; they were very good friends. He was really happy, I think. And just loved his life. He was sixty-five years old when he died; he had a heart attack.

Maniscalco: Oh, gee.

Johnson: It was too bad. I wish he had lived to be ninety; it would have been interesting to talk to him.

Maniscalco: I'm sure. Now, you mentioned you have brothers and sisters.

Johnson: I have a brother.

Maniscalco: A brother, okay. What was your childhood like?

Johnson: Let's see. It was like, school, and going to the beach. That's what it was. It was going to the beach, because the beach was there, it was free, it was entertainment. My mother stayed at home, she didn't go to work—she did go to work finally, but she didn't go to work until I was probably maybe eight or nine. Billy's younger than I am, and when he was in school and I was in school both, then my mom got a job. But we lived across the [J] street from the Lincoln School; it's still there. Get up in the morning, go over to school, play on the playground, go to school. Come home, Mom would be there. She would always be there. My dad would come home at about 7:00, maybe. He worked pretty far down on the other side of Chicago, it took him awhile to get home. Homework. Perfectly average childhood. And in the summertime, get up in the morning, go to the beach, and stay there until you had to go home.

Maniscalco: Oh, really?

Johnson: Oh, yeah.

Maniscalco: So what did you do at the beach?

Johnson: Swim. Get really, really cold. Come out because I had to, warm up, go back in the water, swim some more. I just spent my whole childhood swimming, I think. Floating around, lying in the sun, getting tan, playing in the sand. I know that sounds ridiculous.

Maniscalco: Great way to go. (laughter)

Johnson: I had actually forgotten about that, or I had stopped thinking about that, until recently, I took a memoir writing workshop, and the prompts at the beginning were, you know, write down the names of places where you can place yourself. And then let one of those things just pop up, and go into that place. And I just started having all of these memories of my childhood at the beach, and games that we would play, and how my lips would literally turn blue, because Lake Michigan is not warm. It's really cold. I mean, if it gets to be—if it's sixty-two, it's warm. Well, have you ever been in sixty-two degree water? As an adult, I'll tell you: it's really shocking. It's really, really cold. And if it was fifty-five, we were allowed to go in. And now, I've been in water fifty-five since then, and it just takes your breath away. I don't know how we ever did it. I really don't. But we all did it; we all went in and swam and

turned blue, and you'd come out and you'd be totally shaking, you'd be freezing cold. It's very funny.

Maniscalco: It is. What kind of child were you?

Johnson: I was very musical. I was probably really bossy. I was unhappy a lot of the time. I didn't realize until much, much later that it was because I could tell that my parents didn't get along with each other, but I didn't have any idea how to think about that, and there was nothing I could actually do about it. I liked being busy, and I was very religious; we were brought up Catholic. I think I was very religious. I remember—that just reminded me, I had these holy cards, whatever they are, little pictures of saints and things. I remember having a little altar in my bedroom when I was a little girl at one point. I think I was kind of inquisitive, because I did have collections then. And I was very protective of them, and I think that's one thing, one reason why I don't want them anymore, because I don't think that that necessarily brings out the best in me. I was kind of fat, and I was a very good student. And, I don't know. I had some friends, you know. I always had a whole bunch of friends. I'm still friends with people who were friends of mine when I was five years old. In fact, I was just emailing one of my old five year old friends today. Yeah, it was a really typical 1950s middle class upbringing. It's kind of interesting that that is lost. I mean, there's nothing like that. No one ever locked their doors. And we're talking about a city; Evanston is a city. It probably has the same number of people in it now as it did then, which is between 70-80,000 people in Evanston. But I just, I'd get up and leave the house at six in the morning if I wanted to. When I was six, my parents gave me a bicycle, and that gave me a lot of freedom, because I'd just go out and get on my bike and go riding away, and my mother never worried about me, because why would she? And everybody knew everybody, because there were televisions, but people weren't glued to them. There was a lot of outside activity. In the summertime at night, you'd go outside, and all of the parents would be out there, and their kids would be riding bikes, and everybody would be hanging around. There was no air conditioning. Of course, we lived right near the lake, so it almost never really gets hot. I mean, it might get hot in the day, but it almost always cools off at night. And I can remember being thrilled on a couple of nights when it was so hot that you actually couldn't even put a sheet on top of you because it was so warm. And that was so exotic, because it was always very cool at night. Now, it's like, oh, my God, another one of those horrible nights when you can't even have a sheet on top of you, because here, we are away from the lake, we get a lot of hot nights.

Maniscalco: Now, you mentioned, you know, church, which is an organization. What other organizations were there outside of school that you could have been involved in?

Johnson: I think I was in Girl Scouts. My friend Debbie's mom was the Girl Scout leader; I'm still friends with Debbie. And I don't remember how long we did

that. I think just in grade school; I don't remember doing that in junior high school. And we were all involved with the YMCA in Evanston. We all went there for swimming classes in the winter; we swam there in the winter. People had parties there. And when we were in high school, there were social service clubs through the YMCA that raised money for various charitable organizations, and did stuff. And I was always in one of those. Well, when I got to be in high school, I still had catechism classes and stuff like that, but I was a singer, and I sang in the Saint Mary's Church Choir, which was a very prominent Catholic Church choir in the Chicago area. We had an absolutely fabulous organist, and we rehearsed on Tuesday nights, and then we sang at High Mass on Sundays. And I did that for four years when I was in high school. That was really fun. And at school, I did all of the plays—not plays, but I did all of the musical theater stuff at school, sang in the choir and stuff like that, in the chorus. I don't know. We hung out at the library; that was interesting. We all hung out at the library when we were in high school. Other kids were hanging out at Coke and french fry restaurants and things like that, but my friends and I hung out at the Evanston Public Library. You could take the bus there, so you didn't have to have a car. It sounded great to your parents. "Well, I've got to do some research; I'm going to the library." No. The library was just packed with all of these high school kids who were supposedly doing research, but they were really just feeling their way through high school, I suppose. But there was no rampant anti-intellectualism like you so often see nowadays. I mean, everybody really cared about their grades; everybody really cared about where they were going to go to college. We were all kind of intellectual snobs, I guess. And growing up in Evanston, it doesn't surprise me that that would happen, because Northwestern University is there, and it's held up as a model, it was held up as a model for us. And at the time that I was in ETHS, it was one of the best public high schools in the country. I don't think it is anymore, but it was when I was there.

Maniscalco: You've mentioned it a couple of times, and that's church. I mean, of course I'm sure you went on Sundays, you went on Thursdays for catechism. Sometimes church isn't just about going to church and those sorts of things; sometimes there's social events at church. Did your family get involved in any of those things, or—?

Johnson: Not at all, because my mother was the Catholic; my father was not. My father made a vow that he would raise his children as Catholics. My mother very soon lost interest in the Catholic Church, after I was born, I guess. She didn't care whether we went there or not, I don't think. But my father made us go. We didn't have any social interactions with the church at all. And actually, I think the main reason I went was because I liked singing in the choir. Because when I went to college—oh, my gosh—I went to college at Occidental College; it's in Los Angeles, in the eastern part of LA. And right in Eagle Rock, there's a Catholic church. So the first Sunday I was there, I got together with some other Catholic kids, and we went over there to go to church. And it was so horrible. The priest was screaming at the congregants that if they

didn't get their kids out there to process next Sunday for the 9:00 Mass, they were all going to go to hell. And I said, you know, I don't want—I'm not going to do this anymore. And so I stopped going to church completely, and I haven't gone back to church since. I mean, I've gone to church occasionally. Michael and I got married in the Mount Carroll Catholic Church, because Michael's father was Catholic, and it was pretty important to him that we do that. But I think I might have been more interested in remaining associated with a church congregation if I'd had that when I was growing up, if my parents had been involved. But they really weren't. I mean, there were some other friends of mine who were Catholics, and we all went to catechism class together. But that was the extent of it. It wasn't the way the churches are around here. They are social organizations. That's who your friends are, as far as I can tell. And that's something that Michael and I haven't entered into at all.

Maniscalco: It's just very interesting, the way it all works out. Now, you've mentioned a bunch of times about school, and your school in Evanston. Can you kind of tell me a little bit about it? What was it like, if you were to describe it?

