Gene Johnson Interview
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GJ: . . . well, what they call the reputation of others, and everything like that, I won't do that. And I don't want to be held responsible—anything I say here is intended just to relay to you my experiences in life and everything, you know, and not intended to offend or anything.

DC: Oh sure. Yeah. It just started rolling.

GJ: OK. Yeah, I'm saying that for both our benefits. Not intended to offend anybody—it's just if somebody's getting offended, it'd probably be me for being embarrassed. Some things that's happened to me and I'm almost embarrassed to say. So there's no intention whatsoever for any offense for anybody, on any of that end. And like I said that—I'd like a tape of it, and play it for my kids, to see what they think of it, you know.

DC: Absolutely, yeah. I'll not only give you a tape . . .

GJ: They will be the expert critiques, you know!

DC: [laughs] Well, the thing is that everyone has their own view of things and all I'm asking you for, is yours.

GJ: OK.

DC: And in that sense, it's your view—if your kids want to challenge your view or if anyone else does, that's OK.

GJ: That's fine.

DC: In the end what I'll have is, I hope, dozens and dozens of these different views—not necessarily just on your life, but on their own experiences and then I'll try to make some sense of it all.

GJ: OK.

DC: But I'll not only give you a copy of the tape, I'll also—when I get the transcript typed out—I'll get you a copy of that.

GJ: OK. All righty.

DC: And there may be some things that you'll have to help me on, because no matter how good

this recording is, sometimes it doesn't sound quite clear on the tape and I'll come back to you and ask for your help. You know, "what was that?," because you'll know.

GJ: All righty. OK.

DC: All right. But I do start out with really simple questions and the first one is the simplest: where were you born?

GJ: I was born in a small town, southeast Missouri. Name of the town was Bernie.

DC: How do you spell that?

GJ: B-E-R-N-I-E. Just like it's spelled in the fellow's name. The county, in Stoddard County, Missouri. That's in the delta flat lands, farmland agriculture section of the southeast corner of Missouri. Bootheel [as in heel of the boot], they called it.

DC: Bootheel, OK.

GJ: Bootheel of Missouri, the bootheel.

DC: That little tiny . . .

GJ: Yeah, that little thing—you see it on the map. And all they had there, when I was a kid—you want me to go on?

DC: Yeah, keep going, yeah.

GJ: See I was born in 1925, so my growing years, mostly, was spent during the Depression. And of course, as everybody knows the Depression didn't stop, didn't end in the South until almost the start of World War II. We didn't have anything what they have in Michigan or in any other state. And I remember that we didn't have what they call welfare. I didn't even know what welfare—I just thought welfare meant farewell backwards. [Laughs] I didn't know what that was. We didn't have anything like that. Poor people, you know, if they needed shoes for their kids or something, maybe the Red Cross agent in that county would put their name in and bring them some shoes to go to school or something. It was hard. It was rough. And as I started to say, when I got ten years old, well, I was picking cotton with a little old—what I want to call it? We called it a toe sack. People will know what I mean. Anyhow, with the little—one of these old, holes on it, real—like tights, you know, we'd tie it on the ends of the sack. And I'd fill that full of cotton and pick cotton that way. And I was only about six, seven years old then. Now, when I got ten years—and my Dad worked on the WPA by the way. And I remember he got sixteen dollars every two weeks. Sixteen bucks every two weeks. Now . . .

DC: What did he do on the WPA?

GJ: He worked, just like the rest of them. Yeah.

DC: Do you remember on what projects?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. That way if you were—I don't think they called them a reclamation project. Back after the Civil War they had a reconstruction project, I remember that. But maybe they did call this a reclamation, because they did reclaim a lot of old swamp lands. And they used to call—and still, the southeast Missouri down there a long time ago, I remember, they used to refer to them as "Swampeast" Missouri.

DC: Swampeast, OK.

GJ: Yeah, had water moccasins galore and all the blackberry fields, and of course cotton plantations and everything else—they called them plantations then. But anyway, when I was about eight—six, seven, or eight years old, I was picking cotton with that little sack like on. When I got ten years old, I never will forget the day. Now picking cotton's hard. But you can, if the stalks is high enough, you can hide yourself—especially if you're a kid, you can lay down on your side and rest for a little, a little once in awhile. But now, chopping cotton is when the cotton's about two inches high. And the sun's just blistering out in the field. Now remember I'm comparing this to what that—there's no coffee breaks. And there's no breaks at all, and at the end of the row you turn around and come back another row, quarter mile long row. And out in the middle of them fields, that—when the humidity was high it felt 110, 115 degrees. Actual temperature would be over 100 many, many days. And that was all day long. Now let me state this: it wasn't just; hell, nobody paid any attention—you might want to strike that. I'm sorry if I said that. Nobody paid any attention to hours, what I mean, so much per hour. No. A day! A day was the time, not hours. And back in the summertime, a day can be twelve, fourteen hours of sunshine. And you work from sunup to sundown. One dollar a day. A dollar a day. And I tell my kids that, and my grandkids, you know, they're standing around listening: "Grandfather, you worked for a dollar an hour?" I said, "Wait a minute, back up a little bit. I worked for a dollar a day." And that's the reason why I said they can't believe it. But, you know, I remember *all* these things.

DC: Did your family own any of the land?

GJ: No, no! This is another thing I'm gonna say. Back—I was born, I was a town boy they called it, town boy. Now back in those days, they didn't have industries that moved from the big cities for cheaper wages and stuff like that. You know? And I could've understand, back in them days, why people would grab for them jobs whether unionized or not, whole lot better than a dollar a day. Now they do, you know, they move from here to Alabama, Tennessee—have work for cheaper wages. Back in those days, there wasn't any industry in those little towns. Not especially—most of those little towns, the one I was from, wasn't. If there was any industry in a town ten or twenty miles up the road, you can bet your bottom dollar that everybody in that county had the job already. You know? Any *decent* jobs. Well, that was hard work. That was *real* hard work. Now can you imagine going down one end of the row to the other end of the row, a quarter mile long in over a hundred degree weather? Sun just burning down on you. No shade trees, no shade trees at

all. Nothing.

DC: Tell me more about how you actually chopped, about chopping cotton.

GJ: Well, we chopped it. They plant it—now they got different, now they almost broadcast it because they got the automatic cotton pickers now. And thank God for that, for the kids that came after me—they didn't have to break their back in the cotton fields. It's almost like a combine now. But anyway, they plant the cotton in a row and the rows was about thirty inches apart. They had to leave an open space in the row. That was for when cotton picking time came in the fall. You could walk down between two rows and pull your cotton sack behind you. You had to have the space, see? OK. That was, now that was picking cotton. OK, go back to chopping cotton like you said. Chopping cotton, they used to plant it, think it's in April down there. And farmers always like to find the first bloom by the fourth of July. That means you're gonna have a good crop. Well, in—chopping that cotton though—they planted it just almost—no space in between the plants, no space in between the seeds, you know. And then of course, in order for it to grow—I mean, if it growed like that, it'd be crowded out and wouldn't grow—then, it's like pruning fruit trees or something. They'd have to take it, and a lot of times they'd call it blocking, blocking it. They'd take a hoe, about five inches wide, that was your—that's what you're chopping with, the hoe. I didn't mention that in there, and that's what you're—you go down there like that and you're watching that and you got your head down and leaning down all the time. I think that's the reason why a lot of them old timers is hunchbacked. Yeah. I thought of that. But anyway [laughs], you're probably gonna be sorry you want to interview me!

DC: No, that's OK. No, no, no, this is good!

GJ: But anyway, you take that hoe and you chop it about five inches apart, and all the way down. And if you see any grass in there, the three or four stalks—you need three or four stalks in a pile of stalk—in there, you try to take the corner of your hoe and get that out. If you can't, you reach down and pick or pull it out. And anyhow, my first day—I started to say this before I started all this other rigmarole—my first day I actually went to work, I mean as working from that time on until now, or until I retired. I've been retired now twenty years from GM. That's when I tell everybody I started working. I retired from GM at fifty-seven, but I told everybody I worked forty-seven years when they asked me how long I'd been there. And I can just see the wheels spinning in their head: "You're fifty-seven, you worked for forty-seven years?" Then I have to remind them, "Wait a minute, buddy. I started working when I was ten years old. I had my social security card when I was thirteen." But anyhow, when I first went out, counting back the time to when I was ten—remember, I worked even before that, picking that little cotton and dragging that little sack—but as far as working as a *man*: ten years old. This is—I'm telling you this—my Dad said, "What do I get for the kid?" to the farmer, you know, to the farmer out there, when I was starting there. Well he said, "Whatever I give you guys if he can do the work, if he can keep up." Well my Mother seen that I kept up a row just like they did. Now from that day on, I worked, and I worked my you-know-what off. [laughs]

DC: So was your whole family out there, picking and chopping?

GJ: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah, that's the only way. And like I started to say, there wasn't no industry back in that town, so everybody worked on the farm. The farmers would come into town to get, usually truckloads of the farmers. It was almost like migrant workers, but we wasn't migrant. We were citizens of the town, you know. But that's when I started working, per se, from that time on. You know.

DC: Did you work for one farmer or a whole bunch of different farmers?

GJ: Just any farmer. Just any farmer. We could get through with one patch, and another farmer would need some workers.

DC: Did the farmers ever offer different amounts per day?

GJ: Oh no. No. No, no. No, no. I guess they figured you would be glad to get that dollar a day. Well, we were! That's the only way to make money. And so from that time on I worked until—I could go through—there's a six or seven year period here till I get eighteen, you know. I worked there and done work like that till I was, I think sixteen. And it was in 19 and 40—let's see. No, I wasn't sixteen yet, I was—'41—yes, I was sixteen. Because World War II didn't start till December the 7th, the twelfth month in '41. I was sixteen. I was born in 1925. And they hired me—I went—I took my dad's old '36 Chevy truck—stake-bed truck that we used to haul logs on. I'll get back to that in a minute—that was another way we made some money. And anyway, I drive that down between, halfway between the town of Bernie and the town of Malden. Park it on the side of the road. And man there was just a string of cars on both sides of the road—everybody was trying to get a job. The farmers---the government went and leased several thousand acres of that land there to build an air base. So I was one of the guys that was parking alongside the road, standing in line, trying to get a job. And it was a union job by the way, fifty cents a month. They give me a little old cardboard tag to put on me, you know. Out in Waco, Texas. Industrial Builders out of Waco, Texas.

DC: So it was a construction job.

GJ: Yeah! And about the second week I got hired. And boy I was doing all right. It was sixty-five and a half cents an hour. Now can you imagine going from a dollar a day, fourteen hours a day to sixty-five and a half cents an hour?

DC: Now we're gonna sneak up on that again, I gotta back up a little bit.

GJ: Man, I was up on that.

DC: I've got a note made that we're gonna talk about that some more, because I can understand why that would be a huge deal. But I want to know a little more about the town of Bernie and where you lived in Bernie and all that.

GJ: OK. I lived—at that time I don't think there was any name, any post names of the streets. [laughs] You know? I know on the maps of the town in City Hall they probably had flagged street names. But I don't remember the street name that we had. I don't even remember a street post.

DC: How long had your parents been there?

GJ: My parents came there in 19 and 33. '32 or '33.

DC: OK. Well then . . .

GJ: By '32, I think. Because I think I was about six or seven years old. Born in '25. Yeah, about '31 or '32.

DC: Is when they moved to Bernie?

GJ: Yeah.

DC: And where were they before that?

GJ: Greenville, up the foothills of the Ozarks in Wayne County. Greenville, Missouri. I was born in Greenville.

DC: Oh, OK, you were born in *Greenville*. OK.

GJ: Mm-hm. But I was raised in that little town of Bernie because . . .

DC: So what you remember is Bernie but you were actually born in Greenville.

GJ: Yeah. Right, right.

DC: Well, what were your parents doing in Greenville?

GJ: Well, my Dad's grandpa and grandma raised him and his aunt Molly. He—my Grandmother on my Dad's side died about three, four days after my Dad was born. And my Grandpa, I guess, felt, you know, helpless to raise a kid, a baby. And he took off on his own and he was an old photographer—went all over the country riding a bike, taking pictures, you know, kids on their horses and everything. People back in them days done everything to make money. Instead of cheating—now they usually cheat. You know what I'm talking about, stock markets. But anyway, he was raised by his aunt Molly and his Grandpa and Grandma Eades. Now they—that goes back, too. They—we've got genealogy records of where—there was Eades on the Mayflower.

DC: How do you spell that?

GJ: E-A-D-E-S. But now since then they've dropped the—if you see that word Eades, they've

dropped the E. It's E-A-D-S. But on the tombstones—I go visit my descendants—it's E-A-D-E-S. But anyway, my sister got with the Mormon Church and got some of this genealogy records. And there was Eades on the Mayflower, on the, what they call bill of lading, or bill of shipping or something like that. Passengers on that. Anyway, they—my Dad's Grandpa raised him, him and his aunt, which would've been my Grandmother—Dad's Mother that died three days after he was born—her younger sister was Aunt Molly. We always called her Aunt Molly. She was my great-aunt and Dad's aunt. His Mother's name was Nancy Eades. And was Nancy Johnson then, of course. She married Grandpa Johnson. But anyway, they raised him. They're buried there at Bounds Creek Cemetery in Wayne County, Missouri, just four miles north of Greenville.

DC: What did they do in Greenville?

