

Interview With Mr. George Johnson, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, September 1941

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Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did ah did they drive the ah slaves down there on in Davis' Bend very hard, or did they work them reasonable?

Mr. George Johnson: Reasonable. Reasonable. You know, ah master Joe give master Jeff, another boy and ah, the driver was, the boy was chopping cotton. Boy didn't keep up with the gang, you understand. But he hoed a clean row.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: And ah the boy, he [the slave driver] come to whup the boy, the boy wouldn't keep up, you understand. The boy throw down the hoe and run. Went to house where master Jeff work. And he ask him, "What is the trouble son?" Say, "Mr. So-On-So whup me because I won't keep up with the gang. I ain't let no man whup me. I ain't belong to him. I don't belong to him, I belong to you master Jeff. If I need a whupping I want you whup me. I don't want no body to whup me." And he go, "Sonny, go out in the kitchen now and tell her give you breakfast ??? and go out ??? yard there work in, work in, work in, work i-nnnn-in the garden. ??? and our Court Day twelve o'clock. That day held court twelve o'clock. And all the hands say that you ah, "He didn't keep up, master Jeff, but he hoed a clean row. Hoed a clean row." "He hoed a clean row?" "Yes, ah." "Ahha, well Sonny, you hoed a clean row, all right. You stay in the house here now. Hmm. I'll get rid of him." Next day he fired him. That's what kind of man he was. Fired him, for that nigga. Yes, sir. Master Jeff take up for his nigga.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah wha-what did you say that Jeff Davis' mule was named?

Mr. George Johnson: Righteous Bill.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Righteous Bill?

Mr. George Johnson: Righteous Bill.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You used to hold him?

Mr. George Johnson: Hold him many a time. Hold him with Grandpa's shop rope. Yes, sir. Righteous Bill. Sat with a horse named ah, Midnight. Little black horse.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Know them personally. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, when they weren't working did they allow them to have fun? Did-what sort of fun they have? Did they have things like ah, ahhh log rollings, or corn huskings, or—

Mr. George Johnson: Corn husking, yeah they had ??? corn husking and all like that.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Gang of them get in there shucking corn. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well-well, what'd they do on the corn husking?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they'd sing a lot of songs. They'd laugh and play. Wrestle and jump. I guess you know. They'd make a mark here, mark there. [Full with (?)] that, you understand. Fellow lay down and ah, his hand out there, his feet down yonder. Made a mark, like that ??? . And he jump from here to there, if he could do that, you see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: The other fellow couldn't jump, why he can just made a mark where he jump.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: That's the way they do. I was a little boy, I see them do it, you know. I was a little boy. Right in master Jeff barnyard. Yes, sir. In a fine place too. Fine, fine barnyard too. Fine barnyard. Fine great big barnyard. Great big barnyard. ??? . Great big barnyard. Be full of mules. No cows in there. [I told them (?)] these cows go outside. Other place. Lot of mules be with the cows. Sheep in other place, you know. And the sheds, you know. Great big sheds. Sheeps and goats in there. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well what, ah what other kinds of ah [*long pause*] what other kind of fun and celebration did they have except ahhh ah corn huskings?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they'd have cotton pickings, you understand.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. You, I know—

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: —you mentioned them.

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Anything else besides cotton pickings and corn huskings?

Mr. George Johnson: No. No. Haven't seen nothing like that. That's all they would have. And I'd tell you another thing they'd do too. They-they-they-they-they had this here, this, this horse race, you know—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —and they playing tuma, you know, tu—kissing ring on, ride you know, running a horse. Kissing a ring on a horse, you understand; called tuma—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Tutuma?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. They played, played that, you know. Four or five horses, you understand. Every fellow on his horse, you know. His time around, why, he hold his spike, you understand, till he slip there, you understand. See if he miss, he misses but the other fellow, the other fellow get it you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. He win, fellow get the ring he win.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Fellow didn't get it, well he lost. Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Ah, di, did you ever hear them tell these ah Brier Rabbit stories and things like that around there, or did they tell them around there where you were?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they didn't tell them about where I was at. [If they tell them about (?)] ??? I didn't hear about it. No, sir. No, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Did they tell ghost stories? What kind of stories did they tell when you sat around the fire at night?

Mr. George Johnson: Well, they tell about these ah ghost [things like that (?)] ??? Ghost Stories see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: About spirits.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Spirits coming down in the house, you know. And hear something at the house. Come in and see ghost, and like that and all them kind of stuff. And he get scared and run, see. Come by the cemetery. He get scared of so and so and so. He feel the hot steam—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —and it be out the spirit. And the other fellow head toward the spirit he get home and tell that tale about that spirit. That's all right. Nigga have so many things he tell that ain't so.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: *[laughs]*

Mr. George Johnson: Pass the steam and the water out there he ain't so he ain't think. He ain't thought. White man he ain't got that kind of thought in his head. Nigga ain't—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: White man doesn't have that kind of thought in his head?