Johnson: There were 5,000 kids in the school. It's a huge place; it's a great big huge place, with a central part of the building that was probably the original building, that's kind of like an H. And there's a library in the front, and all of the offices and stuff. And then there were these four—what were they called?—halls, maybe. Something. I was in North Hall, which was the northeast corner, and South Hall was the southeast. And the East was—anyway, I don't know how it worked out, but there was kind of a thing, and there were freshmen, there were—I wonder if there were—I think the freshmen and sophomores used the same homerooms at different times, and the juniors and seniors used one floor above, or something like that. And the homerooms were these gargantuan rooms with, I think they were called ranges, a range of like maybe ten or maybe twenty seats, two together, and then an aisle, and then two together, and then an aisle. And you were seated alphabetically, and you were seated by range and your number seat in the row. So like I might have been nineteen-eight, the nineteenth range and the eighth seat back, something like that. And the person who sat right next to you was called your range partner. God, I haven't thought of this in so long. I graduated from high school forty-five years, and I just am remembering this. And that's where you went for homeroom, which was in the middle of the day. And it was like a period, a 45 minute period divided half into lunch and half into homeroom. And lunch was in this enormous cafeteria, I can't even tell you how big it was. But they used to put on plays in there, and they had dances in there and all kinds of stuff like that. And then you would have your classes, and you could go all over the building. Classes probably had about thirty kids in them. Classes were on several levels; there were general level classes, there were honors level classes, and there were AP level classes. And the school had a newspaper that was published every week, and it had plays, it had musical comedies, it had—and there were, you could only do one after

school thing at a time. Like if you were on the basketball team, you were not going to be in the musical, because everything rehearsed after school. So you had to pick. It wasn't like [Chadwick our local school], where the same kids do everything. And so if you've got—if you're casting a show, and you've got some kid on the basketball team, you know he's never going to be there until probably the last week, because he can't get out of basketball practice. Whereas at Evanston, if you wanted to be in the play, you couldn't play basketball. Of course, there weren't really competitive athletics for women then, for girls. Just intermural stuff. They just, you know, it was pre-Title IX, was it called, Title IX, that said women have the right to have athletics as much as men. So, it was pretty old-fashioned. We all wore skirts all the time; we couldn't wear pants to school. You could wear pants as leggings if it was twenty below zero or something, but you wouldn't be caught dead in pants. I don't even think I owned any pants, honestly. Everybody wore—all the girls wore skirts.

Maniscalco: Wow.

Johnson: Seems really old-fashioned, doesn't it? (laughter) Another century.

Maniscalco: (laughter) Now, you said you went off to school in Los Angeles?

Johnson: Mm-hmm.

Maniscalco: What did you go to school for?

Johnson: Well, I went to school to be a doctor. I always had wanted to be a doctor. And I went to California, because I was born in California, and I wanted to go there. But I didn't want to go to Northern California. I considered going to Stanford or someplace like that, but I wanted to go someplace where it was warm. I really did not ever want to live in Illinois again; I didn't want to go through freezing cold winters anymore. So I just happened—one day, the Occidental College guy, the admissions person came to Evanston High School, and I just—I had never even heard of the school, went down and talked to him, we had this really great conversation, and I applied early admission, and I was accepted, so I just went to school there. I did not know anyone there. My mom and dad took me to the airport and put me on a plane, and I flew out there by myself. Somebody I had gone to high school with who was going to USC had a car and picked me up at the airport and took me to Occidental and dropped me off, and I didn't know anybody. And it didn't really sink in until I got there, and then I went, oh, my goodness, I don't know anybody. So anyway. That was kind of—I really went there to be a doctor, but the first semester—they were on a quarter system. I had all these labs; I had biology lab, and chemistry lab, and I was inside all the time, and I realized that I didn't want to do that. I just couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand to be inside all of the time. And I hadn't realized that that would happen to me. I had spent, during my childhood, a lot of time outside. In the summertime, I

was rarely inside, and in the wintertime, we were always outside playing and skating and doing whatever. And I started thinking about being a professional person and spending my life in a laboratory, and I just couldn't stand it. So I dropped out of the premed program, and I decided to major in music instead. And I majored in music for a couple of years, and then I realized that what I really wanted to be doing was majoring in theater. So then I majored in theater. And then when I graduated, it was actually called Speech and Drama. I went back to a year of graduate work and got a teaching credential; you had to have 28 or 30 units past graduation to get a teaching credential in California at that time. And then the year after that, I went to teach, and I moved down to Laguna Beach and I taught school in Mission Viejo for a year. It was a brand-new town. Now it's where they train the Olympic swimming team.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Now, at one point, you said you ended up in New Orleans.

Johnson: I did.

Maniscalco: How did you get there?

Johnson: I got there because I got married to a doctor who went down there to do an internship and ended up staying to do a residency. So I moved to New Orleans, and I taught in the New Orleans public schools for a year, and that was really beyond me. Oh, golly. I would drive home every day at the end of the school day, and pull my car into my little tiny garage, and cry, because it was so sad. I had never experienced anything like it. I was teaching seventh grade English; I had five sections. One was all girls. One was boys and girls. And two—no, I guess two were boys and girls. One was all girls, and two were just boys. The principal of the school had decided that she was going to divide the school—it was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade—divide all the kids in half, and half the kids would go to coed classes, and half the kids would be divided up into same sex classes. It was probably against the law. Those boys classes had—it was seventh grade. I had eight or nine sixteen year olds; they had been in seventh grade for like four years, five years. They were six feet three and a half inches tall and weighed 225 pounds, and they couldn't read. They couldn't—one of them turned out to be dyslexic; no one had ever figured that out. They were so daunting. And I remember one day, I mean, they were literally off the wall. When I first got there, I got there in November, and they had already had eight teachers. Eight people had had my job and quit, because they couldn't do it. So I'm in this classroom with this group of boys at the end of the day, and they are sitting on their desks, they're jumping up and down, and I walked around the room, and just started putting them in desks. Later on, somebody told me, "You're never supposed to touch these children." You could get sued. Anyway, by the end of the year, I truly loved them, but I just didn't think I could do it anymore. So I applied to Tulane to go to graduate school, and I went to graduate school at Tulane for a couple of years for that.

Maniscalco: What did you go to graduate school for?

Johnson: Dramatic theory and composition. And I did a lot of reading, writing, studied the history of the theater even more than I had studied it at Occidental. And we did a lot of acting and directing, and they didn't really have an acting program, but everybody who had even the slightest interest had to do some acting. But we did a lot of writing about dramatic literature, that kind of thing.

Maniscalco: Now, eventually, you came to Illinois.

Johnson: Yeah. I got a divorce, and I came to visit another one of my really old friends named Maria, and she had just gotten married to an artist, the same person who I told you about who wrote the book Family Farm. And they, she was in this place called Massbach, which is actually not a town, but it's up in Jo Daviess County. And I met her in Evanston, and we drove out here, and I just could not believe the driftless area. I don't know if you've ever been up, just north—we're on the very, very southeastern edge of the driftless area, it moves up into Jo Daviess County, and it goes up into Wisconsin, across the border, it goes up by Baraboo and Viroqua and then it comes down the Iowa side. And it's just a little area where the Illinois and the Kentucky glaciers never crossed the land, so it's driftless; there's no glacial drift. And it's very hilly, it's very—there's a lot of limestone outcropping. Lots of little streams. I couldn't believe it; I couldn't believe that it was in Illinois. And she was living up there. And that night, the first night we got there, a friend of theirs came over to have dinner, a friend who Tom had known when he was teaching at Shimer College, a photographer named Michael Johnson. And he came over and had dinner, and that's when I met Michael. And about six months later, I moved up here to be with Michael. We got married, and we've been here ever since.

Maniscalco: Wow. Well, that's, you know, talking to Michael earlier, he had bought this land, and he was working on a home. What were you expecting, moving up here?

Johnson: Well, I met Michael in September, and then I saw him again in December. He walked me all around. Well, when I met him, he had just bought the property, and he had plans for this house that he was going to build, this little photographer's cabin in the woods. And right away, I could see there were things wrong with the plan for this house. I'm not kidding you. Isn't that terrible? I remember the first time I talked to Michael, he was showing this floor plan, and I said, "You know, you really shouldn't do it that way." You should put the staircase over there—(laughter) I mean, it was so funny. I had just met him. So then in December, we started spending more time together, and I actually walked around on the property and stuff. And there was a hole in the ground, and there was a lid on this cement wall thing for the basement. Well, it was so cold, I had moved away, it was ten years since I had moved away. I didn't even have a coat. I had lived in Los Angeles or New Orleans