GJ: Well, it was a lumber town and a train—well they had a roundhouse there, for where the trains turn around and everything. And a train machine shop repair—where they repair, you know, like they used to have out here in Pontiac out here and I think they—oh they still got it out there. Grand Trunk Western, that big place out there, where they repair boxcars there. That's what they did. In logging. Lumber, logging. It was a great big—no, it wasn't great big, but I mean as far as towns were in those days, in that county it was a big town. A lot of hustle and bustle of things going on. But now you go down there now, and that's another story. In 19 and 37 they built—they put a dam on the Saint Francis River because it was flooding all the time. They had to move Greenville up one mile and now it's called *New* Greenville. Up one mile from where it is—and they've made a park out of where the old Greenville is. And we just went down there last year and there was sidewalks—the sidewalks are still there. And I remember before Mom and Dad died I used to take them over there and Dad would say, "Well this is. . .", you know, he'd say where he used to shoot dice out at the back of the courthouse. The old courthouse stand—you know where they had the—it's sort of built up like that and steps, stairs going up. It's still there. And the old streets and sidewalk is still right way back in them woods. The woods have grown up since then. That's the old town. Now it's a—I think it's a federal rivers and scenic park or something. And—but anyhow, that's what's left of—and the people—the cemetery's still there, but only about half the people's in the cemetery because the government gave the people a choice: if they wanted to take up their loved ones and move them on up to where—up, one mile up on the hill, away from the water, why, they could and the government would pay for it. And if they wanted to move their houses—they even moved their houses! If they wanted to move up there. But they didn't—then they got to pay for it. And I remember my Mother got—she got a little three hundred and forty-seven dollar check. I remember that. I was about twelve years old. She got the check. But that was a lot of money then, you know?

DC: No kidding, in 1937?

GJ: Yeah. Now that was the flood. That was that great flood they had down there. You know? And, of course they've had great floods after that, too, down there.

DC: But the dam was designed to prevent further floods.

GJ: Yeah. Prevent—well, it used to come up into the second floor of the courthouse there, Dad said. And people used to have to take boats, you know, and go up to higher ground. Oh yeah. And that's why they—Corps of Engineer, U.S. Corps of Engineer put the dam on. They called it Wappapello Dam. And of course it's still there, and they've got a state park there and everything else.

DC: What about your Mother? Was she from Greenville as well?

GJ: Yes.

DC: OK. What did her family do?

GJ: All her folks was from Greenville. Oh, her Dad was an engineer on the train. And he was in a train wreck. The train went through—the locomotive went through the trestle and the steam blinded him, on his eye and everything else, but he survived.

DC: How old was he when that happened?

GJ: Oh, in his forties, I think. Mom said 43, 44.

DC: So he couldn't see then.

GJ: No. No.

DC: Oh my. What happened after that?

GJ: Steam. Well, he lived till he was—I think Grandpa was eighty-one when he died. And he's buried there in Bernie Cemetery. He's one of the few that isn't buried up to the old descendants in the Greenville Cemetery and all.

DC: How did the family get by after he was blinded?

GJ: Well—my Mother was married. She got married when she was fifteen. Yeah, she got married when she was fifteen. She was born in 1900 and she was married in 1915. And Dad was—I think Dad was twenty when they got married. And after—let's see—my, after [there is a knock at the door] [tape recorder is turned off for a bit]

DC: . . . So they moved to Bernie in 1931. Why did they move to Bernie?

GJ: Well, Dad got tired—well they shut down the roundhouse and the logging—the timber ran out. In other words, the town was just going to pot. And so they moved out to that little town of Bernie. The farm work, see—up on the hills is nothing. Even a sheep almost falls down trying to stand up. It ain't nothing but little hills over there.

DC: What had your parents been doing before they moved to Bernie?

GJ: What had they been doing?

DC: What had they been doing, yeah. I know there's logging and there's the roundhouse, but what exactly were they doing before they moved to Bernie?

GJ: Well, like I said, Dad was raised by his Grandfather. He was still living with his Grandfather.

DC: But he was married in 1915.

GJ: 1915.

DC: So there's this period there where he was an adult and he was married . . .

GJ: What did he do?

DC: Yeah.

GJ: All I can say, he just done like anybody else—he done anything to make a living.

DC: OK. Uh huh.

GJ: Yeah. Anything and everything to make a living. And I'll say this right now. It may be embarrassing but it's not embarrassing to me. It's part of my life. A little after we got to Bernie, we done everything then—you know farm work, hard work, stuff like that. But now there's winter time when there ain't no farm work, you know. So we cut wood. Went up on the river—up there at the same old river—Saint Francis River where all that was mostly woods then. You can go down there now and you can see forty miles either way, just flat because they've cleared it all. They've got this graded level, farming machinery and all that stuff, you know. And if I'd a went away and stayed away twenty-five or thirty years and hadn't went down, I wouldn't even know I was in the right place. That's how it's changed. But anyhow, we even—we even—there was five widow womans in that town and they all bootlegged whiskey. OK? There's one drugstore that sold what they call bottled and bonded whiskey. You know, bonded means has a tax stamp on it. OK? Well that was a fight that the government had against the revenuers, you know, getting—they didn't want to pay tax on it. They were selling whiskey, but they didn't pay no tax on it. And the law—even the sheriff of the county, and the city police—they only had two policemen—one night cop and one day cop in the town—but even the sheriff's department winked at all them women that sold whiskey there because they already had their husbands in jail, in prison. They knew they either had to let them go ahead and sell it or pay for raising their kids, you know? So that's the reason why they winked at them. You know, I mean, they never even bothered them. And I'd come home from school—I walked to school because the school was only about a half a mile from our home. I'd come home and go through the back alleys and find whiskey bottles, you know? And I'd hide them under them little storage sheds that the merchants had out there to store stuff in. Hide them under

there, you know, and on Friday evening or Saturday morning I'd take my wagon and go down and get them and, I guess, I remember I'd haul them across the railroad tracks, you know, and over there to—I ain't gonna mention no names that bootlegged whiskey. I got penny apiece out of the whiskey bottles. And I could play pool all day long. It was two and a half cents a cue. In other words, two guys could play a game of pool for a nickel. I could play pool all day long with what I got out of them whiskey bottles. And by the way, that's all the money I had to spend because my Dad took all the money we made chopping cotton or anything else. You know, it was no different than any other family. The other families' dads, you know— it went into the whole family, surviving. And you heard the old phrase, "hey, if you don't work, you don't eat." It may not be true here, but buddy it was true then. You worked or you didn't find anything on the table. Everything we made went for food. Food was cheap. Get a loaf of bread for three cents. A dozen donuts for eight cents. Gallon of kerosene—a lot of people had old kerosene stoves—four cents a gallon. I remember I got this old white gas, they called it tractor gas then, it's full of ethyl coming out and all this lead and stuff come out—eight gallons for a dollar. Yeah! We put that in our truck, of course it run just like it did on Champion gas—it ain't no different. But I know I'm staggering around here and everything else but . . .

DC: That's the way it works, don't worry about it. Why did you choose Bernie?

GJ: Why?

DC: Yeah.

GJ: I don't know. I've asked myself that question, and I don't know. I really don't know. And I don't think my Dad would've known, had I thought to ask him. I don't think he would've known. Only, maybe it was because he was—see he was raised by his Grandfather and there wasn't no jobs up there and the railroads had went out. They closed the round house. Logging industry was just about to come to an end. And being a young man, I guess he just, you know, got tired of just sticking around his Grandpa and Grandma's house. He went out on his own. And met my Mother and they got married. And by the way, there's a story there. I've got the picture—I mean I've got the little paper clipping yet. The *Greenville Sun*. My Dad's cousin, he was a Baptist preacher. What was his name now? Ben! Ben Eads. And his cemetery's right up there—his tombstone's—probably I just seen it about four or five months ago. Ben Eads buried [married?] him. He was a Baptist preacher. Mom and Dad run off to get married. And my Grandpa Francis—my Mother's maiden name was Francis—my Grandpa Francis had the sheriff out looking for them all night long. And when they found them, they was already married. That's such a classic story. And I've got that little paper clipping from the *Greenville Sun*. At that time the town was big enough to have a newspaper and everything, you know. And I've got that.

DC: Did it announce the wedding or announce the search?

GJ: No, it told the story about the law being out searching for them. [laughs] Yeah. And they was already married.

DC: We may have to get a copy of that sometime.

GJ: My Grandpa threatened to shoot old Ben Eads! He was the preacher that married them, you know? He was my Dad's cousin. He was kin to my Dad's Mother's family, see. Eads.

DC: Did he ever settle down, your Grandpa, about the wedding?

GJ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, he settled down. And of course, my Dad had six, well seven kids counting my older brother—he died when I was six years old. I just barely remember. The oldest one in the family. His name was Calvin. And he died in '31.

DC: Oh '31, OK.

GJ: Yeah. And he's buried up there.

DC: What happened to him?

GJ: Pneumonia. Pneumonia, and then he had a relapse of pneumonia.

DC: Out of the seven kids, where did you fit in?

GJ: Well, it's Calvin and Ruby and Pauline and Harvey and me. I was—let's see, Calvin, Ruby, Pauline, Harvey—I was number five out of the seven. There was two more after me. Frank and Don. Don, he's the youngest one. He done real good. He's over in Van Wert, Ohio. He's been a lawyer for thirty years now.

DC: OK. I've been through Van Wert.

GJ: He just made a, he just—well, he can quit any time he want to, he's a millionaire now. He's got a case like every lawyer hopes to get once in a lifetime. [?]'s case. Big freightliner. Run into a guy. And it was the freightliner driver's fault. He's a quadriplegic. Sued them for ten million dollars. They settled for eight million. My brother got 28 percent of that. He gave all of his office employees, his paralegal girl and everything, a trip to Hawaii. And he give his—I guess you call it a paralegal, the girl—he gave her an eighty thousand dollar bonus, that one year. He always, it was his— it was a policy of his office to give a bonus every year, you know, so much percent. But when he got that settlement, that made that bonus way up there. That old gal was tickled to death. But anyhow, he done real good.

DC: How did it affect your family when your oldest brother died?

GJ: Oh it affected them. I'm glad you mentioned that. Me and my older brother—not the oldest one, not the one that died—Harvey was two years older than me. It was always Gene and Harvey, Harvey and Gene. My name is Eugene, and they always call me Gene. Arthur Eugene. But anyway, we were real close together. Before my oldest brother died,

as I started to say, me and my—Harvey, which is two years older than me, older brother—we was all musical. My Dad played fiddles and he even made fiddles. And we'd go out to square dances and everything and play for square dances out, you know, on the old farms. And he'd play till three or four o'clock in the morning, fighting, drinking moonshine. I never will—I was just a kid, but I remember all that. I was a kid, but yet I had the experience that most adults don't have at that early age.

DC: You mean he'd take you along to these gigs?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, I played with him! Oh, me and my brother played—we played guitars, right. My Dad played fiddle.

DC: And when did you start playing?

GJ: I was about seven. Yeah, about seven. I still play. I played in a band in the 1940s, early '50s. But I don't have any now. I joined the church in 1954 and me and my wife went down the aisle, same time, together and dedicated ourselves to the Lord. And I raised my kids in church. They went to church Wednesday nights, Sunday evenings for youth service and Sunday night for main church service and Sunday morning for Sunday school church service. We went to church three times a week, four services a week. Until they got away from home. Thought they knew more than we did, you know—that's the way it goes. But I don't know if—well I know, you know, it stays with you. You don't forget. But they're not, they're not overly religious. They go to church on Easters and Christmas and stuff like that. They've gotten away from it. I lost my wife twelve years ago.

DC: Oh you did. I'm sorry.

GJ: '89 was it. Thirteen years ago. July, too, it was the 22nd day of July.

DC: Oh, right about now. I'm sorry.

GJ: Yeah. Pretty near within a week. She had an aneurism. We had just come back from a convention to Washington D.C. I was with the retirees chapter at that time. In fact, I've been a member of the retirees chapter executive board just about one year after I retired, since '83, I think it was. And I've been elected every time until I resigned here, about three or four months ago because I felt guilty going to Florida and missing so many meetings. You know, it's just like a slap on the face of the people that's got confidence in you. So I just—that's what I said in my letter of resignation, you know, I mean I just felt guilty going away and not being with the people. So I resigned.

DC: Well I'm wondering, I know we're gonna keep jumping around because that's the way . . .

GJ: I know, I . . .

DC: Don't worry about it, that's absolutely OK. But I was wondering, was church a part of your life when you were a child?

GJ: No. No. And now going back to my—now, since you mentioned it, going back to my brother that died. I remember he used to take me piggy-back on to church, and we only lived about two blocks from the General Baptist church, to Sunday school. He went to Sunday school. Now, but Mom and Dad, no, they didn't go to church. Dad knew more about the Bible than me and—by the way, the brother that's in Ohio was a preacher, too, before he became, you know. Well, he's still an assistant pastor of that church in Convoy, Ohio. But anyway, now where was I?

DC: Well we were talking about the impact it had on your family. Talking about your brother carrying piggy-back.

GJ: Yeah. I remember that, see, but I was only six years old when he died. And Dad and Mom didn't have much money, of course—that was in '31, so the Depression was in full force. And we hired a friend of his, Joe [?], that was manager of one of the three cotton gins in that town, was a good friend of my Dad's. And my Dad worked there at the cotton gin, by the way, too.

DC: Now was this in Greenville or Bernie?

GJ: Bernie. It was in Bernie. It's where my brother died at. And we hauled him back up. And I say hauled him, literally did, too, because I was in the car—don't know if it was our car or their car. Anyhow, I remember being in the car and seeing the truck, open back of that truck—no stake ends in the end of it, you know—seeing the casket and going up to the cemetery. I remember that real well. You know, you don't forget anything like that. And back in those days, they couldn't afford to be discrete about anything. You know what I mean? It just—what you see is what it was. And we got there and I remember, and this is where it starts [?]. I remember burying him and everything and it tore Mom and Dad all to pieces. That was their oldest son, you know. And even my Dad used to make me feel bad—he didn't *mean* to, and I know he made the other kids feel bad, too, always talking about Calvin being the favorite, you know. But you can understand, see, from a kid's point of view. You're wondering, 'well where do I stand?' You know. But I remember Dad used to say—but I *know* that he didn't mean anything by it. But they was so attached to my older brother, and lost him. You have to understand, and I understand that.