Mr. George Johnson: No. He ain't got nothing like that in his head. No. He ain't got nothing like that in his head. They put it off just air. Now you know I never seen spirit in my life—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —that wasn't no spirit. I told them, “Pass the road here.” It's full of hot steam. It's just hot steam that's all. I ain't told them about it. Tell me some fellow is born to see spirits. Well, if they see them, he see them. Now, I ain't neva see none. See, I don't know nothing like that. Ain't seen no spirits. Said he seen a white man: “Saw a man with no head on him.” Saw his so and so and so. I ain't seen nothing like that. No.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well ah, you, you didn't hear them tell any stories about animals, any things like that? Any-any other stories they'd tell?

Mr. George Johnson: No. No. No. Now I know a tale told once, you see, it's supposed to be fact though; a fellow was out hunting [*microphone noise*] and ah he [had a broom stick (?)], you understand. He had his gun out hunting rabbits, you understand. And he run up on a man head out there. He looks, say 'Lord heaven, a man head! Poor man got killed here. Man, man dead [out ??? (?)] cut off his head.' He say, 'I wonder what killed him; how come you here anyhow? How come he here?' And the head spoke to him, you see. Mouth open for him to hear. So he went on home to his master. 'The head'll talk to you.' And he carried his master out there, say 'Talk with him.' Went out there, said, 'Master, here that head talked to me not too long ago. I was here hunting. There that head, see it hid in the grass yonder? It was talking to me.' He asked him something to see 'What he say to you?' And he asked he said, 'Don't head don't you be talking to you-you-you cut my head off.' He said, 'Oh, no boy, that ain't going happen.' 'Yes, he will.' 'Just see him do it.' See the boy spoke to the head. Head doesn't even answer. Head didn't answer at all. [Then said 'I was ready ta (?)] cut Bob's head off.'

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: He cut Bob's head off?

Mr. George Johnson: Cut Bob head off. And he said told Bob. The head spoke, you understand. Said, 'I told you, had to bring him, not to bring Bob here. Now here he is his head's dead.' Head spoke again said, '[Bob (?)] brought you here ??? out there hunting rabbits and got his head chopped off.'

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [*laughs*]

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. See, I believe in truth.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, did you, do, do you remember any songs, any, any, any lullabies that mothers sang to their babies when they were little? *Sleep Baby Sleep* and that sort of thing?

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, sing a song what you sing, *Buy a Baby a Bunkin* and *Papa Going Hunting, Johnny Catching a Rabbit Skin Without A Baby Bunkin* (?), papa used to sing that. Mama used to sing that.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, ah will you say that song again, I didn't quite catch it?

Mr. George Johnson: My mama used to sing, *Buy a Baby a Bunkin, Papa Going Hunting*, [Johnny *Catching a Rabbit Skin Without A Baby Bunkin (?)*], *Baby Don't You Cry, Be Papa Angel By and By*. Like that, you understand. You see.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Do you remember any others?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. ??? a while sometimes. Yeah, I heard all those things when I was a little boy.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: A when-when they had these tournaments riding horses, di-di-di-di-did Negroes ride in those races—

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. That's where they learned from, white folks, you understand. Right on Hurricane. Right on down on our plantation. Down on our own plantation. See Hurricane up here. Brierfield here. I was born on Brierfield. See on Hurricane, pastures you understand. See. Racetrack. It was running a horse, you understand. Catch up to him.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: And then, then the nigga would come home and have a tournament their own?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Master Jeff allow them to have—allowed them to have it.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Allowed them to have it. What they wanted. Allowed them to have it. Yes, sir. Let the niggas have it. What they wanted. "My niggas. They can have what they want." Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [long pause] Well, are you, ah you didn't know any ah any stories about Brier Rabbit and [Bruff (?)] Fox—

Mr. George Johnson: No.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: —and those kinds of stories?

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. No, sir. No, sir. No, sir. Didn't know anything about Brier Rabbit and [Bruff (?)] Fox. Nothing like that. [I didn't (?)] hear them. Could hear them but just out, you know, other things.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Mr. ??? ah you, you, you could have heard them if you were interested in them?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yes, sir. I could have heard them, if I was interested in them.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, one more thing I guess we'll be through—

Mr. George Johnson: Ummm.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: —and that is, ah you, you, you, you you still don't remember any of the dance steps they used to do, do you? Or do you remember any of the dance steps?

Mr. George Johnson: No. No. Don't remember no dance steps at all.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You just played music and—

Mr. George Johnson: I played music, yes sir. I played my music. Played music. Played music. Had my heart there all the time. Before I went to school. After I got to school. I come back from school. That's my all my heart were when I was working I was playing music. Yes, sir. I like music you understand. I like to see other fellows dance, anyhow. I like ta see them dance.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You liked to see them dance?