for ten years. I was absolutely freezing. I didn't have any shoes; I don't think I owned any socks. I mean, I was totally unprepared. And I mean, I knew it was Illinois, but I never intended to spend any time in Illinois. In fact, I had even made a vow that I would never live in Illinois again. So I don't know. I mean, in that time when I lived in New Orleans and I was working on the theater thing, I just kept thinking, what are you doing? You don't want to live in a theater, either. Theater people are never outside. What's the matter with you? You don't like it inside all the time; you want to be outside. And a friend of mine, her family was actually from Mississippi, and they had an old plantation up on the Natchez River. And we would go up there every now and then on the weekends; her brother was trying to farm the place. It was sort of a mess. Oh, I just loved it up there, and I kept thinking, you know, that's what I want to do. I want to be in a rural area; I want to have a funky farmhouse; I want to have a garden. I don't want to live in a theater; I don't want to live in a hospital. I just want to live outside. And I'd been trying to figure out how I was going to pull that off, living in New Orleans, working for the Opera House Association, I spent all of my time building sets and running these ludicrous performances and stuff. And I wasn't very happy. And then when I met Michael, here was this other person who also just wanted to be outside, and walking through the timber was so much fun, because there was one path—well, when we take you out there later on, you'll see, there are all—we've made all these paths, you can walk for five miles out there if you want. We had to kind of bushwhack to get through the timber, and I had no idea where we were. I got totally disoriented right away, and Michael knew, he has a very good sense of direction, so we go walking off, and all of the sudden, we're back at the clearing. I said, "How did we get here?" I thought we were going in the opposite direction! And I just thought, wow, what a great place. But I mean, I knew that there would be a lot of work. And I think that that appealed to me. My tendency as a person is to just love to just sit around and read all the time; I'd be very happy to do historical research for ten hours a day. But I know that isn't really very good for me. So it's good for me to have these outside things to do, and the idea of having a garden, and being able to grow something from a seed into something that would actually sustain our lives. The idea of building our own home. All of those things appealed to me so much. I guess it was obviously what I wanted to do. I didn't know it. But I finally did get some decent clothes; that helped a lot. In fact, I have learned that if it's really cold, you'll be fine if you have the right clothes on. But it took me a long time to figure that out. It really did. Oh, my God. (laughter) Those first few years, I was just absolutely frozen constantly. Then I found out about long underwear, and I've been fine ever since.

Maniscalco: Well, great. Now you've mentioned your garden, and that you wanted to have a garden. I saw out the window that you have a garden.

Johnson: I have several gardens.

Maniscalco: Can you kind of describe what they are and what's in them?

Johnson: Well, the garden that you passed when you drove in, which is over there; that was the first garden. And the reason it was there is because it was the only place that wasn't completely covered with trees. And there was already a thing out there, the people who Michael bought the property from, had had a little asparagus patch, and they'd had a little horseradish plant thing. So we thought, well, we'll do that. So we got a roto-tiller, and we tilled up a bunch of stuff out there, and that's where we made the first garden. And it's evolved a lot, as you might imagine. Now it doesn't have a fence, but that's just been the last couple of years. It was always fenced because dogs would go in there and dig holes, and actually Bella still does that, but I don't really care that much anymore. And to keep deer out and stuff like that. Now I have perennials planted all around the edges. I like perennials; I like perennial flowers. They're easy, you know, you don't have to plant them every year. And we have a lot of perennial fruits and vegetables. In the last five years or so, things that never used to over-winter do. And a lot of things volunteer, like tomatoes, and gourds, and squashes and stuff, that never—the seeds, if you left them outside in the winter, they would freeze so badly that they were never viable in the spring. That doesn't happen anymore. The weather is totally different. And then when we bought our neighbor's property, I don't know if Michael told you, but our neighbor had a heart attack, and she couldn't pay all of the bills, so she ended up having to sell her farm, and we bought a six-acre strip on the east side of our original forty acres. And a twenty-five acre meadow. It was a pasture meadow, and we put a pond in down there, and we've planted quite a few trees down there. We then made another garden out there, where it really is sunny, because this garden started out being in a relatively open space, but thirty-five years have gone by, and the trees have grown tremendously. We have an elm tree out there that's one of the biggest elm trees in Illinois, I'm pretty sure. It's got to be forty-eight inches in diameter. Just huge. And it had one branch, we finally cut this branch down, it had a branch that literally went all the way across the garden. And I told Michael, there's no point in even having a garden there unless we cut that branch off, so we did do that a few years ago. The gardens are [a joint project], Michael helps me, he tills. He does construction like fences and arbors and stuff like that. We talk about what we're going to plant. But for the most part, I plant it and harvest it and weed it and take care of it.

Maniscalco: So they're kind of your baby, I guess.

Johnson: Yeah. I mean, they are—it is a way for me to contribute to the economic well-being of the family. I always looked at it that way, because I wasn't working, and yet I could raise a lot of food. And then, you know, over time, I think we became more and more concerned about what food is available, and of course it used to be around that there was no food available, absolutely none. I'll never forget the first time I went into a grocery store in Mount Carroll; I just couldn't believe it. They had potatoes and carrots and celery and parsnips, whatever they are, I didn't even know what they were then, turnips, which were like, ugh, and that was it—and cabbage. But you couldn't get zucchini or

green beans or bell peppers; it was very rudimentary. There's more demand for really good produce nowadays. Now we're really picky. We just like to eat organically produced food. And we actually used to butcher our own beef with the neighbor, but you know, we can't do that now, because we can't eat that much.

Maniscalco: So what exactly are you growing in your garden?

Johnson: Well, I grow a lot of tomatoes. And I grow hot peppers. It varies from year to year; usually a whole bunch of serranos and some green chilies, we love green chili. And anchos and a few habaneros for the fun of it…. From time to time, I've become a fanatic about something. Like one year, I think I grew about thirty different kinds of beans to shell out and cook, because I just fell in love with them; they're so beautiful. I've grown—I've probably grown sixty or seventy different kinds of peppers, just for the fun of it. But now I'm much more sensible than I used to be. I grow all the things you would expect. I always grow potatoes; I usually grow about 400 onions. I grow about 300 heads of garlic, and then you have sacrifice some of your crop to plant for the next year. I have I think thirteen different varieties of garlic now that I plant. I grow a lot of aliums. Onions, leeks, and garlic; lots of potatoes, lots of tomatoes. Peppers. Beets, we love beets. All kinds of greens. Three or four different kinds of kale, Swiss chard, spinach, lots of different kinds of lettuce. And then I grow lots of herbs. Just as you walked in the door, you walked by that big—that's a big rosemary plant that I call Grandma; I've had it for about twenty years, and I over-winter her in the greenhouse. Thyme, all of the stuff that you like to cook with. I've never grown parsnips; I don't have any luck growing Brussels sprouts. Some things I've tried over and over again, for some reason I just can't pull it off. I don't grow cauliflower but I always grow broccoli. I just grow a little bit of everything.

Maniscalco: It takes a lot of skill to grow a lot of this stuff. How did you get this knowledge to grow these things?

Johnson: I talked to people and I read. I probably have fifty books on gardening. And I have a gardening journal that I've kept for probably twenty years, where I write down—I usually start in the winter when I'm deciding what I'm going to start in the greenhouse, make the baby plants. And then I send away to the other members of the seed savers' exchange for seeds sometimes, and sometimes I get them from catalogues, and sometimes I save them myself from last year. And I keep a record of everything, when I planted it and how fast it germinated, and what the varieties are, and then I make notes on what went well and what didn't go well so that I can go back and refer to that if I need to, in order to keep track of it. Which things were successful and which ones weren't, because I can't really remember all of the details from year to year. A lot of reading; a lot of sharing with other people who like to garden, and we share seeds and give each other starts of stuff. And the way you find out about anything, I suppose. Just chip away at it. You can't learn it all at

once. And then you have to learn your land, because our land, our soil, is very high in clay [content], and we have improved it by putting an enormous amount of mulch on it over the years. Neither Michael or I is particularly excited about hoeing and weeding constantly, so we use a lot of mulch to keep weeds down, and we've always used rotten hay, and we've probably put five bales of rotten—you know, those great big round bales? We probably use about five of those a year on our gardens mulching. And by the end of the summer, it's almost gone. And then it gets tilled in. We also have dumped tons of sand on these gardens to try to loosen things up, and we have very nice soil now. We can even grow carrots, and at the beginning, we could hardly grow carrots at all, because the soil was like a brick, and a carrot just wouldn't grow there. We use soaker hoses now; we never used to do that. You have to know whether you have the right kind of light. Like, I don't grow sweet corn, because I just don't have a place where the sun is going to shine for twelve hours a day. I try to grow it every now and again just because I love the plants, and I especially love Indian corn, and it's always a disappointment, because the kernels are never really well-formed, and it just doesn't do well without enough light. So you learn your limitations.

Maniscalco: Interesting. Now, the things you produced in the garden were one of the things that you brought to the family. But I know that from talking to Michael earlier that after moving here, not too long after, you became pregnant and you had a child. Would you mind telling us about your children?