DC: Well they were grieving themselves.

GJ: Sure. But anyway, when—before he died, and this is just like a stenciled impression. I mean stenciled right into your brain. Before he died, I remember going into the living room where his bed was. Wasn't in the hospital—people didn't go to the hospital then, you know—not very many. And the doctor was giving him some liquid or something and he was just as blue as he could be—vomited up, you know, all over his bed and everything else. And it couldn't have been over two or three days after that—see I was only six years old, I'm kinda grasping here—but it couldn't have been over two or three days after that that he died. Now when he died, this is the indelible impression. I'm not trying to use fancy words, they're coming to my mind. That left on my mind. They come in there, guys

from the morgue, mortician, funeral home down there. Come in there with the little gurney, real little gurney with four wheels on it; picked him up out of the bed. Now, I understand since then that they didn't realize I was standing there. He was as stiff as a board. And I still see that. And they laid him on the little gurney like that, right in front of me. You know, and he was stiff. He was dead. And I remember saying to my older brother, Harvey, the one that was two years older, "Harvey, why?"—you know, I didn't—I had no concept of life and death. "Harvey why is he letting them do him that way? Why is he letting them put him on that?" I remember I used to say that to him. But I just brought that to mind, you know. Probably affected me more than it did anybody else. [pauses] Do you know, people don't think. A lot of times they do very innocent things that affects other people and they don't think. No, I never will forget that.

DC: Did your parents talk with you about Calvin's death?

GJ: No. No. I guess, you know, I guess people are so busy, just day-to-day living, to—didn't think about anything like that, you know. But it was—it was a rough life. It was tough. I don't say it's the worst life that anybody could ever have, but I'll tell you what, I haven't seen anything any worse. And I've looked around, and I haven't seen anything. And I haven't heard no—maybe it's because I'm expressing myself and I'm *remembering* too much. Maybe other people are able to *forget*. But I'll tell you what, that, like I said, that book *Scars of Depression*, it sure left a scar on me. I haven't forgot any of it. I ain't forgot any of it.

DC: What kind of house or, where did you live?

GJ: Well, we lived just across—well, we lived right beside the railroad track. In fact, the railroad right of way was right on our plot line. And it was a—it was said to be a haunted house. You know, I don't know. There was some strange things happened, even to an adult I'd have to say there's—even *as* an adult, I mean, I'd have to say, in remembering back there were some very strange, unexplained things that happened. But I don't believe in ghosts. I do believe in spirits. I don't believe in ghosts. And maybe some people say, "well there ain't no difference." I don't know, but . . .

DC: Can you remember any of the unexplained things that happened?

GJ: Oh yeah. Window falling out upstairs and breaking. Was going up and see, you know, the window . . .

DC: Just fell out.

GJ: Yeah. Wasn't even no crack. Nothing. [laughs] A lot of things happened. It was so weird, and this is the reason why I'm convinced yet, still yet today—as old as I am, I'm seventy-seven—that there *was* something supernatural. Now I use the word supernatural. A lot of people says, "Well, that's hogwash." Well, I don't think so. I think there is still things supernatural. And I can remember some things that happened that's unexplainable, you know, in that place. Well one thing was—now I was eighteen, nineteen years old.

Well let me see, I was eighteen. Eighteen. Because that's before I come, just before I come to Michigan. I'd be in that house—this happened several times—and I'd find out that I was in that all by myself. Even in the daytime, this is daytime. Mom would be out in the yard or up on the garden working or something, and Dad would be working or, you know, at the gin, the cotton gin. Nobody would be there but me. And when I realized nobody was in that house but me, I had to get out. Now, I can't explain that feeling, but there had to be something affecting the circumstances, you know, or I wouldn't have felt that way. You know, here I'm almost a grown man, eighteen years old. Daytime, this is daytime, not nighttime. I know that—this may not be what you want, but I'm telling you just exactly the way I remember it.

DC: That's OK, yeah. So it sounds like in addition to you not being comfortable at home alone, I also learned from what you were just saying that you had a garden.

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh, we had a big garden, yeah. Back in those days a lot of—they called them hoboes, you know, rode the rails, they called them—ride the rails. Because this is the Depression. Everybody was leaving their homes and trying to get a job somewhere else. They were just going all over like a crossword puzzle trying to get a job. And many, many of them never did come back, you know? OK. Dad had—we had five lots on that place. Well, it was almost a whole block. The big house is on the one lot. The rest of that land was planted in garden—potatoes, turnips, turnip greens, and stuff like that. And Dad planted about half of it—at first he didn't plant that much in turnips, because he didn't like turnips that well—but we ate a lot of turnip greens and a lot of turnips. He didn't think it'd get—let me tell you. But anyway, them hobos—the train would stop there, you know, and they'd be sitting in the boxcar door hanging their feet off like that and man, they'd be six or eight in them boxcars. And they'd run over to that turnip patch, start pulling them turnips up, and go on back to the boxcar. So Dad increased his turnip patch. I never will forget that. Dad was compassionate. That was—he was known as Honest Abe. If he told you anything, he meant it. If he owed you anything, he'd pay it. My Dad had a reputation like that. He didn't have anything else, but he had that kind of reputation. Honest. But anyway, Dad was compassionate. This was a compassionate action that he did. He expanded his turnip patch. And boy I tell you, oh, for several years until the Depression was over, them guys would jump out of them boxcars and go grab a big old bunch of turnips, go in the boxcar with them. And I remember, too, when I was a little kid the hobos come to the door. Knock on the door, you know? And ask if there was any work they could do. My Mother's name was Bertha and the hillbilly pronunciation of that is Berthie. You know, if it was Ida, it's Idie. You know what I'm trying to say. And anyhow, they knock on the door and Dad goes to the door and they'd ask if we had any work to do—they were hungry. Dad turned around to Mom and said, "Berthie, save a place at the table! Save a place at the table!" He did that all the time. You know, I remember bad things about my Dad but I remember good things, too. And Mom would fix the old boy something to eat. And they had what they called—and I said I walked to school and back, you know—and they had what they called a—hobos called it a jungle. Don't know if you've heard that phrase or not, the jungle. Where they had a little corral there where they'd load their cattle in and ship some of their cows and stuff and, you know, a little incline for the cows to go into the boxcars, you know, up even with the boxcar door. And

underneath that, these hobos—this was their jungle. A little bitty ring of fire, little logs on it, and anything to hold the little can that they boiled their coffee in that had already been boiled two or three times. I used to come home from school, walk home at lunchtime, and I'd stop there and I'd see one under there and it was interesting to me and they'd tell me all kinds of stories, you know. Here I'm just a seven or eight year old kid, you know, antennas up, wanting to hear all of this experiences that this guy's had and, boy, I heard a lot of it. I heard a lot of it. And many times I'd see them in their old stiff—I can visualize an old black suit jacket. Dirty and stained all over. And inside their coat pocket they'd pull out a little brown bag. Brown piece of—piece of brown bag—that he had folded up with coffee grounds that he'd already boiled two or three times before. And maybe a hunk of bread that you wouldn't feed to the birds, hard as a rock. He'd eat that. Yeah. I remember those things. It was, it was educational to me, I'll tell you that. And they'd have some stories to tell me about places, other places all over the country, you know, they'd been.

DC: Any of those stories stand out in your mind right now?

GJ: Well, one guy was talking about when he left, when the Depression came, he thought he had it made. And he was only about . . .

End of Tape I, Side A

Begin Tape I, Side B

GJ: . . . I remember asking him, "Well, what do you think will happen?" "Well," he says, "I'll just keep on going till I find a job." And I don't know—like I said starting out with this little story, many of them never did go back home. No. You probably seen in the movies these old—they called them railroad dicks. Detectives. Oh yeah, they used to—I've seen them chase them right off the trains.

DC: Right there in your town.

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. But then before the train would pull out, they'd circle back in, they'd find an empty boxcar, and it didn't do any good. [laughs]

DC: And then another thing that I heard you say and missed that story is that your Dad apparently worked at the cotton gin.

GJ: Yeah, he did. Yeah he was a ginner at the cotton gin. But I'd only see—the ginning of the cotton only lasted about seven weeks. Seven or eight weeks.

DC: Yeah, temporary job.

GJ: Yeah. Then wintertime come. There ain't nothing then, you know, but cutting wood. And that's a story in itself. That old land is all cleared out there now. Like I say, you can see

forty miles either way, it's flat. But then it was mostly jungle and woods. And we'd go out there and we'd cut the virgin timber down—and remember, now, they didn't have no chainsaws then. We had them old two-man cross-cut saws. I'd get on one end, my brother would get on the other end. Saw them trees down. We trimmed the trees—trimmed the tree, pile the brush, throw kerosene—like I said, kerosene was pretty cheap then: four cents a gallon. But of course four cents was hard to get, too. But anyhow, we didn't, we didn't pour it on real heavily. We poured what we needed to burn the brush, and then we'd saw them logs in half to about twelve, fourteen feet long. We loaded them on that old flatbed '36 Chevy truck—I told you I went up the highway to get that job. And we had a nineteen-inch—we called it a buzz saw—aw up on one end corner of our lots up there. And we'd haul them logs in there, and we'd roll them off the trucks and pile them up there. And when we'd get what we thought was enough for us to come in to cooking wood and stuff like that and sell through the winter months, why, we'd start sawing it up in eighteen inch logs, like this, see? And the way we did it, we backed the old truck up there, had a [wet?] belt, about a six or eight inch wide [wet?] belt, like you've seen, on what they call a power off, you know? And we'd put on the power wheel of that saw and put the other—and it sort of criss-crossed above, you know what I mean? And put the other end of the belt, jack up our wheel and that's—the wheels was, what I wanna say? Jack up one axle and the other wheel won't roll—anyhow. Jack up the wheel on that wheel. Put that old belt on, start that truck, put it in gear, and then we pull that buzz saw with that. That's the way we run our buzz saw. And we'd saw them, our logs in thirty inch little small logs like that. And then we'd split them up into little triangle, triangle pieces. For the wood—they called that cooking wood. Back in them days, Moms had ranges in their kitchen, old cooking ranges they called them—a stove wood. And we'd split it up to that, stove wood.

DC: So your market for your lumber, then, was cooking wood.

GJ: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. That's all we did it for. We didn't, we didn't build no sheds or anything like that. We wasn't builders. We did that for cooking wood, and winter wood, and stuff like that. And the logs would have big knots in it, something like that that wouldn't split, or couldn't split. Why, we sold them, too, for the people who put them in what they call big can heaters. You know, them old big round—for *heat*. People didn't have furnaces and air conditioning units then. No! Maybe, what, three or four percent of the *nation* did. As far as I know, nobody in my hometown did. In fact, in that hometown there was one car for four blocks.

DC: One car.

GJ: One car for four blocks. And we wanted to have to make an emergency phone call or something, we had to go down to operator, you know. Central, they called it. Central. To make a phone call. But anyhow, we sawed that old wood up like that and me and my brother would split that wood in them little old triangle sticks. Now, here's the gist of all of that: we done all of that. Remember, went out eight miles out in the country in the woods and got it, cut it down, hauled it in, sawed it up, split it, to get it ready to sell. We'd haul it over to the customer. All that for seventy-five cents a rick.

DC: Seventy-five cents a what?

GJ: Seventy-five cents a rick.

DC: And what's a rick?

GJ: That's a half of a cord.

DC: OK, a rick's half a cord. OK. Seventy-five cents.

GJ: Right, seventy-five cents.

DC: Wow.

GJ: And we had to haul it and unload it. Now, this—people was so concerned about getting what they paid for, because they didn't have much money to pay for anything, we had to rick that wood up, and show them that they had a rick of wood. Wasn't that they didn't trust us. It was just that they wanted what they paid for. Heh. I tell you something else, how we made some money. I'm telling you all this stuff to let you understand you had to make money any way you could. We didn't steal it. Now I could tell you this right now—back in those days, people would do without food before they'd steal. Now that's saying something. That is saying something. And I know many people that had a means to get by with swiping or stealing and everything. But you never heard of anybody getting arrested for shoplifting in the grocery store or in the clothing store. You never heard of that, you know? People, they done the best they could in an honest way. But anyway, we—besides selling whiskey bottles and things, my Dad—we had a ten gallon crock. Old clay crock—ten gallon crock. We—not only did we pickle pork, pickle a pig they call it. You might've heard of that, in the older days they pickled pork in it. Several times we'd make home brew. We'd buy a gallon of malt liquor and, man, I could make it blindfolded right now. And Dad would leave it set about twelve days. He ordered his bottles, clear bottles, from Spiegel [catalog company] out of Chicago. Spiegel catalog. And plain copper caps. And we had a crimper. (By the way, I got an old crimper in my garage now. I wanted to sell it in the garage sale I had last year, but the guy didn't want to give me enough for it. I got an old Model T Ford jack, too.) But anyway, he'd leave it set about twelve days. He ordered the bottles from Spiegel's I, said, and the old plain copper caps, and we had that crimper. Dad would fill it up till about maybe a half an inch or an inch from the top. They put a half a teaspoonful of sugar in it. That'd help it ferment quicker. Leave it set another three days. Fifteen days altogether. Leave it set another three days. And me and my Dad and my brother would be standing down on the street selling it on Saturday mornings. Me and my brother, we'd have our shirts blossomed out like this and all the wet bottles of home brew in there. We sold it for fifteen cents a bottle.