Mr. George Johnson: I liked to see fellows dance.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, what, what kind of steps did they do?

Mr. George Johnson: Oh, they called it all kind of steps. Don't remember the steps. They call all kind of steps. Yes, sir. They dance you know this, just, just thirty-two to a set, you know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: And *Palm* ??? all that kind of stuff, you know. *Swing Corner. Palm As You Swing. Palm [As You (?)] ???* , all that kind of stuff, you know. And when you get to the bar you got to treat, you understand. You had to buy her some oranges, apples, candy. Something like that, you know, they have in that place to sell, you know. Pay a dime. A nickel. A quarter. Something like that. ??? . [*an automobile roars by*] That your car?

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: No. That's another car. Well, let me see if there's any question, Mr. Lomax, wants to ask and then I'll be through. [*Alan Lomax barely spoke in this interview*] You told me this ah stick was Jeff Davis' stick?

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, master Jeff's own stick. That's master Jeff's stick. [*Mr. George Johnson raps his cane as he addresses questions*] Yes, sir. Master Jeff's stick. [*rap, rap*] That's master Jeff's. That's master Jeff's stick that stick [cut (?)] on Brierfield, since I was born. Yes, sir. [*an automobile revs its engine*]

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You say Mr. Montgomery gave it to you?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. He give it to me forty or forty-two years ago. I hurt my foot one day [*Mr. Johnson seems to rock in his chair*], say, "Boy come on go in the house get my stick." "What stick is this?" Say, "The old stick here is master Jeff's old stick." Say, "You can have this stick now?" Say, "Alright, cause I'll take care of it." Say, "I'll take care of it." I got it up till today. [*raps cane*] A man tried to get me sell that stick. Carry it Jackson, sell it. "Give you fifty-dollars." "No, I won't sell it." I keep the memory of master Jeff. Ain't I right?

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: I think you're right.

Mr. George Johnson: I think I'm right. A lady want me to will it to her in Cleveland [Mississippi], down there. Told me to will her the stick before I die for her. I say, "Oh, Mrs. I hope you live well. I hope I never die."

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: [*laughter*]

Mr. George Johnson: I told her [*pause as he taps cane*] that I need that, need that stick. Way I done get good with these southern white people, you got to give, give them a little honor. Got to give them a little honor, I know them. Give them a little honor and they always will help you do what you want to do.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Give them a little honor and they will help you?

Mr. George Johnson: Give them a little honor and they will help you.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: What do you think will be the final outcome for Negroes in this country? ??? .

Mr. George Johnson: [South Land (?)]?

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm. [*loud recording distortion*]

Mr. George Johnson: ??? Well, I tell you, ??? nigga in [South Land (?)]. These niggas. ??? remind me all the time. All the time. If he don't come in line he lost bird in the high grass now. This late young nigga I'm talking, this late young Negro.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: See. A done old nigga like me, old, old nigga like me they'll live wholesome.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: This late young nigga he, he, he got more education and he ain't got commonsense in his head. And commonsense is the best medicine a man could ever have. Commonsense. He ain't got enough that stuff in his head. And he be lost ??? . Yes, suh.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, do you think that the times are going to get better for him, or—

Mr. George Johnson: For late young nigga?

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Times are going to get worse.

Mr. George Johnson: Worse for him. Because he ain't right. You can't, you can't trust him. You can't trust them. [*faint woman's voice in background*] He'll do something wrong think you'll never know it. It was a mistake. Something's wrong, he can't, you, you, you, think you can do something wrong and, now, cousin Isaiah once, when he bring that oil money up here, all that oil money up here. They had the money deposited in a New York bank. When they, cousin ??? oil money had me, the money shipped to me, you understand. You see. From New York down here. I had all that money. And not a penny come against me, and why? Honesty. I don't have an education. I got common sense. I can read and write [*scratch the whit (?)*]. But obeying you that's send me. You obey—you give me his job to do this thing, I do this thing credit to myself to honor much as I can. You sent me I do, I do what you tell me to do. Obedience the best medicine in the world. Obey. Ain't I right?

[Alan Lomax (?): I think so.

Mr. George Johnson: You obey me you keep me with you as long as I can [stand (?)]. Obey. Obey. [The only education I have was to mind (?)] my own business. Being right. Do anything you want me to do. Do it right.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, do you think most of these niggas will move out of this country, or think they going stay down here?

Mr. George Johnson: They ain't going stay down here. Naw, they ain't going stay down here. No. They going leave. [*car starts engine*] [Now's time (?)] they going leave. [Now's time (?)] they got to, emigrate some other nationality here. Some other nationality.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, they will bring some other nationality here?

Mr. George Johnson: Yeah, some other nationality. Yes, sir.

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