Johnson: Not at all. So Sarah was born in 1975, in September. And she was a very demanding child. And I was—I had never even held a baby in my life. I was thirty years old, and I had never held a baby. That tells you something. I had no familiarity with babies at all. I didn't know what to think. And I found that I was unbelievably protective. I was really shocked at myself. I couldn't stand to not know where she was every single second. I was neurotic as all get out. So for the first year and a half, I was never away from Sarah, ever. And finally one day I said to Michael, "I am going insane. I have got to be separated from this baby." So I took Sarah in to a babysitter in Mount Carroll, and I dropped her off, and I went to work at the co-op, there was a co-op in Mount Carroll then. And I went to the co-op for three hours, and I didn't have a single customer. No one came in. But I went into the co-op, and I sat down in a chair, and I literally sat there for three hours. I hadn't been alone in a year and a half, and I was so—I just was shocked. Sarah was completely miserable. She actually took a nap—it was really funny, because I don't think she ever took a nap, except that one day when I took her to the babysitter when she was a year and a half. She was really smart; she learned everything really quickly. And Austin was born in 1978, and he was like this adorable little baby, and Sarah just took over communication with Austin, to the point where Austin decided he didn't even really need to learn how to talk until he was about three years old. Because I'd say—we called him Mikey then—I'd say, "Mikey, blah, blah," and Sarah would say, "Mikey doesn't want to do that." They are really, really good friends, by the way. And Sarah early on was very musical. She

was precocious. And it was quite challenging for her to go to school in Chadwick, because when she started school, in kindergarten, she was already kind of learning how to read. It was unfortunate, because when she became a first-grader, when everyone else was starting to learn how to read, she was already reading. And the teacher, I think she was the principal at the time, decided she would move Sarah up into the next grade level, classroom, for reading. And that was a terrible thing to do, because everybody in Sarah's class hated her for going up to second grade for reading, and everybody in the second grade classroom hated her for coming up to reading. And there was one class per grade level in Chadwick, and that, I think that was really, really hard for Sarah. She was capable of absorbing an enormous amount of information at a really young age. But some really good things happened to her. When she was in fourth grade, that same woman, Kathy Williams is her name, decided that the school should get involved with an organization called Campus International, which created exchanges between foreign countries of students who were about ten years old, to introduce them to the other country's language and culture, and they would actually go to the other country. So Kathy Williams got an exchange program set up with a school in France, in Elancourt, which is outside of Paris. She wanted an entire class from the Chadwick school to be in the exchange, but—was there anybody else from Chadwick? Maybe one other kid from Chadwick. All the parents just said, No. Nope. What do you mean? I haven't even let my kid go to Chicago; you think I'm going to let my kid go to Paris? And also it was going to cost $1,000, for your child to go to France for three weeks and live with this other family and go to school there, and learn French, and just have that experience. So Sarah started having French classes once a week when she was—I think she was nine years old; she was in the fourth grade. And learned a little bit. And then in about March, all of these French kids came over here, and there weren't enough houses, so we ended up with two of them, Roman and Leticia. And then Sarah went over and stayed with Leticia's family for three weeks. And she learned French, she just absorbed it; she was exactly the right age to do that. And then when they were twelve, Leticia came here for a couple of weeks, and then Sarah went and spent another two weeks with Leticia's family in France. And that was great for her. Meanwhile, the kids kept on having their French class. So by the time Sarah was in junior high, she was really interested in not just speaking but in writing and reading French, and she started taking high school level French classes. So by the time she was in eighth grade, she had already had all of the classes that most high school freshmen in Chadwick had had. We didn't really know what we were going to do with her. And she also was playing the oboe, she had started playing the oboe. And by the time she was in junior high, she was playing the oboe in the Clinton Iowa Symphony Orchestra with her teacher. So she was very interested in music, so she ended up going to Interlochen Arts Academy for high school. So she left the house; it was just Austin—he had changed his name to Austin by now. He informed us one day that he did not want to be called Michael anymore; he wanted to be called Austin, it's his middle name,

and he's been Austin ever since. And we had Ben by that time; Ben came along in 1984. Then Austin, Austin was—always has been the kindest person I've ever known. Very concerned always about how everybody else is doing. He was tiny, he was really short, and in junior high, he was like the shortest kid on the basketball team. And when he was a sophomore—he went to Interlochen also as an art major—he grew about six inches, and his metalsmithing teacher one day said, "Let's not do any work today in class; we're just going to sit here and watch Austin grow". Because he just grew so fast that you could just see it happening. He went away to school in September, and by December, he was an altogether different person. He had doubled, and his hair had grown, he had a really long ponytail. He had really, really changed. That was interesting. And he was also a very good student, but not as voracious about learning [academic] things. He was much more of an outdoorsy person. He learned how to operate all the equipment. I heard Michael telling you about when he was growing up that they got more points for using the Gravely instead of the riding lawnmower; that's the way Austin was. He helped Michael a lot with the beekeeping thing, and I have some really wonderful funny pictures of Austin wearing this whole beekeeping paraphernalia thing, the hood and the veil and all of these, mowing around the beehives out there. People used to drive in, and they'd say, "Do you have a cemetery out there?" Because we had all of these beehives with these boxes stacked up. And Austin did all that mowing out there, and he didn't want to get stung, so he always used to wear his bee veil. And he was very mechanical. When he was in high school, he bought a power wagon when he was fifteen; he and Michael redid the brakes, the transmission, the inside, the outside. I think they had it painted. And when he was—right after he got his driver's license, he drove that truck down to the power wagon rally in Fairfield, Iowa. He was very—he's always been very mechanical, has really good mechanical intelligence. He's very good with his hands. In junior high one summer, they offered—what did they call it?—it was like a biology class as a summer school class for junior high kids, and Austin took it, and they did some dissections. Not just worms and stuff; I think they had a fetal pig. They got these cool things to kind of entice some kids to come. And they did a brain of something, and Austin loved that class. He just loved it; he loved doing the dissections. He just loved it. And that's what Austin does. I don't know if Michael told you, but Austin's going to be a doctor, he might be a brain surgeon. But he just got his PhD in neuronal development at the University of Wisconsin Madison; he's in the MD/PhD program there. But when he started med school, they all had to dissect a cadaver, and there would be four people together, they called it the tank, because after you were working on the cadaver, you'd put it back in the formaldehyde or whatever it is that preserves it. And Austin did the backbone, and the person who was running the anatomy class came over and said, "Who did this backbone?" And everybody in Austin's tank said, "He did it." He said, "That's the best dissection of a backbone I've ever seen by a first year medical student." And I think it all started with that brain and the fetal pig and getting his hands on these scalpels

when he was twelve years old, and just seeing what an incredible miracle the body is. So he had a lot of different things that he was interested in, and he was also sort of musical. He played the drums always in junior high. But then he taught himself to play the banjo, and I think he still plays the banjo, just for the fun of it. And Ben was altogether different. He's six years younger than Austin, and he was almost like an only child in a lot of ways, because when Austin was fourteen and Ben was eight, Austin left for high school, and then it was just Ben. And Ben was a voracious reader. He would sit in this chair, which was actually there then, for days reading. He read everything, and then he read it again. He read Watership Down I don't know how many times. And one winter, after he had read Watership Down, he spent the whole winter making little tunnels in the snow like the rabbits did, and I'd look at the window, and he had a snowmobile suit, and I'd look out the window and I'd see him kind of inching along on the ground and creating tunnels out of snow all through the yard. He could entertain himself for hours, which was really lucky, because at that point, he needed to be able to play by himself. And he is incredibly intelligent, but he was a really mediocre student. He never was particularly excited about school. He didn't want to be there; he'd much rather have been at home reading, cooking, they all like to cook, the kids all like the cook. Or—Ben did some amazing things. At one point, he was having a birthday party, and he—his birthday is May fourth, and he was I think fourteen. And he was really worried that it was going to rain, because he had invited his entire class, which is about fifty kids, to come here for a birthday party. And it's iffy, May fourth is iffy. And the weather forecast at first was that it would be a nice day, and then the weather clouded up. And I said, "Ben, do you think we're going to have to cancel this party? Because it's going to be an outside party." And he said, "I'll take care of that." So he goes up in his bedroom, closes the doors, and when he came back out, the sun came out. And I said, "Oh, that's great. The sun came out. This is really, really nice." So then about an hour and a half after that, Michael went upstairs to do something, and he went up that staircase and walked through—you have to walk through that bedroom that was Ben's room to get over here. Michael walked through the bedroom and he left the doors to the bedroom open. All of the sudden, these clouds come in, and Ben said, "Who's been in my room?" And so Michael said, "Well, I have." He said, "I told you not to go in there," and he goes back upstairs, closes the doors. He had in his room strung strings all over the room and all of these weird—I don't know what he did. But he had created—he had done some kind of magic, or made a wish, I don't really know what he did. But when he did it, it was a beautiful day. And Michael had gone through, and he had inadvertently opened the doors, and he had walked through a couple of these strings, and kind of messed up this configuration—I've asked Ben about this a lot of times since then, you have to know, I've asked him, what were you doing? "I don't know. I have no idea what I was doing up there." But that's the kind of child he was, very creative, very funny, really kind of mysterious. Just not—he was not following the footsteps of his brother and

sister at all. So he was a bit more challenging. He went to Interlochen also; you couldn't tell him no at that point.

Maniscalco: Okay. What was it like—I mean, you grew up pretty much in the city of Chicago, while you were outside, you were in a very urban area. This is a very rural area. For you, what was it like bringing up kids in such a rural area? What were some of the difficulties, I guess?