DC: So was that legal or not?

GJ: *No*, it wasn't legal! Heck no, it wasn't legal! You can put it in there—the statute of limitations would protect me! I don't care. I'm just telling you. You know?

DC: [laughs] Was this before prohibition ended or was it a dry county or what?

GJ: No. It wasn't a dry county because the liquor store sold liquor.

DC: That's right. They sold liquor by the bottle.

GJ: And that's the reason I could find the bottles outside.

DC: Right. Exactly. Yeah.

GJ: And getting to that—I don't want to forget where I was, but getting to that, you could go out the back of them stores. Sharecropping, that was a common word down there, sharecropping. Well the old guys, they'd get together, you know, to drink. Just about everybody down there drank. And they'd sharecrop. In other words, that meant you give me a quarter and I'll give a quarter and we'll go into the drugstore here and buy a half a pint of whiskey. See? But there's only one drugstore there in that town. And a lot of people didn't *have* that kind of money—when they could get it across the railroad track for half the price. See? But anyhow, to find my bottles, I'd go out behind that liquor store and if I seen—and she wouldn't buy them without the cap, you know—couldn't buy the bottle without the cap. If I seen a bottle laying over here, about ten foot to my left, invariably—maybe once in awhile it wouldn't work out—but when I say invariably that means all the time. But once in awhile it wouldn't work out. But ninety-nine percent of the time you look over and see a bottle, you see the cap over here to your right. When they killed it—then they called it kill it, you know? Kill it means drinking it all. I'm sure people, people that reads this or sees this that's older than you, know exactly what I'm talking about. Raised in that area, anyhow.

DC: Absolutely, yeah. That's how I learn.

GJ: But it was something else. And we made money that way.

DC: So you had the bottles underneath your shirts then, and you just pull it out.

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

DC: Did you run into any trouble with the sheriff or anything?

GJ: No, no. No. No, they winked at us, you know. It wouldn't do them no good. It wouldn't do them no good to throw anybody in jail at the time. They'd have to bring them a hamburger twice a day and all and pay for it. I'll tell you. There's something else. I wouldn't live those days at all—I've often said—I've often thought back on it, 'How did I do that?' Talk about the cotton—chopping cotton— that was the worst job there was. How did I do that? I wouldn't do that at all now! Not at all! [laughs]

DC: What about your school? What was that like?

GJ: Well, oh that's another thing. I think I was promoted once for a condition. That means, you know, not quite so good. You're not retained, but not quite so good. They had what they call on condition back in those days. But other than that, that was about the least grade I got in any one year. Other than that, I passed, usually with a C or C+. But the reason why I wasn't any more than that was because I missed three or four months of school every year. Every year. But when I'd go back, my teacher—any exams that I missed, she'd give me the material to take home with me that pertained to those exams. And I'd study and read them and I'd pass. But I missed three or four months every year.

DC: Is that because you were working?

GJ: Oh, because I *had* to work the fields, right? Yeah.

DC: Now did many of your fellow classmates . . .

GJ: They didn't have no truant officers. There wasn't no such thing as a truant officer. Hell, because they didn't pay no attention. Kids had to work back then.

DC: Did many of the other students also miss that much school?

GJ: Yeah, it's like anything else, you know? You have your few, what we called in them days big shots. They wouldn't be big shots now, they'd just be ordinary citizens now. Like I've told many people, back in those days, and I'll say this again, there was only two classes of people—people that had it and the people that didn't have it. And the people that didn't have it had to kiss the other peoples' you-know-what to get anything. Nowadays, you've got four or five classes of people. Wasn't no such thing as the middle class or lower-middle class then. There was only two classes: the ones that had it and the ones that didn't have it. But—and you mentioned that question, 'what about the other people in town?' Well, like I said, it's like it is now only it was more noticeable then. Because the ones that didn't have anything didn't have *anything*, period. Didn't have nothing, you know, had to work for every scrap that they got. Like I said, didn't work, didn't eat. But you still had your merchants and their families. They had their families. And three or four kids would have their new bikes and stuff like that, that you would wish you had one, but you couldn't. And you know, the merchants' families and things like that, well, they was the so-called high elite. You know?

DC: Yeah. How many kids were in your class?

GJ: We had, uh, twenty, I think it was twenty-three. And we had two grades in one room. It was a big square, took up the whole block. Elementary school—we only had one elementary school in the town and one high school. And I think we had twenty-three in one class. We had sixth and seventh grade in one big, in the upper floor of that big building. And had the fourth grade and the fifth grade on the upper floor. We had the sixth and seventh grade together. Now in eighth grade, we got to go down to the big time, the high school. When I was—the last year I went to school there was eighth grade, and then I

started high school in the ninth grade. And then I quit. I didn't go the full way.

DC: So ninth grade was your last year?

GJ: Well, as far as public school's concerned, yeah. But I took schooling in the Army when I went in the Army. I went to clerical school for about seven months and administrative school for another two or three months. And—but that was when I got out of that whole picture. And as I started to say, I started back on the jobs deal—this is coming up. I got that job building that air base. And that was in '41. I think that was in April of '41. Either—March. March of '41. And that lasted about five or six months. Well, that was sixty-five and a half cents an hour. Well, they got the air base built. If you remember, just three or four months after that on December the 7th the war started. See, they knew. They were building air bases all over the country. The administration knew we was going to get into it one way or the other. I figured that out since, but I didn't bother—when you're sixteen you don't think about those things then. But anyway, that got through and then about October, about November of that year I hired in on the section gang. I was—I think I was seventeen then.

DC: On the railroad?

GJ: Yeah. Section gang on the railroad. They don't have them anymore. They done away with them, but that was—see, they had—each town had a section gang. Railroad company had a section gang in your town. And that one town, I'm gonna, let's say south—well let's say, there's eight miles between my hometown and the other town closest to it. So the town up north of my hometown, they'd come south four miles. And the town, my hometown, they'd go north four miles. And they'd meet—you know, they maintained that eight mile strip of the railroad track right there. And they call that the section gang. Section gang. Well I hired in for the section gang there at Bernie. I was the youngest guy that ever worked, and hired in there. It was the old Cotton Belt railroad line. It's still in business—Cotton Belt. And they paid me seventy-four cents an hour. Now that's nine cents an hour more wage than sixty-five cents. So, I worked there until I got eighteen. When I got eighteen I headed right up here buddy, when I heard what the money was. [laughs]

DC: We're just about to that point but there are a few more questions I want to ask along the way. First of all, what was the racial makeup in Bernie?

GJ: Oh. You want me to talk about that?

DC: If you would, yeah.

GJ: Well, they—it was like it was back—well, even the colored people knows how it was back in those days. So I'm not—I don't want to be offensive to anybody.

DC: No, no.

GJ: But back in my hometown—you've heard the old saying that you gotta be out of town

before the sun goes down on you?—well that was the attitude there of that town.

DC: Did any blacks live in Bernie?

GJ: No, no, no. They do now, but not then. No, no. No, no. Uh uh. They lived out in the country. Usually tenants on cotton plantations.

DC: When you were out picking and chopping cotton, were blacks and whites both doing that kind of work?

GJ: Not very often. Not very often. Uh uh. Nope. They was mostly—they was mostly segregated on hard labor, too. [laughs] Yup.

DC: OK, yeah. So correct me if I'm wrong, but my impression is that what you're saying is that the blacks were sharecroppers and . . .

GJ: Mostly permanent tenants on the farms on the plantation, on the bigger—thousands of acres. Yeah.

DC: Right. And so what was the difference? Were you a day laborer, then, on the farms where you were working?

GJ: Oh yeah. I didn't live on the farm, I drove back home at night. I still lived in Bernie. We just worked for the day, right.

DC: Right. So on those farms, would they just hire whites, then, to do that kind of day labor?

GJ: Uh, uh. Yeah, most of the small farmers. Smaller farmers did, with a couple hundred acres, something like that. But the big plantations, they had their blacks, because I guess they got it cheaper, you know. And they furnished them little huts. They called them houses, but they was huts. OK. And they lived there permanently on the farm, on the plantation. And that was the difference. And I suppose that's the reason why you didn't see any mixed up on the other fields because they had their own farmer to work for. He didn't want us working for—he didn't want no other farmer to have them, you know.

DC: OK. So you're doing the same work as them but not getting paid . . .

GJ: Oh yeah, same work, just as hard. It don't make no difference. They can talk about race all they want to, but we didn't—all we knew is just that guy's just a different color than we was and hell, he done the same thing we did and it was hard for him to get enough to eat just like it was for us. I mean, as far as the class is concerned, you were equal. We didn't have no more than they did.

DC: Yeah. Now did any blacks work in Bernie?

GJ: No.

DC: Not even as domestics or anything like that?

GJ: Um, had a few, but not—but not—remember what I'm saying. There wasn't very many households that could afford a domestic. [laughs] We're *forgetting* about that, see. But there was a few, like the rich—I was gonna say a word that rhymed with that, but you know, like the rich people. They had domestics, right. But there wasn't very many in that town. Maybe the merchants and something like that.

DC: How many people lived in Bernie?

GJ: Uh, there was—I think there was fourteen hundred at that time. Now it's about nineteen hundred. Over the period of fifty years they gained four or five hundred. [laughs]

DC: Yeah. A couple other questions that I had—when you were building the air base, what exactly was your job?

GJ: Oh, pouring cement. By the way, I was ignorant, see. I hadn't never done a job like that. There were some old people that followed this, you know, all this contracts they get, followed them, you know. The experiment [maybe meant experienced] people. I was tired and I was breaking my back, you know, and one guy come up and said, "Son,"—and I appreciated it, too—said, "Son, let me show you how to do that." What I was doing, I was pushing. We had boards, you know, to run these wheels, the boards, and then I'd form forms. For the barracks. Forts, OK. And what I was doing, I was turning, just setting the wheelbarrow down. And that way they'd just fill it plum full, right up to the brim. So one old guy comes, said, "Let me show you how to do that." He knew that I was just killing myself. He said, "Hold them handles up like that. And they can't put so much cement in it." [laughs] I appreciated that.

DC: So was it—it sounds like it was a mixture then of construction regulars who moved with the job and then a number of people . . .

GJ: Yeah. Yeah. Local.

DC: Did many other local people . . .

GJ: Right. Oh yeah. A lot of local people, yeah. Like I said, when I went up that little highway, drove my Dad's old truck up there to get the job, it took me two weeks. I had to park alongside the road, on both sides of the road like *they* did.

DC: I remember you telling me that now. Yeah. Well, so you poured cement basically the whole time then?

GJ: Yeah. Yup. Oh yeah.

DC: And then you said that was a union job, too.

GJ: It was. It was fifty cents—they charged me fifty cents a month. Kept it out of my check.

DC: Did you have any need to use the union at that point in time?

GJ: No! They just give us a little badge with a number on it, and fifty cents a month out of our check. They didn't say, "This is your steward." I never even heard the word "steward." You know? But I'm sure in the bigger cities where they done bigger, you know, contracts or worked with people that was used to the higher-type jobs, if they had any then. Well, by that time they probably did, because I was sixteen then. That was in 1941. Probably those guys, yeah.

DC: It's probably the case that most people from Bernie weren't gonna complain since they were getting sixty-five cents an hour.

GJ: Ain't gonna complain, no. Absolutely not.

DC: Let's see. Were there any people in Bernie, though, who were reluctant to join the union to get that job?

GJ: [thinks a bit] No. No. Absolutely not. They'd think you'd lost your mind and ready for Farmington. By the way, Farmington was what Pontiac used to be here—the mental asylum in Missouri. That quote was said many times: "Oh, that guy's ready for Farmington." They'd a thought he was ready for Farmington. [opened in 1903, the Farmington Asylum/State Hospital was about fifty miles NNW of Bernie]

DC: OK. How about the section gang job. Was that a union job?

GJ: No. Nope.

DC: No, OK. But it still paid more.

GJ: Yeah. Seventy-four cents an hour.

DC: OK. And how did you like the section gang job?

GJ: Oh, it's hard work. Hottest place you can be in the summertime, and I guess the coldest place you can be in wintertime. But I only worked there about—I don't know—about five months.

DC: How many were in your gang?

GJ: Nine.

DC: Nine people?

GJ: Nine, yeah.

DC: And you stayed busy working on the tracks?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. You straddled a rail like this, see, and a guy facing you, other guy facing you. And you got these spike drivers, that's rounded like that, you know. Like a gravel fork, you know what I mean? I don't know if you ever seen them use a pitch—not a pitch fork, but a pick. Pick fork with gravel. Loosen up the gravel some. But anyhow, this was round on the end. You straddled it and you faced this guy. He's facing north, you're facing south. OK. That was exactly what it was, my hometown, north and south—the railroad went that way. And he'd swing it, *huff*; you'd say *huff*, you know, *huff*. Take turns about swinging that old spike in—after awhile you drive that old spike down. We'd take up loose plates—you've seen them plates over there at the railroad tracks, I'm sure—we'd take up loose plates and maybe a spike would be up two, three inches. That's what they had the section gang for—to walk up and down the rails. They had these little hand carts, you know—they'd ride real slowly on it and watching for spikes up. And—but now, you know, they've got these little yellow truck-like things that rides up and down the railroads. And they got an automatic driver on them. Boy, if they see a loose spike, all they gotta do is push a button, drive her down.

DC: Is that right?

GJ: Yeah, that's the way they done away with the section gangs.

DC: How often would you cover the eight mile segment?

GJ: Uh, every day. It was every day. Every day.

DC: OK. All right. Now did you ever have to worry about trains coming through when you were on that hand cart?

GJ: Oh yeah! We'd take the cart, lift it up, take it off.

DC: You could set it right off.

GJ: Yeah. Nine guys, oh yeah. And like I said, we used to unload these big creosote ties out of the—ten-by-ten—cross ties. Old black creosote on them and everything—that was the hardest job. Out of the boxcars.

DC: How much did those things weigh?

GJ: Oh, man. I'd say maybe a hundred and twenty, a hundred and thirty pounds. Hey, I was seventeen, but—back—I could do anything back in them days. Well I'll tell you, till I was about fifty years old I could do any thing my sons could do. And since I've been on that subject, I've never had a permanent prescription in my whole life until about three years ago. And now I've got five. [laughs] But I feel pretty good.

DC: Well, you look good.

GJ: I was seventy-seven the first day of May. I feel pretty good. I had a five-bypass surgery a little over two years ago. And since then, I've got this cardio exam and all this—I got five permanent medicines. Never had any before. I played ball till four years ago. On two organized teams.

DC: Is that right?

GJ: Yeah.

DC: Softball?

GJ: Yeah, softball. And I played on the youth team at church for years and years and years. And when I made a resignation speech I was sixty-five. This is to all the old church. Well, me and my wife was real active with the youth group, boy, and they didn't, uh—they had the youth group, uh, certain younger age up to thirty-five. Well we were included in youth group till we was fifty-five or sixty, sixty-five years old.

DC: You're as young as you feel.

GJ: Yeah. And I—and so I made my resignation speech one Sunday morning at the church and I resigned, so the coach that took over next spring, he come to me, he said, "Gene," he said, "gotta give your uniform back." I said, "Well, what for? I ain't gonna play." "Yeah, you are. You're gonna be my assistant because I can't get enough people." And he said, "Whenever I need you, you're ready to play." I said, "OK." So that was the end of the resignation. That lasted just about one season. But I had to quit about four years ago.

DC: Well tell me about your move up here. You said in '43. Let me get it straight now—you worked in the section gang for how long, then?

GJ: About five months.

DC: Five months, OK. And then . . .

GJ: I was seventeen at that time.

DC: And so did you go from the section gang up here?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, I didn't fool around no more. I was tired of it.

DC: All right. So the war would've started by then.

GJ: I was educated then. Oh yeah, the war started in December '41.

DC: Right, right. Did any of your older brothers head off to the war?

GJ: Well, Harvey, my older brother, he went in in ‘42. And I think I was drafted in ‘44. Don’t quote me on that, but I think it was in ‘44.

DC: We’ll work up to it, yeah.

GJ: He went in ‘42.

DC: Did uh—the war obviously changed things a bit because you had that air base not far away from Bernie and stuff. Did business pick up in Bernie at all when the war started?

GJ: A little bit. Well, yeah. Well, I said a little bit—*quite* a bit compared to when, you know, when the Depression—oh yeah, quite a bit. Yeah, they got a shoe factory down there and they had two handle mills, a north handle mill and a south handle mill.

DC: What kind of mill was that?

GJ: Handle. Well, they didn’t just make handles but they called the legs handles, too, you know. They’d make legs for TV stands, tables and that. And they made handles for shovels and picks and things like that. Handle mill is what it was. And they had a meatpacking company. Not a big one, just a small—they made bologna and sausages and stuff like that.

DC: Still, compared to the Depression, that’s a lot of companies.

GJ: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, they didn’t have no industry there at all.

DC: Yeah. But in spite of all this it looks like you took off, it sounds like. OK, so . . .

GJ: Well, yeah, I had an aunt up here, had a sister up here and a couple of cousins up here.

DC: When did your aunt and your sister come up here?

GJ: Well, my aunt came up here in—I think she come up here in ‘34 or ’35, and stayed here. Married—well she was divorced from her husband down there . . .

DC: Is this your sister you’re talking about?

GJ: No, my aunt.

DC: That was your aunt.

GJ: My Mother’s sister. So she was up here and I came up here, and I room and board with her. In fact, her husband worked at Pontiac Motor and he got me the job. At Pontiac Motor.

DC: At Pontiac Motor, OK. Now was that your aunt who remarried or was that your sister who was married? I got a little bit confused there.

GJ: That was my aunt.

DC: Your aunt, OK.

GJ: Yeah. They got divorced and she come up here and married this guy by the name of Knotts [sp?]; last name was Knotts. And he worked at Pontiac Motor at that time and had worked there for a long time. And he got me in there, got the job there.

DC: All right. So tell me about that job. What was it?

GJ: Well, first—the first job was—let me see now. Oh, first job was material handling—stacking ring gear housings. Stacking ring gear housings on a pallet and putting between the rows of ring gear housing, putting a flat piece of plywood over and then another stack and everything. That was my first job.

DC: And then was that to move two in a line?

GJ: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And my next job was inside power truck driver.

DC: How long were you in that material handling job?

GJ: Well, power truck driver is material handling department, too.

DC: Oh, OK. The ring gear housing, then, how long did you do that?

GJ: Oh [short pause] about six months, five months.

DC: OK. What was it like doing that work compared to all the work you'd been used to doing?

GJ: Oh, hell. It was a snap, man, it was a snap! That's like I said, these kids that complains about this—I've heard complaints about the bumper lines at Pontiac Motor. I've heard complaints about the fender lines at Pontiac Motor. Complaints about everything. Foundry work. By the way, I worked about eleven months in the foundry at Pontiac Motor, too, during layoffs and things. But anyway, I've heard complaints about that. The worst job they *got* can't even—and I'll use this "can't even compare," and I mean strictly, seriously, too. The worst job they got in the shop can't compare to chopping cotton fourteen hours a day. Hundred degree weather. When the humidity's just right, a hundred and ten. Now you know, we've talked about it.

DC: I believe you.

GJ: Now, getting back to that. I remember the farmer, either probably be his kid or his wife or

somebody in all, would bring us water. And hell, you'd think they was gonna let you starve to death for water before you ever seen that water boy or water girl. And they had this—an old gallon, a big old gallon pickle jug like they have now. And they had this here—the word gunny, is what I'll use—I said toe sack before. Gunny sack wired around it to keep it cold as possible. And they had several old drainage ditches out there, you know—and by the way that was what the WPA was formed for, to reclaim all that land out there and put drainage ditches in it and stuff like that. You asked what my Dad did. That's what they all did. Anyhow, they did reclaim all the land. You can go down there now and see forty miles either way. But they had this old jug. Now, my kids laughs at me when I say this, say, "Dad, don't tell this to anybody." [laughs] They'd come up and if you—it was four or five guys over here on this side of you, you know, and the water boy happened to get to them first—now this has happened many times. Maybe an old guy there just before you get to drink would—with a big old cud [of tobacco] at the back of his jaw. Yeah. He'd drink before you did. When they brought that jug to you, you'd have to blow away the dregs and you drank. You didn't question it. Hell, you was thirsty, you drank it! Yeah. I'm, you know, I'm saying it just like it was. And I ain't cutting any corners anywhere and I'm not—I'm trying not to be embarrassed about it.

DC: I mean, that's the way it was. You didn't have Gatorade out there.

GJ. That's the way it was. That *is* the way it was.

DC: Wow. But anyway, it sounds like these jobs up here at Pontiac Motors were . . .

GJ: Oh man, that was heaven! That was paradise. Only got ninety-nine cents an hour, but still yet, I'm talking about from sixty-five and a half, to seventy-four, to ninety-nine. I'm going up, see? [laughs]

DC: Moving up in the world. So you told me a little bit about the ring gear housings, but then you didn't tell me—or what was the next job? You were still in material handling.

GJ: Truck driving. Inside power truck driving.

DC: Inside, OK. And what exactly were you doing there?

GJ: Hauling pallets and weighing them. Putting them on those big US freight line trucks that parked into the dock. You have to weigh them because they had a law that you only could put so many thousand pounds on a truck, you know—that's what they call the state road commission law, I guess. And at that time, I think, it was only 30,000 pounds. Now I understand they can put as much as 80,000 pounds on these roads. Maybe that might say something about having to repair the roads all the time. Yeah.

DC: They're breaking down. Yeah. So where was the stuff going? I mean, what was your stage in the process?

GJ: Well, it was going to other plants, other assembly plants. Like maybe Lansing.

DC: OK. So you were shipping out parts.

GJ: Yeah, shipping out parts.

DC: Shipping out parts that were made at Pontiac Motor to go to other assembly plants at these other places.

GJ: Right, right, right. If you remember, back in those days that was a defense work. We'd make them old frank—they called them frank liners—piston liners for the big tanks. Could be along that big—you know, the piston liner. We'd make those. And then they would make the—what I call the tappets—rocker arms. Make those. The valves. The valves and like. We—Pontiac Motor, at one time Pontiac Motor made all except the wheels. The wheels was made at Lansing Wheel Corporation, I think. Most General Motors wheels were made in Lansing. But just about every part—I can't mention any par—I don't know; if there's any whatsoever. But I'd say just about every part, maybe *every* part of the Pontiac car, except the wheels, was made right here at Pontiac Motor. We forged our blocks—the old foundry—the heads. Like I told you, I worked about eleven months in the foundry on account of layoffs and things like that.

DC: I need to learn about that. Yeah. But then during the war, you weren't making any cars, were you?

GJ: Oh no. No no. It was all defense.

DC: Yeah, all defense. Let's see, who all were you working with at that point in time? I mean in your materials handling jobs, or material handling jobs.

GJ: I can't remember any specific names.

DC: That's OK, but I mean, like, were they new workers like you? Were they younger? Were they older?

GJ: Well most of them was from the South.

DC: Most from the South, OK. All right.

GJ: Yeah. Most of them was from the South. Like me, got tired of being down there, come up here and got a job. Shoot, you could go up to these local bars and—which I did. I was running around a little bit. I was young, you know. Sow some wild seeds. Go out to these local bars and, shoot, half of the people in there was from Arkansas, Missouri, or Tennessee, somewhere like that. Oh yeah! They called us hillbillies. [laughs]

DC: What did you think about that when they called you hillbillies?

GJ: Well, at first we resented it. But later on, you know, later on we almost got proud of it, to

be honest with you. [laughs]

DC: Why was that?

GJ: Well, because it was a little bit of integrity, you know what I mean? We wouldn't back off, wouldn't back off at all. And if anybody started trouble, they knew there's five or six there they gonna have to whip. So I guess that's the reason why we became proud. A little boisterous action, you know? It wasn't right, but I mean, that's the way it was.

DC: So it sounds like a lot of them were from the South. Were they also mostly younger, like you were at that point in time?

GJ: Yeah. Yeah. A lot of them was. Right.

DC: Did many blacks come up from the South, as well, at that point in time?

GJ: Yeah, they must've because most of the ones down here that I met over here had a lot in common—would talk about the South a lot. So, you know, I didn't know them personally.

DC: So not at that time. Did you work side by side with any blacks up here at Pontiac Motor at the start when you first got hired.

GJ: No, no. There wasn't too many in that department. There was a few, but not too many.

DC: OK, there were a few. How about any women? Were there any women working in your department at that point in time?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah, a lot of women. A lot of women were driving power trucks, too, that you wouldn't think they would do, right? A lot of welders. Women was welding. They had a job just about for any woman there. But I noticed there wasn't no—there was no women on any skilled trades.

DC: OK, all right, not that.

GJ: Not at that time.

DC: But all the material handling and power . . .

GJ: Yeah, all the regular labor. They had a lot of women. Had almost as many women as they did men. Because known fact—most of the men was either going in the Army or getting ready to go in.

DC: Yeah. Well what about the union? You would've had . . .

GJ: Oh! We had the union then, right. The first union hall I ever recollect is either behind Leo's Pool Hall, or it could be the next door over to the barber shop. In the back end of the

barber shop. That was the union Local 653's office.

DC: And where was that in relation to the plant?

GJ: You're right here where we're at now. You can compare that to this place here. Well that was just—Glenwood Avenue extended right down to Plant 9 gate, which was the main plant at that time. Sort of down hill a little bit. And just about maybe two hundred yards up is the end of Glenwood Avenue, which was business area at that time. They had a couple of bars there and a couple of restaurants. They had a pool hall, Leo's Pool Hall, and they had the barber shop. Now, I believe—I believe it was in the back end of the barber shop. Just a little room in the back of the barber shop. That's where you went in to pay your dues. They didn't have no check-off. They didn't take them out of your check. You paid it.

DC: So did you pay your dues?

GJ: Yeah, and they'd give me a little button, you know. I believe it was a dollar and a half. I think it was a dollar and a half a month. Might've been two dollars. Think it was a dollar and a half. [coughs loudly]

DC: What did you think about the union at that point in time?

GJ: Well, I thought it was good. I've always thought it was good. Because I guess I had sense enough to realize that people wasn't being treated right, from where I came from. So that was my attitude right there. Anything that would better the people that had to work every day to make a living, yeah, I was for it. Yup. Absolutely. Oh, in that same place, where I think the union hall office—which would be now Local 653 compared to this one, one room. As I went into that store, I think it was—I think it was either, it was either Leo's and right next door is the barber shop. One or the other. When you went in there, they'd sell you—see you had to buy your gloves then—the shop didn't furnish gloves. Aprons—they'd sell you aprons for ten or fifteen cents and a pair of gloves, ten or fifteen cents. Bought them in there, too.

DC: Were there many old-timers that you worked with at all? At the start I'm talking of, again, your first few years.

GJ: Old timers—I don't know what you mean by old timers. There wasn't—I was a kid.

DC: Yeah. I mean people who worked there before the union, for instance.

GJ: Um, yeah. Yeah.

DC: Did they ever tell you about what it was like before the union?

GJ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

DC: What did they say to you?