Johnson: We really had to be quite resourceful. There were less—well, you could open the door and say, go outside, I guess. But you couldn't say go outside and find somebody to play with. That whole thing seemed very weird to me, that if kids were going to get together, you had to arrange it. You had to talk to their parents; somebody had to drive them there. In fact, a friend of mine got married a long time before I did and had a couple kids, and at one point, she said—when I met Michael, she said, "Oh, we were going to buy a house in Barrington Hills, but I decided not to, because I didn't want my kids to not have any neighbor friends." So they bought a house someplace else; I can never remember where. But the idea was that she wanted her daughters to be able to go outside and play, and not to have to make up their own games. So we played with our kids a lot when they were young, which I don't know how many parents do. I mean, maybe lots of parents do, but not that I'm that aware of. Most of the people around here, when our kids were growing up, who lived in the country, had farms, so their kids had work. Our kids didn't really have work per se. We didn't have the saw mill and that whole thing. They helped us when we needed them to; they helped us plant trees, they helped us harvest and cut down trees, make brush piles and make firewood, and all those things, when we needed them to, but we didn't have regular chores and stuff. So I think that whole thing about always having to drive somewhere to get your children around [was one of the difficulties]. And Sarah and Austin took the bus to school, and it used to come at about seven in the morning out by the mailbox. When Ben started going to school, the school district—two school districts had combined, and the bus was coming at about 6:30 in the morning to pick up Ben. He was the first one. And by the time—and school didn't start until 8:30. And that little kid was going to be on the bus for an hour and a half, and also, he couldn't get up. He's never, ever been a morning person. Even when he was a little baby, he would sleep until 9:00 or 10:00. I used to wonder if he was dead, because he just didn't wake up in the morning. But it's just not his body rhythm, and he would just—I remember when he was in kindergarten, for about a month, every morning he just cried and cried and cried, and finally I said, that's it, I don't care. He can sleep until 7:30, and it takes me five minutes to drive him to school, I can drive him, and so I'm going to. So I always drove Ben to school, and Austin really got mad at me for that, because Austin said, "Well, you wouldn't drive me," and I said, "Well, I didn't have to drive you, because you were always up at five in the morning anyway; why couldn't you take the bus?" That is a big problem. The more the schools consolidate, then the further and further away from school some of these little children get, and that's a big problem in the school districts just to

the west of us; they just consolidated these three towns that are fairly far away from each other. And some of these little tiny kids are picked up at six in the morning, but they don't start school until 8:30. I mean, by that time, they're ready for a nap. That was an issue. Another thing that was an issue for me was the first time I ever saw the Chadwick school, I just about dropped dead. First of all, I didn't think I was in the Chadwick school district, because I had a Mount Carroll address. And I knew what the Mount Carroll school looked like, because I went to Mount Carroll all the time. The Chadwick school was built, I don't even know when. The part that the grade school was in was probably built in the 1930s, and I swear it had never changed. I don't think they'd ever even repainted. It was so old and so—I mean, I went to Evanston Township High School. It was a school with auditoriums and theaters and light booths and gymnasiums and indoor field houses and everything, and I'd go over to this school, and the whole school was like this tiny little thing, the classrooms were so old-fashioned—it was just shocking. Meanwhile, the teachers in the grade school were just wonderful, wonderful people, and that was a big realization that I had, which was: the most important thing is the teachers and the way they are with the kids; that's much more important than all of the stuff that public education seems to need. I mean, I'm not saying that it doesn't need those things; it really does, and teachers nowadays who know how to make PowerPoint presentations and things like that are way ahead, in terms of communicating with their students. But back in 1980, it was like stepping back fifty years in time. It was really odd. But I just got used to it, I guess. And after awhile, it didn't bother me at all, because what really seemed to matter most was the way that the faculty was, and they were all really wonderful. Really, really good teachers.

Maniscalco: You talked about your high school, and your high school was able to offer quite a bit. And you talked about your daughter being able to go to France through school, and you had children that went to school actually through the consolidation of school. How do you think the consolidation—did that increase offerings that schools were able to give?

Johnson: It did not increase offerings, but it did increase flexibility in scheduling, I think, at the high school level, probably, which I really never had much to do with, except I would always help the person who was doing the high school musical or something like that. But it gave the student body a much more diverse group. I mean, up until that point, there had been between eleven and twenty kids in a class, and let's say you were in a class with eleven kids, like the class between Austin and Sarah had eleven kids, and two of them were girls, and the other nine were boys. And they were dodo boys, too; they were just not great kids. Well, what if you had to go to school with that same group of kids for twelve years? You'd have a skewed view. So all of the sudden, you infuse—now they've got between fifty-five and seventy kids in a class. There was much more flexibility in terms of grouping those kids in a classroom. So like let's say you've got two guys who just are going to get in a fight every time they're in the same room. Well, then you just never put them in the same

room. You just do away with that problem. And that kind of flexibility I think was really good. But especially in Chadwick, Milledgeville, I thought it was a wonderful combination, because every one of these little towns has a very distinctive personality, and Chadwick people are remarkably laid back. They have had a population of 450 in that town for over a hundred years. This seems to mean to me that if someone is born, someone else is going to die. There's just like this fixed number; it's kind of funny in a lot of ways. But they're very laid back, and some of them just tend to be less—I don't want to say they're not aggressive; they're less interested in exploring their intelligence. They're just—it's not literally anti-intellectual; they're just not interested. They don't even know how exciting it can be to have an intellectual experience, to learn something that's completely new. I can't tell you how many times I used to hear, "Well, it was good enough for me." The school was good enough for me forty years ago; why can't it be good enough for my kids now? Well, it was okay for us to only have basketball; why do they have to have football? But the people in Milledgeville are feisty, and they're very creative. They are—the kids get in trouble, in a really interesting kind of way. They're troublemakers, but they're clever troublemakers. And it was really good for the Chadwick kids to get mixed in with these other kids, because it kind of like perked them up, and the Chadwick kids kind of calmed the Milledgeville kids down, and I think it was a really, really good combination. I thought it worked really well. And I actually can sort of speak from experience, because starting when Austin—no, I guess it was when Ben was in fifth grade, I started doing the junior high play, and I did it for four years, and I worked with Chadwick and Milledgeville kids, and I loved them, they were wonderful. I would often find that the mix would be just right, some of both kinds of kids in a scene could really make something out of it, whereas if you had just the Milledgeville kids, they'd just be jerking around and throwing spitballs or the equivalent, and the Chadwick kids would just be sitting there waiting for something to happen. But if you put them together, then all of the sudden, you just started getting these wonderful things happening on stage. And I thought it was very beneficial. The parents have to take a really, really big part in the kids' schooling. Part of it is because otherwise the kids can't get there. If you are the parent of a kid who wants to be on a team, you have to be available to bring that child home afterwards, because there aren't—there's no public transportation. Another thing is that for these local school, sometimes it's the only entertainment in town, so you get these huge crowds at junior high basketball games, junior high volleyball games. You get the entire bleachers completely full, and it's not just parents; it's grandparents, aunts, uncles, people who are visiting, older brothers and sisters. It's really a big deal, starting like in the fifth grade, they get competitive in the fifth grade, which I think is ridiculous, but partially I think it's because the parents don't have anything else to do. There was one movie theater in Carroll County, and it closed about a month ago; it had been in operation for years and years and years. And it was only closed for two weeks; somebody bought it and opened it up again. Because if there weren't a

movie theater here—there's a movie theater and there are a couple of bowling alleys, and that's it. So the school provides the entertainment, and the parents have to be there anyway, because otherwise their children can't take part. That was hard, because when I was growing up, I'd just go get on the bus that was on the corner and go wherever I wanted to, and my parents oftentimes didn't go to anything that I did. My dad, if my dad was out of town, couldn't be there, he would never reschedule. Whereas—and for Michael, Michael went away to high school, his parents never saw any of the stuff that he did either. I don't think they went out and hung around the Berkshire School when he was there. And I don't think—I'm not sure, but I've never, ever heard Michael talk about extracurricular activities at Countryside. I think usually he just came home and took his fishing rod and went out on the lake and went fishing; that's the impression I have of his childhood — he spent the whole time fishing and raking leaves. {laughter} His mother was really fanatical about it. When a leaf falls, she'd be out there picking it up.

Maniscalco: Speaking of leaves, Michael is involved, as well as you, in forestry and taking care of the trees here and turning them into lumber and everything. What was it like for you when he said, "I'm going to cut these threes into boards." What was the process?