GJ: Well, they told me about a lot of times and I don't recall whether they did it while I was there or not. I think maybe they still did it. Like if the line broke down or you didn't have anything to do, you had punch cards. You go punch your card out. Then you punch it back in when you go back out. They'd subtract that—they went by the tenth units.

DC: Tenth of an hour?

GJ: Right, right. And they would—you know, six minutes, six minutes.

DC: Like if a machine broke down, you gotta go punch out?

GJ: Mm-hmm. Then when you went back to work you punched back in. That was something that you tell these young kids that's working nowadays, they wouldn't believe that, either, but that happened. And you bought your own gloves, you bought your own aprons, or anything else that you needed.

DC: What about your fellow southerners? How did they respond to the union?

GJ: Oh, shoot, that little old hometown of mine was almost emptied in about a year after I come up here. All of them was, down there, in southeast Missouri. And I suppose in Arkansas and Tennessee and all the other southern places the same—Georgia and Alabama. Take your pick, I think it was the same thing. Of course, you know, most of those places was—excepting the states like, maybe, North Carolina and [pause] carpet states like Georgia. Textiles, I'm talking about textiles. Except in the textile industry, they didn't have nothing in those states, either. Not like they have now.

DC: When those folks came up here, you know, to Pontiac or wherever—in your experience, did the other southerners also respond favorably to the union? You did, you said you favored the union. What about your fellow southerners, the ones you'd hang out with at the bars and stuff?

GJ: Oh, they mostly was just like I was about the union. Well, they was so glad, you know, to get a better improvement in life and stuff like that. They, naturally, they was for the union.

DC: And you had a brief experience with the union. I mean not much, but building the air base.

GJ: Yeah. Waco, yeah.

DC: That's right, yeah. OK. Well anyways, we got you through your first couple jobs here. What happened next when you were here? Were you still living with your aunt at that point?

GJ: Yeah. But then I—but then I went in the Army after that.

DC: OK. So did you leave that job you were just talking about, where you were driving the truck and the pallets and all? Did you . . .

GJ: Yeah, I was drafted. Yeah. I had no choice.

DC: You got drafted from that job into the service. OK.

GJ: Then so when I went in the Army, this is another segment of my life. Like I said—as soon as I got in, I went to Jefferson Barracks, Saint Louis, Missouri when I first went in to take my training. Well, when my training was over I thought I was gonna be shipped out to—overseas or somewhere else. But instead of that, they chose me—and I don't know why—there's the old saying, you know, they'd make a baker out of a bakery and stuff like that. The Army did do things like that—some of them you wouldn't expect. They sent me to clerical school. I don't mean collar, I don't mean church. Administrative school, they called it.

DC: Why did they decide to do that with you, do you think?

GJ: I—that's what I ask. I don't know. They thought I'd be good at it. Well, evidently, evidently I was, because I spent the rest of my time in the Army, other than when I was in the hospital for fourteen months out at Fort Lewis, Washington. I was a patient in the hospital due to a wreck. And I still got scars on my back and this and everything and that. But anyway, they—I was in Jefferson Barracks, and then they sent me to this administrative school. And then, oh, then they assigned me to the W.D.P.C., War Department Personnel Center, in St. Louis. At that time, that's where all the Army records was of all the Army GIs. I know right where it is on Blind Street in St. Louis. And . . .

End of Tape I, Side B

Begin Tape II, Side A

GJ: . . . Fort Lewis, Washington. And I figured then, be hitting, you know, port of embarkation, make me go overseas, something like that. But instead I got in this accident and wound up fourteen months in the hospital.

DC: So what happened, how did the accident . . .

GJ: [?]

DC: What was that all about?

GJ: It was a six-by-six and an ambulance collided. Crushed my hand and hurt my back. I still got my back problem. But anyway, that cost me fourteen months in Madigan General Hospital.

DC: Fourteen months.

GJ: Fort Lewis, right. And I got separated from there, right there. I was in what they called a detachment of patients. So by that time, the war was over and they were demobilizing.

DC: Now let me get this straight now. So how long were you in St. Louis? I guess you got drafted in '44, right?

GJ: About—oh, I'd say about seven or eight months.

DC: OK. All right. But you got drafted kind of late in the war. So seven or eight months . . .

GJ: Yeah, yeah. Yeah yeah.

DC: So fourteen months, then, I can see why the war was over. I gotcha now. I'm with you, OK.

GJ: OK. And then so they discharged me there from the hospital. Like I said . . .

DC: What was it like being in the hospital for fourteen months?

GJ: Heh, heh, heh. Well, it was bad at first. But after I got up to where they called it "ambulatory" patient, where I could walk around on my own, you know, and all that stuff; and go over to the general mess hall and stuff. It was all right. And at that time, like I said, they were demobilizing. They wasn't in no hurry to get rid of guys like me. They wanted to get, you know, get the guys back from over there. And I can understand that. And didn't bother me much, only that I wanted to get out and get home, like anybody else did. So anyhow, they discharged me there, and I come home. Well, I got married. OK? I got married.

DC: So was this 1945 or '46?

GJ: Forty—think it was '46. [softly] After I come out of the hospital. [normal tone] Anyhow, so I reenlisted.

DC: Back up for a second here . . .

GJ: Now I reenlisted and you might wonder how could a guy who was fourteen months in the hospital reenlist. I went up to the recruiting sergeant with a buddy of mine. He had just got out. We were both drinking. "Let's go rejoin." OK. We went over to the bigger town, up about twenty, thirty miles from our hometown, where they had a big recruiting office. Reenlisted. And the guy wasn't gonna take me. And my buddy kept saying something about, "Well ain't there any way he can go in with me?" you know, and we was all gung-ho, boy. And the old recruiting sergeant said, "Only if you sign a waiver." That's, you know, I don't get no pension, you know; I haven't bothered to re—some people says I

can re-submit and all that and get back pay. Back in those days, Dan, I thought government compensation meant that they would replace your wages that—if you were disabled where you couldn't do it. Well no, when I got out, I went back to Pontiac Motor and got my job back. See. So I felt, I really didn't know. I was ignorant about the fact, how lenient this government pension is. I thought, "Well, if you're able to come out and work at a job and make a living like you was before you come in, they don't owe you nothing." So I didn't file a claim! But anyhow, the reason why I got able to reenlist is I signed a waiver of my injuries, see. OK. In—that proved to be about my best move.

DC: So you reenlisted after you got married?

GJ: Mm-hmm.

DC: OK.

GJ: That proved to be just about my best move. Because, I don't know what these people seen in me at all—going back to the administration school. Hell, here's an old cotton picker that don't—I guess, I didn't figure I was very smart. But anyhow, they seen something. They cleared me for access to secret material. So I was with G-2, which is intelligence in the Army, for another four years. And I was put with the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. I was with the 3rd Armor Division, Fort Knox, Kentucky. And 2nd Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, before I got in the hospital. But anyway, I spent four years in administrative—at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

DC: What exactly were you doing?

GJ: Well, they said it was clearance for secret material. I was publishing and printing and distributing. In other words, I had the whole combined. Special orders, special transfer orders, troop movement orders—that's where the clearance has to come in. I'd hand deliver them to the train commander and many times I'd have to stay till midnight after duty hours was over, printing some what they call hot poop. Red line means restricted, you know, on classified papers. And I'd have to hand deliver them to the troop commander. And I'd have to stay there with my blinds pulled down in my office, the printing office, till every piece of paper, scrap, you know, from the printing press—too heavy of ink or stuff like that wound up scrap. We had a little incinerator out the back—I'd have to go out there and stand there till every backing of the stencil—because, you know, there's print through the backing—every inch of that was burned. Incinerated. A lot of times I didn't get home until 1:00 in the morning. I didn't live on the base. I lived off the base. I rented a house off the base. And, of course my wife understood. She knew my job, you know, so it wasn't no, "Where you been?" and all that stuff.

DC: Was she with you down there in Kentucky?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. I had my family with me. Oh yeah.

DC: Did anyone from your family ever visit you when you were in the hospital for fourteen

months?

GJ: No. Because I was in Washington and my family was still in Missouri and Michigan, you know. That's a long ways.

DC: Yeah. Did your parents stay in Bernie, then?

GJ: At that time—no, at that time they were up here. Dad was working for City of Pontiac and Mom was working as a practical nurse over at one of these nursing homes.

DC: When did they come up here?

GJ: They come—well, Dad come up here in 1929 and got a job and went back when everything fell out. You know what I mean? Or in 1928, and when everything fell to the bottom in 1929, he went back.

DC: Did your family stay in . . .

GJ: Bernie. After that, right.

DC: OK.

GJ: But then they come up here in the '40s.

DC: At the same time as you?

GJ: No, no. They came up here in, uh, '45.

DC: So they came after you. You came a couple years sooner.

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. And Mom was a practical nurse over in one of the nursing homes. And at that time they didn't have as many—they got nursing homes all over the country right now, you know, big, big ones. Big conglomerates now.

DC: And your Dad, you said worked for the city of Pontiac?

GJ: Dad worked for the city of Pontiac. D.P.W.

DC: And it sounds like you got your former job back for a little time.

GJ: I did. I didn't get my seniority back, but I got my credited service back.

DC: Credited service but not seniority.

GJ: Didn't get the seniority back. Because I stayed out, about, well it was over a hundred and eighty days.

DC: Even though you were in the service. Or was that after your discharge?

GJ: No, I mean between the discharges. Yeah.

DC: Gotcha. OK. So what job did you take when you went back for that . . .

GJ: See, when I went back in the second time, I volunteered. I wasn't drafted. And this was the reason why they didn't give me my seniority back, but they did give me my credited service. So on my retirement time I got my . . .

DC: Right, but just not your in-plant seniority for . . .

GJ: Right. But I stayed in there so long, I still had plenty of seniority when I retired anyhow. [laughs]

DC: So it didn't affect you much. OK. So anyways, I'm sorry, I went backwards on you on that one. So anyways, how did you like that Army job, the G-2 job? How did you like that?

GJ: Good. Interesting. Interesting.

DC: Did you think of staying with it?

GJ: Yeah. That's another story. Yeah. I was gonna retire. I had a brother who retired in the Navy as a commander. And he went in in '48. See, I'd already been in. And I reenlisted. And we was just playing tit for tat on promotions, you know, see who could outdo the other one. Well, I got up as high as, I believe it was sergeant first class, and that's when I quit. But the reason why I quit, like I said, was the other story. My oldest son—well the oldest one in the family, Ronny—he had—when we started him in school—I lived off the base out there, remember I was telling you—when he started in school, he was six years old—didn't have no kindergarten. He was running out of the yard, catching the bus. For two or three days he would fall before he'd get to the bus. So we knew something was wrong. We took him to the hospital there, Fort Campbell Hospital. And they diagnosed him, orthopedic doctor there, he was a Frenchman. His name was Colonel [Monsignor?]. I won't forget it, it's such an uncommon name. Diagnosed him, his leg had EGG perthis. P-E-R-T-H-I-S. [probably Legg-Calve'-Perthes disease] I'd never heard of it before. I had never heard it before. They explained that—deterioration of the hip bones to the spinal from each side there. And they said he probably—they said he *likely* would not walk again. But said there is a possibility. So the prescription was for him to stay off his feet. And no medication or anything, no shots, just stay off his feet and watch him. And so we did. And so when it come time—now remember Truman extended these enlistments one year. I don't know if you know about that or not.

DC: I didn't know that.

GJ: Oh yeah. He extended all regular Army enlistments. Not draftees but regular Army enlistments. Draftees got out when they said so. Six months or duration. But all the regular Army enlistments for a certain term was extended one year.

DC: And when was that?

GJ: Think that was in forty—'49. '49 or '50. '49 or '50. Anyhow, as I was getting back to my son and the reason why I left the Army, I was gonna retire and try to keep up with my brother. I outranked him at that time. He was a petty officer second class at that time. But I—like I said, he retired as a full commander. And he was gonna go thirty years, but he had a heart condition, too, and they made him take a desk job that he didn't want. So he insisted that they retire him and they did. And he died in '86 with a heart attack. So I guess they knew what they were doing. But anyway, with this disease that my son had, telling him that he wouldn't walk, I—see, I was—I knew, although I wasn't there—the guy on the front lines firing bullets don't know what's happening back here or what's happening at the command post or anything like that. I knew more than the guys on the front line did about what was happening, because of my job, my duty. We got TWX's casualty reports every day from this area and that operation and everything else.

DC: What's TWX?

GJ: That was like telegrams, you know, like messages. [Teletypewriter Exchange Network] Communications. And so, really, I was well aware of everything. And you ask what kind of job—how did I like it? Well, like I told you, it was very interesting. It was nothing—the only thing that was common and not changed is the regular special orders of the guys that's transferring from this camp to that camp. I had to print them and everything else. And the court martial orders and memorandums, unnumbered and numbered, and letters of commendations, and general transfers, stuff like that, and general court martial orders. Printed everything—every printed matter for that company, I printed. Post headquarters. That's where my office was. And like I said, it was interesting. Never was a dull moment.

DC: And so you did that through 1950, did you say?

GJ: Uh—'52.

DC: '52, OK. And when was your son born, the one who had the hip and spinal problem?

GJ: '45.

DC: OK, '45, all right.

GJ: Now, see I've been honest on all this stuff. People are gonna read between the lines and compare dates and stuff like that. Me and my wife wasn't married then. But you know, don't put that down, but let them read that. But I'm just telling you that, you know.

DC: OK, all right. Sure. You wouldn't be the first person.

GJ: But we got there. We fought for three years and finally got there. And we had six beautiful kids.

DC: So when exactly did you get married then?