Johnson: Well, first of all, I'm sure he told you, we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. But actually, it was my idea. I'm the first person who voiced it. We used to drive around, when Michael was just being a photographer, we drove around just looking at things a lot, and I really love doing that. And there's this one place north of Mount Carroll where every time we would drive by, Michael would say, "You know, there's a saw mill down in that ditch there. I wonder if that guy's ever going to use it again." And I'd say, "oh." You know, but the sawmill would come up, and it's a logical extension of the work that we do in the forest. I mean, what are we doing it for? And every now and again, we would cut down a tree, and make firewood out of it or something. And a couple of times, we hired sawyers to come up, plant their saw out there, and saw up a bunch of something. Once we sawed up a whole bunch of cherry, had it sawn up, and then we didn't know what to do with it, so we put it in the place where we [had] kept bees [equipment], had processed honey, we weren't doing that anymore then. And we stickered it and we had it in there, and a friend of ours who lives in California called and said that they were building a sort of an Indonesian kind of house, and they wanted to have all cherry cabinets, and had we sawn any cherry lumber? And I said that we had, and so we shipped all that lumber out to California, and they made their cabinets out of it. And it seems to me like there was another time too when we sawed up a whole bunch of lumber; I don't remember what happened to that. But a bad storm came through in 1996, I guess. And, oh, there must have been a monstrous down draft or something, but I was in Chicago, and Michael called me and said, "You won't believe what happened here. I've just been out in the timber, and I bet we've lost 200 cherry trees, the tops have been blown out of these trees, and half of them are fallen on the ground and the other half

are topless and they'll just rot. We couldn't burn this much firewood in a hundred years." And I said, "Wow. We could just ask George West if he wanted to come and live with us for the next couple of years,"—he's the sawyer—I said, "Or maybe this is the time when you ought to get that sawmill that you've always wanted." So I get home from Chicago the next day, and Michael says, "Listen, let's go look at a sawmill." Well, I didn't go, but Austin was home, and he went with Michael down to south of Decatur, and they looked at this sawmill and met Paul Easley. And then Michael decided he wanted to buy the sawmill, and I said, "But then what are we going to do with all of the lumber?" And he said, "Well, I don't know." So then I went down there, and I met Kathy, and this is getting around to your question: we walked into this "Oak"—let's see, what do they call it? — "Oak Leaf wood 'n Designs"—I hate names like that, because I can never remember how to spell them. Walk into this building, and there was one area that looked like I could get my mind around it. It was books on how to do things, and it was little things that you need to put stuff together. And then there was this room that was just full of all these stacks of lumber, and there was a price list, and it was all the trees that grow in Illinois. And then they also had some exotic [species] there. And then we walked into this other room, and it was kind of like the room that we have now, which was just all of this wood, and I was looking around at all of this wood, and I said to Kathy, "How can you tell one board from another?" And she said, "Oh, you'll learn." And that's how I felt; I just felt like I didn't know anything about it at all. And so Michael bought the sawmill and built the first building and sawed a bunch of lumber, and then in August, Sarah came home from someplace, and we loaded the first kiln, and we then added on—I mean, we just, every year we've added on, because it's never adequate, and we never make anything big enough, the buildings aren't big enough, the lean-tos aren't big enough. And handling this wood, I just started learning what it looks like, and realizing how beautiful it is. And then we cleaned all the power wagon stuff out of the building, and put the wood in there, and started advertising. We don't even advertise anymore; there's no need to. And Michael started reading everything he could get his hands on about sawing wood, and he bought this sawmill, but he could tell right away as a mechanic that it was kind of really poorly made, and he started modifying it right away and changing things about it. And he just learned it, partially just hands on, but then reading about it; something would happen and he would read all about it—why did that happen, what could he do to change that, how could he fix that, how could he improve this, how could he improve that? And then after we'd been in operation for about a year and a half, we hired somebody just to make firewood one year, and then Michael taught him all about the sawmill, and we had an employee for seven years, who we dearly, dearly miss, he became part of our family, like my brother or something. And he's living in Iowa now. But then when we got Steve working for us, things could really take off, and then Michael could spend more time just looking at trees and that kind of thing, while Steve was constantly creating product. And I just learned—at first, I did everything with Michael, and pretty soon, I

realized that I was physiologically incapable of handling quite a lot of the stuff that needs to be handled out there. And at first, we carried everything everywhere we went, and then we got the loader, and that made a big difference, and then we got the little loader, and at first we did everything by hand, and then we realized that we were ruining our bodies. I remember after the first kiln load, I couldn't even bend my fingers, because they were so swollen, because I was carrying all of these boards like this, and my fingers weren't strong enough to pick up an eighty pound board, or maybe even a ten pound board, and I was getting—I felt like I was getting arthritis in my hands; I had to relearn how to handle things. We both did. Michael has had trouble with his back, from just picking up things that are way too heavy, which he will always do. We just absorbed it; it was like learning another language. You go to a different country, and after awhile, you just understand what people are saying, and you can speak the language, because you absorb it. And we kind of absorbed the lumber business, in a way. And we have gotten so much information from our customers. I mean, they are everybody from a ninety year old man who comes over and spends three hours and looks at every piece of red oak that we have and buys one piece that's this big, which is fine. But he tells us all of these things about how he works with wood, what tools he uses, what he wants it to look like, how does he finish it. And we've just learned those things from our customers, and from our customers asking us questions. And then we go out and find out. And then along with that came this other thing that we do, which is our work with the Illinois Tree Farm Committee. Paul Easley was the president of the Illinois Tree Farm Committee when Michael bought the saw, and he asked Michael if he would be interested in being on the committee. And I said okay, because I had just resigned my position at the Freeport Art Center, and I realized I had time. I couldn't have done both, because I used to go to Freeport two or three times a week, and I wouldn't have had time. But we did agree to serve on the committee, and that has taught us so much about forestry issues, nationally and state-wise. Not just the lumber business, but the whole business of growing trees, and who cares, and what the issues are. Even internationally, the issues of sustainably-produced lumber and all that kind of stuff, which has just emerged in the last few years. And then we do the newsletter for the organization, so we do a lot of research on diseases and insects that are affecting the trees in the state of Illinois, and we work with all of these really, really smart people, they're so wonderful. The extension forester at the University of Illinois, Jay Hayek, is one of the smartest guys I've ever met. And Kurt Bobson and Dan Schmoker and all of these people at the DNR who serve on the committee, and are just like walking encyclopedias about forestry and forestry issues and stuff. So that has been really interesting to us too. It's made our whole experience of working here just so much more rich.

Maniscalco: Yeah. I want to just take a step back from the forestry service stuff that you've done, but I wanted to ask you, what do you see your role in the sawmill and the forestry stuff that's going on here? What is your role here?

Johnson: Well, I think Michael and I are a partnership, and things that he wants to do in the timber—the things he sees out there are different from the things I see. I remember one day I don't know how long ago when I said to him, "You know, you're a gardener too. It's just that the things that you—your garden is sixty feet tall, and the way you treat the timber is the way I treat my garden. You do weeding; you start seeds; you release trees. All the same things, only it's just on a much, much bigger scale." And that has really worked for Michael as a way to describe what he does. Because we do not plant trees in rows. I mean, we have on a couple of occasions planted trees in rows, but for the most part, we don't—that's not how we go about working in our timber. I do whatever I can, whatever I'm physically capable of doing, and I notice different things than Michael does. So I'm a person who's perfectly happy to start a whole bunch of seedlings. Michael's not that—he's not as likely to do that. He'll help me plant them, but he isn't going to weed around them, he's not going to—but I like nurseries. I wouldn't mind having that garden be a nursery, because I really love to see little baby trees growing every year, and then dig them up and plant them somewhere else. I do a lot of the accounting and form filing, and with the Johnson Creek Hardwoods, I file all of the sales tax forms, and communicate with the state of Illinois about things like that. I did all of the payroll for Steve and all of that kind of stuff, which is just book work, kind of. But in terms of things that we're planning on doing, like if we're going to plan to plant 500 trees next spring, what are they going to be, those are things that we talk about together, and—but ultimately, I think Michael—I will always defer to Michael as far as those decisions, because he says he knows every tree in our woods, and I'll bet he does. He doesn't name them or anything ridiculous like that, but I'm pretty sure that he does. And he does all of the big heavy machinery stuff. I don't drive the machinery. I'll drive the riding lawnmower, and that's where I draw the line.

Maniscalco: No, that's great. And now to get back into the forestry systems, is that the title of it?

Johnson: The American Tree Farm System?

Maniscalco: The American Tree Farm System. The newsletter that you're putting together: a lot of research is going into this.

Johnson: A lot does, and we don't write every article in it; we're the editors. We ask for and receive articles from people on the committee. Did Michael show you a copy?

Maniscalco: No, he hasn't yet.

Johnson: Do you want to see it?

Maniscalco: We'd love to.

Johnson: Do you want to see it now, or do you want to wait?