GJ: We got married in 19 and 40—9. February, February 13. By the way, I didn't even have sense enough to wait another day, make it Valentine's Day. [laughs, then loudly] Well you know, when you're in love to think about that—you don't think about them things!

DC: All right. And so I'm just trying to make sure—it's all on the tape, I probably just didn't get it quite . . .

GJ: Now these are the little things I said to you that might, that I might would have been reluctant to mention—what I just said there. But I'm not. It's just a part of my life. I'm just being straight with you.

DC: Yeah. I'm not here to judge and I wouldn't, you know.

GJ: Well, you know, I don't even try to judge myself. I just say that's part of life. That was it.

DC: Absolutely. Your enlistment, then, lasted from when until when?

GJ: Well, '44—I think it was '44—'44 to '52.

DC: OK. You were in the service from '44 to '52.

GJ: Yeah, with the exception of about seven or eight months between the time I reenlisted.

DC: Yeah, and that's when you came back and got that job here for a little bit of time. There was some time off, and then . . .

GJ: Yeah, yeah. And I reenlisted, yeah.

DC: Yeah. OK, all right. So a little window when you worked here after you got back from the hospital in Washington, and then you reenlisted.

GJ: Right. Now by the way, just in case people thinks that the Army is not diligent—for lack of thinking of the right word—not diligent in picking out guys for clearance, for classified, that type of duty. Let me tell you something. I would go down to my—I was stationed at Fort Campbell, that's—go down through Paducah [Kentucky] and Cairo, Illinois, down to southeast Missouri. Couple a hundred miles—about 215 miles I think it was. I'd go down—my folks still lived there in Bernie—I'd go down there . . .

DC: Did they move back to Bernie?

GJ: Yeah, for about a couple years. I'd go down there and the Chief of Police—by the way he was a state patrolman after that—Chief of Police there in that little town was a buddy of mine that I went to school with all through school. And we were real good friends. And he's used to seeing me there just about every other weekend or something. I'd be in civilian clothes, of course, you know, on a weekend pass. I was—I had Class A privileges, in other words. Anyhow, one day—see I hadn't thought of this. But they had put my name in for this, clearance for this. Clearance, classified material. And he called me over there one day. He was sitting over on the corner where his phone, you know, emergencies happen is when you hear the buzzer in his car. And he said, "Gene, come over here. I wanna talk to you." I went over there. We went to talking. He said, "What's going on?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I noticed you're coming down here quite often." I said, "Yeah, Gabe." I said, "I'm only over here at Fort Campbell." Called him Gabe, his Dad's name was Gabe. Back we—if a guy's name, Mother's name was Lottie, we called him Lottie. You know, that was one of the things that went on. And I said, "Yeah, Gabe." I said, "I'm just stationed over here at Fort Campbell." I said, "Thought you knew that." And he said, "Well, that ain't what I'm getting at." I said, "What are you getting at?" He said, "There have been three guys down here two different times asking me questions." Because he's Chief of Police, see. They didn't know that me and him were buddies—it's because he's Chief of Police. And I found out that the grocery store down there, the main supermarket—just a small town, you know, grocery store is where everybody traded. They asked them—they asked all of my teachers from the first grade on up, all of them in school, and everybody that knew me—personal questions about my character and all of this stuff. And he thought I had deserted. He thought I'd run off. See? I told him, I said, "No, Gabe." And at the time I was thinking, I kept thinking about this again. I explained it to him later. But at the time I was thinking I didn't think—see, they don't tell you when they're gonna send these guys down. Because they don't want you to prepare the person that they might ask questions. Which is a good point. So I didn't think of that until the next time I come down on a weekend pass and I explained to him. He said, "Well I'm sure glad that was the way it was, because there would've been a lot of people concerned about you," you know? But anyhow, I said that to say this: don't think that they're careless. They're not. Not that because they picked me is not that they're not careless. But I know from experience, the questions they asked about me—they are not careless in picking out the people they want over there.

DC: Yeah. But anyways, in '52 did you have the option to reenlist and . . .

GJ: Oh yes. Yes. But like I said, I quit because of my son.

DC: Your son. OK, yeah. We didn't quite resolve that story.

GJ: Yeah. Oh there's, yeah that continues here. I quit, took my discharge, '52. And I come back here. Pontiac Motor wasn't hiring then and, you know, the federal law stated that they must give you your job back. But if there's no job openings, they don't have to give you the job. They can't hire somebody else off the street, OK. So I drove a Yellow Cab for about eight months. And buddy, that was work.

DC: Let me get to that in a second, but I just want to make sure I understand. Your son was sick, but how—why exactly did that make you want to get out of the service?

GJ: Well because, see, and you've heard this said before and it's no less true today. You can have it made in one twenty-four hours in any branch of the service and all shot to hell the next day. And I was printing a five by thirteen legal paper of replacements. This Korean War—for Korea. And I didn't know it. Come February when I took my discharge I found it out, that my adjutant generals had pulled me off of two overseas orders. And I didn't know it. And the only way I found it out was when he tried to talk me into reenlist—they didn't want me to take my discharge when I did. Tried to talk me into reenlisting. And that's the only way I found it out. And he said, "Well," he said, "Johnson," said, "though, you're going to have to send the kid—is still going to be crippled." You know, I gave him that reason. I said, "Yeah I know, but," I said, "you know, I've got three other kids. I've got four altogether." And I said, "If something happens and I'm gone overseas," and "am I going to leave my wife to. . ." We had to carry him from the car to the bathroom to the table, dining table—had to carry him everywhere. "Am I going to leave my wife with that and three other kids?" Well he said, "Well, I understand. Just wish you'd think it over, though." I said, "Well sir, I've already thought it over." And I said, "I can't do that." I said, "I may be on next month." And then is when he brought it up. "Well," he said, "I'll tell you—I've kept you off of a couple of them." And I didn't know that until it came up to that spot.

DC: So you already made your decision without even knowing.

GJ: Right, right. Right.

DC: So it was really your concern about your son and your wife's . . .

GJ: Yeah. But now let me—let me say something here. Went back up into where her Dad and Mother lived up in Doniphan, Missouri, up in the hills, since they got out. And I guess I was going to just try to make it that way and they were giving you fifty-two twenty—for fifty-two weeks the government would give you twenty dollars a week. You've heard about that I guess. And anyhow, I went up there and they had a little church up there that my parents—or my wife's parents went to. And it had a youth group, and her younger brother was a member of this youth group, this church youth group. And one night, it was in February of '50—I think it was February of '53. February of '53. I'd only been out about seven or eight months. OK. And they knew about Ronny, you know—we used to go in to church with her Mother and Dad every once in awhile. And, of course we wasn't religious yet. We wasn't atheist, either, but you know. Anyhow, this youth group come to our house, knocked on the door. It was cold. So we opened the door and invited them in. So they told us what they was there for. Now you don't have to put this in there if you don't want to. It sort of sounds a little religious, but that's all . . .

DC: That's part of your life.

GJ: I mean it's not—I mean—I'm more than willing to say it. But anyhow, they asked us if

they could pray for Ronny. Well, what's it going to hurt? I mean, I wasn't religious yet, either. I said, "Sure." So they started praying and praying. I guess they felt—the leader of the group or something didn't feel like they were making any progress. They said, "Well," said, "tell you what," said, "it'd be better if you guys would step outside." Remember this is in February. Said, "There's non-believers in here." Said, "We got a feeling there's non-believers in here." They said it just like that! Now remember my wife's younger brother was one of them people. So I looked at my wife. She looked at me. Well we, you know, I mean—it doesn't matter whether you actually believe or don't believe. You ain't going to take a chance of spoiling a good thing. So we agreed to go out in the car. We had a little '49 Chevrolet. Black Chevrolet. '49 DeLuxe. Of course that was a pretty good car then, you know? And went out and set in it. That was the time when the heaters was optional. Everything else was optional. Didn't have no heater in that sitting in there. We sit out there for about, I guess, twenty-five, thirty minutes. And man, they was really pouring it on in the house, you could hear. Yeah, they were doing business for him, praying. And so they called us back in. When we walked back in there, old Ronny was standing up, right beside the bed. Yeah. Now, you know, I was reluctant to say that because people are going to say, "Well, hey," you know. But I don't care whether they believe it or not. I know it happened. And so I didn't take him back to the doctor no more. You want to know why I didn't take him back to the doctor no more? Because it'd be telling God that I didn't believe that it happened. You understand what I mean? That I was questioning it. And I didn't want to do that. Didn't take him back to the doctor anymore. And for no reason at all, I don't know why, but for five or six months we just didn't pay much attention to it. Ronny was still learning how to walk all over again, you know. And one morning he was sitting up on the side of his bed and one leg of his pajamas was up. It happened to be the leg where we noticed it was getting smaller on account of that disease. And I looked, and I guess it was intended for me to notice it. I didn't even think about it—didn't go in there to look at his leg. But I noticed the leg was the same size as the other. Now, [to interviewer] Danny, you can believe that if you want to. I'm sitting here saying it and I'm telling you the truth. And Ronny, when he was seventeen, he gave us a little trouble. He said he was going to join the Army. I said, "You can't unless I sign for it." He looked at me—we all have troubles in this. He looked me in the eye and he said, "Dad," he said, "I'll make you wish you did if you don't sign for me." That was Saturday. So next day was Sunday, mentioned it. He said, "Well," said, "I'm going to go down Monday." Said, "You going to sign for me?" I said, "No." Well he said, "You and Mom both will wish you did!" Just like that. So I talked to Agnes, that's my wife, standing in the kitchen. I said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I think he means it." You know, give us all kinds of trouble. Kids do that yet today. I said, "OK, son." I said, "Me and your Mother have just agreed. It might be a good thing. In the morning we'll go down to the recruiting office and you can join." And he did. Now, I said that to say this. Remember he had this disease. Doctor said he probably won't walk no more, and all of a sudden the thing happened. He went in 82nd Airborne Division, and was a jumper—82nd Airborne Division. Now can you think about that—a kid who wasn't supposed to walk no more join the 82nd Airborne Division. Yeah. And he's healthy today, down in Paris, Tennessee. Owns a lounge down there. Needless to say, he's still not religious. And he knows all about this. He misses it sometimes. You know, it's not got away from him. He's mentioned it.

DC: Where did you meet your wife?

GJ: Pontiac.

DC: OK, up here.

GJ: Oh, wait a minute. When I met her *seriously*, I met her up here. But before that, she was fourteen years old at a little tent Brush Arbor meeting in that little town north end of Bernie. They'd come there about every fall and have a ten-day what they call a Brush Arbor meeting. Revival meeting is what they call it now. And I remember I got in her Dad's—he had an old '37 Ford pickup truck parked there. Open tents, you know, on the sides. And wooden benches as pews. And the preacher just preaching, hollering as loud as he could holler. And I got in—she was sitting in the car—and I got in the car with her, you know. And she said, "If you don't get out of the car, I'm going to call my Daddy. He's sitting right there." So that's the first time I met her. That was in Bernie. Now, I come up here like I told you, at eighteen. This was before the Army deal and all that stuff. Eighteen. And I got acquainted with a guy; his parents was from Bernie. Now I come up here like I told you—18—this was before the Army deal and all that, so—18. And I got acquainted with a guy—his parents was from Bernie, named Ford—Harold Ford. But I didn't know at that time, he was a cousin to her. So we was on the streets—Saginaw Street's right down here in Pontiac. And here come two girls going up the street. And they started talking, and Harold introduced me to the two girls, and one of them was Agnes. And said, "This is my cousin, Agnes." And we hit it off, just like that. In fact, I took her home that night. So that's where I first met her. Yeah. But of course, after that I told you, you know, we fought for three or four years. Of course, Ronny was born and stuff like that. You know, that's personal, but I mean, that's part of the life.

DC: [softly] It's part of life. Yes it is.

GJ: I suppose that most people could tell the same story could be honest.

DC: What did you do, then, when you got out of the service and you were up there in Missouri for a little while. What did you do there?

GJ: Oh, oh. [Chuckling] I thought I was going to make it, boy. I tell you, this is humorous. This is funny. I bought a cow. First one. Older cow. And built her a stable out there. My younger son-in-laws, her brothers, she had a lot of younger . . .

DC: It sounds like you thought you were going to be staying there.