Maniscalco: Let's wait, after the—

Johnson: Okay. But in this issue, there's an article on the Indiana bat. The reason why is because Indiana bats are endangered; they're an endangered species. They are in Illinois, so there are a few conflicting things. There's one program that helps people clear land for planting trees. There's another thing that says you can't clear this land if the Indiana bat's on it. So that's kind of an issue; it's more an issue in southern Illinois, I think. But somebody on the committee wrote an article about the Indiana bat for us, and gave us an absolutely adorable picture of one. They are tiny little things; it's in someone's hand, and it's this teeny little thing. We have an article in this issue about the farm bill that was just passed by the Congress, and how that's going to affect forestry. We've had a lot of articles about the Emerald Ash Borer, because it's a big issue. There's a little tiny article, very funny little article about an encounter that Michael had with someone from the USDA, who drove in this summer, and pulled up in the yard, and Michael saw—a brand new truck, US Department of Agriculture, Emerald Ashborer something, survey. Michael goes over, "Hi;" the guy says, "Hi." Said, "What can I do for you?" He said, "Well, I'd just like to hang a pheromone trap in your ash tree here." Michael said, "Well, okay, except it's a hickory tree." And the guy said, "Oh. Well, how about that ash tree over there?" And Michael said, "No, that's a hickory tree too." And the guy said, "Oh. Well, do you have any ash trees?" And Michael said, "Yeah, I do. Do you want me to show them to you?" And the guy says, "Yeah," so then Michael took him out and showed him some ash trees that we've planted, because there weren't ash trees on this property when we came here. And Michael was really upset about that. He was upset about the brand new truck that said USDA, Emerald Ash Borer, survey, the person who didn't even know what an ash tree looked like. And he was just wondering what was happening to the $6 million that [Senator] Durbin got from the Congress to work on the Emerald Ash Borer in the state of Illinois if this is what came into our yard. And so he wrote a kind of funny little story about that. And we have a list of new tree farmers in the state of Illinois, and we always have an article from our president. It's a bunch of stuff. And we send it to all of the tree farmers of record in the state of Illinois. We send a copy to everybody on the committee and all of the foresters, and we send a copy to all of the soil and water conservation districts so that they can have one in case they'd like to pass one on to somebody. It's about 1,200 copies that we send out. Michael and I have been editing it since Paul and Kathy Easley decided to stop. They decided to resign from the committee when they sold their sawmill. Paul had been the chairperson of the committee for about ten years, and he decided it was time for somebody else to do it. And so we agreed—The American Tree Farming System is a national organization under the auspices of the American Forestry Foundation, or Forest Foundation, possibly. And it is a group of private landowners who are managing timber. It is not for the industry, though many of the state committees are funded by forestry industries in their state. Ours is just funded from the national. But we do have a lot of state employees on our committee. DNR guys who are from

the forestry division, which is, you know, Michael may have told you, it's just going away, away, away; there's hardly anybody left. And it is to encourage people to take care of their private forest land, because around here, it's just amazing; people have no idea of the value of their forest. Of course, I had no idea either, because you have to learn something in order to know it. But most farmers around here have a wood lot; everybody used to have one, because they had to have wood to heat. Lots of farms still have little wood lots, and every now and then, some logger comes by and says, "I'll give you $6,000 for your cherry trees;" the guy says fine, the guy goes in, cuts down the cherry trees, leaves a whole bunch of junk all over the ground. The farmer says, "God, that's a mess," and then he stops paying any attention to that, and twenty years later, somebody comes along and says, "I'll give you $6,000 for all your oak trees." And nobody manages it at all. And when you see what can be done when you do manage it, it's really a shame that more people don't. And it's just to try to raise people's consciousness about it. So the American [National] group tends to try to find someone who's either kind of colorful or famous or exotic or in some way to be their national tree farmer of the year. One year, they picked the keyboard artist from the Rolling Stones. The guy happened to marry a woman whose father had about, I don't know, 700 acre forested area in Georgia that he had managed forever, and this guy ends up being the tree farmer of the year. Not because he is a tree farmer, or has maybe ever worked on the tree farm, but because he owns it, and because he can be a very, very prominent spokesperson, that people from other places will see this guy, they'll know who he is—I didn't know who he was, which was really embarrassing, because I love the Rolling Stones. But I mean, you say, oh, the Rolling Stones, okay, well, the keyboard artist is this national tree farmer. Okay, wow, what's tree farm, and then people will maybe start being interested, and try to find out. I think it's a long road; I think it's a really long road.

Maniscalco: What do you think is in store for the future of forestry?

Johnson: Well, in the state of Illinois, I am somewhat fearful. There are a couple of things that could turn out to be very, very bad. One is this interest in using cellulosic fiber as a source of energy, and, for example, our co-op, which is called Jo Carroll Electric—it's not called the co-op anymore; it's called Jo Carroll Energy. They are trying to put in a biomass energy generating plant over on the Mississippi River near Thompson. We've been to a couple of meetings where their spokespeople have been in attendance, and they have told us about how they're going to buy—they're thinking it would be just great, because you have a harvest, somebody takes all the logs out, somebody else can come in and pull out all the tops, chip it up or hunk it up and throw it in trucks and take it to the biofuel plant and sell it, so this is going to be worth something. Well, it's going to be worth eight dollars a ton, which is like, something, but it's just almost nothing. And also, it takes a lot of work to pick up all that stuff for eight dollars a ton, making it seem kind of, I don't know. It's kind of like a promise that could never be kept. But on the other hand,

there are people who I'm afraid would just say, "Come and clear cut it. Take the whole thing. I'll plant corn there instead." Especially this last year, when corn was like seven dollars a bushel; I was thinking, oh, my God, how many wood lots are just going to be clear cut so that some jerk can plant corn there, and then all the trees will be gone. Trees are really important. They have—I hardly know where to start. Actually, I have written a little essay about this, about the importance of trees. Human beings have a history with trees. It goes back as far back as human beings go. Trees have been one of human beings companions on Earth. And I have always felt that, even when I was a little girl, I've always felt like I loved trees, for some reason that I wasn't exactly sure what it is, maybe just because they're big or something. But they are so important, in terms of water quality, air quality. Trees are the place where people go to have a picnic, and they're a place where people go to meditate. They are beautiful in the environment. If everybody cut down all of their trees, just imagine what it would look like. It would look like Champaign. Whenever I go down there, I just think, well, they've really made the most out of this flat land, but there's nothing really interesting about it, to me. Trees are important on a metaphorical level; they're important on an ecological level, on an energy usage level. People who have trees around their houses don't have to turn up their air conditioners quite so much in the summertime. So anyway, I'm kind of concerned about this biofuel thing, and thinking that it would just be great for people to chop up their trees and use them to generate electricity. I'd rather see everybody try to cut back a little on your electricity usage instead. In the state of Illinois, I think there's a big problem, in that the budget of the state of Illinois is just a disaster, for probably lots and lots of different reasons. But the Department of Forestry, which used to be a department, is now a division of the Department of Heritage and something, I can't even figure it out. It's in the Department of Natural Resources, and then it's a subdivision, which is natural heritage and something, and then forestry is under that. And forestry has been cut back and cut back and cut back and cut back. There used to be twenty-two district foresters, and I think that there are eleven now. Those other people have either retired or left the state, and they have not been replaced. Every forestry office used to have a technician, and they used to have a secretary. Some of them have technicians now; I don't think there are any secretaries left. I think Steve Phelps might have a secretary one day a week. But these are the men who are supposed to help people write their forestry plans; these are the men who are supposed to inspect plots of trees to make sure that people are following—who are getting money from the state and from the federal government, from FDA and CRP and all of these other plans, are actually doing what they said that they would do. And the number of people who are available to do these on-site inspections has just fallen and become this smaller and smaller number of people all of the time. This administration, Blagojevich, it seems like he has friends who are very interested in wildlife, so in the Department of Conservation, wildlife guys have done very well for the last six or eight years, because they're very interested in deer kills, big deer, big fish, that kind of hunting, recreational

hunting, and recreation generally speaking. But they often will tell people who are trying to do reasonable tree farming practices to plant things that aren't even indigenous to where we live, things that will never turn into decent lumber trees. There's a conflict, so there's a conflict between these same guys who are oftentimes in the same offices, a wildlife guy and a forestry guy, but they're at odds in terms of what they're recommending to people. And there's no support for forestry in the state. Very little. It's very disheartening. You could go to a tree farm committee meeting, and you could just listen to people complaining. I mean, we don't, because we say, okay, we're not going to complain anymore. But I don't know what will happen. I think there will always be people who don't care whether they're in an FDA program. By that, I mean Forestry Development Act, not the Federal Department of Agriculture. FDA in Illinois means Forestry Development Act. Those are programs which kick back a little bit of money to people who employ certain forestry best management practices. And those guys, a lot of the people won't go out and work in their woods unless they get a little bit of money for it. There will always be some people who will go out and work in their woods whether they get money for it or not. They will plant trees, whether they can get them for twenty-five cents from the Illinois State Nursery or not; they'll get them from some other nursery. The Illinois State Nurseries haven't gotten any money from the state of Illinois, because all of the money that supports those nurseries has been swept out of the forestry funds. Michael told you about the taxes we pay on that. And so I don't know what will happen in an official capacity, and it's kind of hard for me to say what will happen throughout the state. I mean, this northwest part of the state has a really cool thing. A lot of people are very interested in forestry, and there is an organization called the Northwest Illinois Forestry Association, NIFA, which has been in operation for over twenty years. It is a completely private organization; it has over 150 members. They pay dues, and they go to monthly meetings, and in the summer from like April until October, those meetings are field days, and they're all over the place. They go to the University of Wisconsin, to the forestry labs. They go to look at a casket company; they go to a horse logging operation; they go to somebody's tree farm; they go work at the Schurmeier Forest. They're really avid forestry people. So I think around here there will always be a bunch of private individuals who are working on forestry, whether they get money or not. But I'm not so sure about the rest of the state. I just don't know what will happen. There's a very good organization that's kind of an offshoot of the tree farm committee in the southern part of the state right now, and I think those guys might have enough oomph to keep going no matter what happens. But I have no idea what will happen. You know, a lot of people can't afford to plant 500 seedlings unless they get them for free, because they can't afford to spend $500 on baby trees.

Maniscalco: You know, it seems like there's a lot of difficult things when we're talking about forestry. I mean, physically it's difficult, but also mentally, and policy-wise, there's a lot of difficult things. What is it that's driving you, to make you get up every morning and go out and do this work?

Johnson: I guess it's just love, probably. Out of habit. I don't know. I mean, Michael and I have, on a couple of occasions, talked about leaving here. But we can't. I mean, I just don't see how I could. When you have invested a lot of energy and time, and I suppose money, although mostly I think we've invested energy and time, in cultivating crops, whatever they are, when you've invested in your land, you are part of your land. You can't leave your land; it would be like picking your land up and taking it to California or wherever you wanted to go. It would just be impossible. You wouldn't believe what people are like around here who own land. They will not part with one square inch of it. We have a neighbor who has a wooded area that is adjacent to our timber; it's about fifteen acres or so. It's got the creek, Johnson Creek runs along it. They've never done a single thing with that piece of property; it's like a ridge, it's really steep on both sides. And then at the end, it comes down like that, and there's a creek over here and a creek over here. They farm all around it, but you couldn't farm on it, it's way too steep. They have no interest in forestry; they've never gone in there and harvested any trees; they've never made any paths. They've never done anything in there. Michael has been trying to buy that and attach it to our property for thirty years, and he can't buy it. He finally got the wife of one of these men to finally say to him, "You know, Michael, we will never sell that land." And that is true. The only way that you can buy a piece of forested land is if somebody dies and leaves or their kids don't want it or something like that. That's the only way you can get a hold of it. Or of any kind of land around here. I mean, the only reason why we got a hold of this extra acreage that we got was because Lois had to sell it to pay hospital bills. She would never have sold it otherwise. She was going to try to eke out a living selling seed or doing something. I mean, she and her husband Bud spent thirty-five years paying that farm off, and she sure as heck didn't want to sell it. People, rural people who own land, will not be parted from it. So I don't know what that is. Is it just love? I think it has something to do with love. But I also think it has to do with investment, that after awhile, the land is maybe more important than we are, what we've done here. Especially in forestry, which a lot of people say, "Well, when are you going to harvest them?" And when we say, "Well, we're not; our grandchildren maybe will harvest them," a lot of people, friends of ours from the city, look at us like we're completely crazy. They don't get it. I like the idea of that really long term thing, where the people kind of roll past, but the earth itself, it has its own timeline for these things, and somebody else will benefit from it possibly who I don't even know. And I don't know, did Michael talk to you about the conservation easement?

Maniscalco: No.

Johnson: That idea? Well, do you know what a conservation easement is?

Maniscalco: Not really.

Johnson: It's actually an encumbrance put on a piece of property in perpetuity, meaning forever, which protects it from certain kinds of development. And we have been investigating putting a conservation easement on our property, because all around us, more and more, especially around the towns, farm fields are being developed. You probably didn't—right, you weren't on sixty-four, so you didn't go back Lanark. But any of the small towns you drive by, you'll see a new subdivision on the side of it. Well, that was somebody's corn field ten years ago, and then they were adjacent to a town, and they got absorbed by the town. That could happen. And we like the idea of our tree farm, our trees, always being a forest. And so we're considering writing a conservation easement for this piece of property. That is a very weird thing to consider, that anybody then who would be interested in buying it would only be able to do the things that we said that they could do when we wrote our conservation easement. Now, maybe we would say that they could harvest sustainably, but they couldn't clear cut. Or maybe we would say that they could never put another house on this property. I mean, those are encumbrances; those make the property less available to people. Only a certain kind of person would be willing to buy a piece of property that had a conservation easement on that. And we've talked to our kids about it, and they all have said that they thought it was a great idea. But I know a lot of people around here think that it is the stupidest idea you could ever come up with, because they want their kids to be able to make as much money off their property as they possibly can. And maybe that is the most important thing, I don't know. But for me, I'd just like somebody to see the trees that we planted last year that are presently nothing more than two foot long sticks in the ground. And I love the idea of the fact that some of those trees could get to be great big things. I like that.

Maniscalco: Yeah. Now, I have one last question for you, and then maybe we can get outside and take a look around.

Johnson: Yeah, we should, before it gets dark.

Maniscalco: Yeah. This is a question I ask everybody, and that's the idea that this is an oral history interview, and it's going to be archived in the Illinois State Museum forever and ever and ever and ever, and one day down the road, somebody might walk in the museum and say, "Hey, look, there's Grandma's interview on the shelf!" What would you like there to be in this interview for them, for that person?

Johnson: You mean, which of the things that I've talked about are the most important?

Maniscalco: Anything that you want to leave in this interview for—

Johnson: I don't know. I can't—I don't know how to answer that.

Maniscalco: That's fine too.

Johnson: I mean, the project is about agriculture in Illinois, and agriculture is something I never imagined that I would be involved in, growing up in an apartment building in Evanston. And yet—I mean, I just wanted to live in the country, but I didn't know what that meant. And I don't think that it's possible to own property in a rural area, and raise trees or corn or soybeans or anything else, without finding out everything you possibly can about agriculture. I mean, I never imagined that I would read the Farm Bureau newspaper every week from cover to cover. That's how I found out about this, by the way; I was reading the Farm Bureau newspaper. I mean, we've gotten the Farm Bureau newspaper for years, but until—I think the whole thing kind of started coalescing when we got the sawmill, and we actually started seeing like the end product of the beginning thing. The tree begins, and then it grows, and then finally someone cuts it down and makes it into lumber, and it goes off and it gets another life as a desk or something. And got involved with the tree farm committee, and realized how many issues there are, and how many tax issues and time issues and resource issues and energy issues are involved in how land is used. Ultimately, to me, agriculture is just the story of how people relate to the land. And the people I know who are farmers of any kind are like part of the land. The other day, we were talking about this, the salt of the earth. All of these clichés. I'm sure the reason why they became clichés is because people said them all the time. It's like the people are part of the earth. They're not disconnected. And that, I think, is what has happened to me, and I think I wanted it to happen. And that's why I didn't want to be a doctor, and I didn't want to be an actor, and I didn't want to sit around inside a theater or a hospital all of time. I really felt like I wanted to affirm the fact that people are part of the earth. And Austin tells me, from a chemical standpoint, people and the earth are exactly the same. They have all of the same chemicals inside of them; they've just taken different forms. And I really liked that idea, from a metaphorical standpoint. So I don't know. Maybe just the fact that someone who wasn't born into it had decided to take a stand for trees. I think that that could be good.

Maniscalco: Well, that's great. That's great. Well, thank you very much for doing this, sitting here with us and talking here with us. It was a lot of fun.

Johnson: Well, thank you for sitting with us. It must have been [redacted information] exhausting.

Maniscalco: No. {laughter} No, it was a lot of fun. It was a lot of fun.

Johnson: We should go outside, because—

Maniscalco: I want to see outside. I'm seeing the shadows getting bigger, and I'm going, oh, boy.

Johnson: Yeah, time to go outside.

Maniscalco: Yeah, I don't know how much time we got, but—

Warren: We've got thirty-seven minutes.

Johnson: You're kidding me.

Warren: I can tell you how much time we have left. The hard drive is full.

Johnson: Wow. Well, part of it is lunch, when no one was talking. Right?

Maniscalco: Yes.

Warren: Right.

Maniscalco: Yes. Well, on our camera, we only have so much computer space, so we have thirty-seven minutes of computer space left.

Johnson: Well, that sounds like it's just perfect.

Warren: But we've got plenty of room for the photographs.

(end of interview)