GJ: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah! And with my fifty-two-twenty—now twenty dollars a *week* was a lot of money then—and whatever money I could pick up anywhere else, I'd do all right. I bought a cow. Just to—not to sell the milk, but milk and butter. Built a stable for her. My younger son—uh, daughter-in-laws did that. I helped them. Built a stable for her. And the old farmer had kept the calf on the cow so long till you couldn't touch her, her udders, at all. Couldn't touch her at all. You get scars, where the calf had bit, you know, sucking on

the cow. He kept her on just long enough where he could get a pretty good price out of the calf. He sold it to me, and the joke was going around there in town about Carl Parson's son-in-law, city farmer, didn't know anything about farming and all. Well, that made me so mad. I was already mad. Made me so mad, I told everybody about the dirty deal he pulled. And his name was mud around there. And you know what he done? He come up on Sunday at church to my father-in-law and said, "Tell your son-in-law to bring that cow back and I'll give him his money back." Give my money back. So that was a bad deal there. OK. Then I bought some chickens. You're going to laugh about this. Oh, I bought a whole lot of chickens. Pullets, you know, a couple of roosters with pullets. Going to have my own eggs and home-frying chicken and all that stuff. Every time we'd go to the little town of Doniphan—about fifteen miles up the road—every time we'd—now, this was up in the foothills, I'm talking about. Every time we'd go to town and come back, if it had rained we'd find about six or seven of our chickens in the driveway, dead. I don't know if you ever heard of how chickens gets pneumonia when they get wet. They just drop over dead. The droops, they call it, the droops. And I lost a lot of them that way, but I kept replacing them. But I wasn't getting no—and my brother-in-laws helped me build chicken coops, roosting—put nests in there and everything else. And I went down to the hardware store and bought these artificial eggs to help the hen lay, you know, the way they do. And I'm saying this like maybe you do know a little bit of something about, OK. Anyhow, no eggs. No eggs, no eggs. Well, my oldest daughter, she was about, oh, four, I guess. Three or four. About four. And she had an aunt. My wife's Mother had a child at forty-seven years old. So Agnes, my wife, had an aunt named Ruth that was just about—not an aunt, but a sister named Ruth—which would be Celia's—my oldest daughter's—aunt. Just about the same age. They was playing together out there. We thought something was keeping—oh, by the way, we kept paying good money for these laying pellets. They call them laying pellets—you feed the chicken, it's supposed to lay more eggs. Not an egg. Nothing, nothing. And they was playing out there. And my wife went out there and they were making mud pies—yellow egg yolks in the mud pies, and she seen egg shells laying all the way around. [chuckling] She asked them, where'd they get them eggs? She thought they'd went off to her grandma's house, which was about a quarter mile up on the hillside there, where her Mother and Dad lives, see; and got the eggs out of the icebox. "Out there under that brush pile." I went out there and I bet you, I bet you there was eight or nine dozen eggs in two or three nests out there. All them hens was setting—they call them setting—you know, wanting to raise little ones. They're still laying in the thing. So I said, "that's all. No! That's all." I come back up here. So I come back up here. And, like I said, drove a Yellow Cab because they wasn't hiring at that time.

DC: Was your wife willing to come back here, too?

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah, she was tired of it, too. Drove the Yellow Cab for about eight or nine months.

DC: What was that like?

GJ: Oh, that was—well, I tried to make a hundred runs a day at fifty cents a run. Now I can explain that this way. When you turn that meter, it clicks twenty-five cents before you ever

move. But then you can ride a fifth of a mile for another nickel. You know? So for fifty cents you could ride a couple miles, probably, from one neighborhood to the next neighborhood. So we tried to make—I liked the short runs. I tried to make the short runs, you know, and they all added up. And I wanted to stay close to where I'd drive around the house every once in awhile to check on the kids and things like that. Because all of them wasn't in school—well, very few of them. And I tried to make a hundred runs a day at the average of fifty cents a run. Some would be sixty, some would be eighty, some would be thirty cents, stuff like that.

DC: How much of that would you have to give to the Yellow Cab?

GJ: Fifty/fifty. Half. So if I made a hundred runs a day at fifty cents a run, that gives me fifty dollars total in my little cigar box. And I get twenty-five dollars of that. And I had to pay half the gas. So I wind up—and you burn a lot of gas)—I wound up with about, I'd say fifteen dollars a day. Now, that was twelve hours a day. They only had two shifts driving the cab: 6:00 to 6:00 in the evening and 6:00 in the evening to 6:00 in the morning. And a lot of our guys got knives stuck in their chest, you know, robbed. I wouldn't work nights. I worked days. But then after about eight or nine months of that, Pontiac Motor was hiring. I went back in '53. April. April the 4th, '53. So, that's . . .

DC: What job did you get there?

GJ: Uh [short pause] Plant, I think it was Plant 8. Broaching, a big broaching machine. I was broaching the steering knuckles.

DC: Explain to me what that would be.

GJ: Well, it's got teeth—big old brass teeth on each side, that clamps down. And you fit these steering—no, tie end rods. You fit the tie end rods into it and you *lock* them down like that. And you do one on one side and one on the other side and you push the buttons. And that thing comes all the way down and as it's coming down it's shaving off, shaving them off, see. They made them at the foundry right there—also, and you had to forge off the excess material. They called that broaching.

DC: That was broaching, OK. All right.

GJ: That was my first job when I got back.

DC: How long did it take to learn how to do that?

GJ: I learned in about four or five hours. It was my job after four or five hours. If I'd a had any sense, I could have got a better job, making out like I didn't know how to do it. Some guys did, you know.

DC: Ah, well did you like it?

GJ: Eh, there was better jobs in there. Yeah, I liked it a whole lot better than I did driving the cab, you see? When you said, "Did you like it?"—if it's better than the one you just left, yeah, you like it.

DC: You like it, yeah. What shift were you on with the broaching job?

GJ: Day shift.

DC: Day shift, OK. All right.

GJ: But most of the time before when I hired in at Pontiac Motor I was in graveyard shift. 7:06 till—no, 11:06 till 7:06 in the morning. Yeah, they call that the graveyard shift. When I first come up here as a young man, eighteen years old.

DC: That's, I forgot to ask you that. OK, you were on nights.

GJ: Ninety-nine cents an hour.

DC: OK. What was your rate with the broaching job? Do you remember?

GJ: Oh . . .

DC: I guess I wondered if it was better.

GJ: I think, I think it was [short pause] $1.85. Something like that, $1.85. See, that was quite a few years difference. You got nine years plus there, you know.

DC: How did that compare, the pay, to the Yellow Cab job?

GJ: The taxi driving job?

DC: Yeah.

GJ: When you said Yellow Cab, I was thinking you were talking about General Motors. Folks, they used to call it.

DC: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I meant taxi driving.

GJ: But anyway, well I liked it a whole lot better. Yeah, I got to take home more money and I didn't have to spend twelve hours on the job.

DC: Yeah, that's true. That's a huge difference, isn't it?

GJ: Right. Absolutely. Yeah, I liked that better.

DC: What about your supervisor or your boss?

GJ: They were pretty good to me. But of course, they had no reason not to be. I done my job.

DC: How about earlier, with some of your earlier jobs at Pontiac Motor? How were your bosses there?

GJ: Uh, they was pushy.

DC: Pushy?

GJ: Yeah, they was pushy. Right, yeah. They were pushy. And they'd always remind you that if you didn't like your job, there's somebody lined up waiting for your job. You know, that was the old cliché they used.

DC: How did you respond to that pushiness?

GJ: Well, I resented it, of course. But as far as physical action's concerned, you still have to do the job or quit.

DC: Yeah. But it sounds like you liked your supervisor better on the broaching job.

GJ: Yeah.

DC: OK. And why was that?

GJ: Well, because I was up on a platform up above, about six or seven foot from the floor line. Pretty much by myself. I wasn't by myself—there was other people on down the line—but I mean—right there—it wasn't that he could just come up and start talking to me, you know? And I think that was the reason.

DC: So you were kind of separated from the pack.

GJ: Yeah. Yeah, I think that was the reason. And I did the job. I did it. I learned it quicker than what I think he thought I was going to learn it.

DC: Yeah. Let's see, did you get back involved with the union at that point in time? Did you, you know—you would've been back in the union, I guess, in '53.

GJ: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah.

DC: Did you ever have any need to use the union when you were on that broaching job?

GJ: No. Not on the broaching job. But I had times to use unions after that, before I retired, of course. One of them was back in the, I guess it was back in the '60s when they was making all kinds of cars. '68 models, '67, '68. The guy give me—I never had a penalty. Never had had a penalty. And he come up and shoved that piece of paper in my pocket.

"Avoiding verbal orders" is, you know, sitting on top of it, you know. Written on it, three day penalty for insubordination. They used them old Army words.

DC: What did they claim that you had done?

GJ: Oh, they claimed that I talked aggressively to the foreman. And I did, and I didn't deny it. But I had a reason to. It was—something had happened on the line, and they were going to send us home. They didn't send all of us home, just people, you know, that probably hadn't been on the job very long. And like I said, I didn't get my shop seniority back, see then, because I had more time. I had more time there—since I hired in in '43 and went in the Army in Korea and everything—than a lot of the people. But as far as seniority concerned—so, they had sent the less seniority people home first. Well that was all right. I understood that. No work, you go home. And there wasn't no thing about just being down ten or fifteen minutes—it was broke down for the rest of the day. So, told me to go home. So I went out and I noticed it was raining and storming, lightning outside. So I went out to the entrance, the outside entrance, and stood there. And I'm telling you it was pouring down. And I had no way home because my daughter was using the car that day and had dropped me off. I had no way home at all. And so I went back in and told him, I said—no, I went back in and he looked at me, and he said, "What are you doing here? I thought you was going home?" Well I said, "I'm not going to go home in a storm like this." He said, "Well, you gotta go home." I said, "What do you mean, I gotta go home?" "Well," he said, "if you ain't working, you gotta go home." And so I got a little smart with him. And he come up, stuck that thing in my pocket. So I called the committeeman and—I think Dave Moore was the committeeman then. Yeah. In fact, I helped get Dave Moore elected for his first union job: alternate committeeman. He worked there at Plant 14 for years. He's the head of the whole thing, now, whole manufacturing. And anyhow, the general foreman heard about it after I called Dave, you know. So general foreman told Bob Castle, that was his name. Come up there and he just walked up to me. I was doing my job. I think I was only in the [?] line. Come up there and picked that piece of paper out of my pocket, just like that. Said, "I'll see you in the morning Johnson." I said, "OK." [laughs]

DC: And why do you suppose he did that?

GJ: Well, because he didn't, you know, I guess I don't know how to say it. Unless it seem like me bragging, but I guess because I was a good worker and he figured I had a right to protest.

DC: Had the committeeman talked to him yet? Had Dave Moore talked to him yet?

GJ: Oh he talked to the other foreman, yeah. The foreman talked to Bob, right.

DC: OK, so there had been some communication.

GJ: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah, I called him.

DC: I just didn't know if they'd had that conversation yet.

GJ: Oh no, I called him. Yeah. But you know, one thing about it, committeemen, whether it was Dave Moore or who it was after that, they didn't have much—in fact, I think it was said once or twice that if Gene Johnson—I don't like my name Gene in there, most of them call me "Preacher," because I went to church all the time. I wouldn't even work on Sunday—said, "If Gene Johnson calls the committeeman, why, you know he's got a reason." And so I never had no problem. But I wouldn't—but here's another thing, Dan. Fair is fair, no matter what side of the fence you're on. I wouldn't go in there every morning just because me and my wife had a few words, or something didn't go right at home, and take it out on the job. But I've seen guys do that. You know what I mean?

DC: Can't distinguish between work and . . .

GJ: Right, just hard to get along with. To hell with the whole world when they go in there, you know? And that caused a lot of problems. But I didn't do that. No, I didn't do that.

DC: So they knew that if you were upset, there was good reason.

GJ: I had a reason. Right. Absolutely.

DC: Well, how long did you stay on that broaching job?

GJ: Oh, just a few weeks.

DC: Oh, really?

GJ: Just a few weeks.

DC: Few weeks, and then what happened after that?

GJ: They put somebody else on it and I went to some other job.

DC: Do you remember what it was?

GJ: [sighs] Oh! I know! I went on the streets. Because the Ypsilanti Hydra-matic Plant burned down. And Pontiac Motor wasn't getting no transmissions. The transmission plant, hydra-matic transmission. Burnt down over here in Ypsilanti. You're too young to recall that. That was in '53.

DC: Well I've talked to some people in Ypsi, though, who have told me about that.

GJ: Yeah! That was in '53. Oh yeah, I went on the streets, laid off.

DC: Laid off, OK. Wow. OK. So, well what did you do while you were laid off?

GJ: Went back to driving cabs. Yellow Cab.

DC: You did?

GJ: Drove for another, I think, probably about ten weeks. Eight, nine, ten weeks.

DC: So the problem was that you just didn't have parts from . . .

End of Tape II, Side A

Begin Tape II, Side B

GJ: . . . the other GM plant.

DC: OK, all right. So that probably took a little while, then, to sort out that . . .

GJ: Right. Yeah. Yeah it did, of course.

DC: Yeah. So you drove the cab for ten more weeks.

GJ: About nine or ten more weeks.

DC: Did you get any kind of benefits at all from the layoff there?

GJ: Oh, benefits? Well, I got—what in the world did I get? Oh, back in that time, back in those days you had to put in a waiting week. So you didn't get no pay for that first week. And the unemployment rate was whole lot lower than what you could, what I would make at that time, when I was driving the cab, even though I didn't make much money driving the cab. So I just went back to driving the cab. I didn't bother to sign up for unemployment.

DC: OK. So then, after the ten weeks or so, what did you do?

GJ: They called me back.

DC: You got your job back.

GJ: Yeah. Yeah.

DC: OK, all right. All right. And was that back to the broaching job?

GJ: No, no. No. Uh [pause] I don't know—well that was in Plant 8. Oh, they called me back to Plant 14. Press metal plants. And I stayed at press metal plants until I retired.

DC: Oh, OK. What did you do when you first went to the pressed metal?

GJ: Heavy press. Operating press, presses.

DC: Heavy press, OK. Tell me what that was like.

GJ: Well, that was a line job. That was pretty much—that was a every-minute job. I mean you, you only got off the job when you got relief or the line broke down for a few minutes or something like that. That was a steady job.

DC: OK. No break, or no rest time built into the job anyway, is that what you mean?

GJ: Well, you had relief period. But other than that, no, no. No.

DC: Yeah. Couldn't get ahead and take time. Well what exactly were you pressing?

GJ: We was pressing hoods, fenders, bumpers, and skirts, fender skirts.

DC: OK. Well what was it like in that department?

GJ: Well, for one thing it was hot in the summertime and cold in the wintertime. Because didn't have no built-in heat and cooling condition at that time. And it was—well, all I can say, it was just a job. It was . . .

DC: Was it noisy?

GJ: Oh yeah. I lost all my hearing in my left ear.

DC: Did you?

GJ: And about half of it in my right ear. Oh, yeah. Yeah, before they come out with these, this OSHA law, you know, where you had to wear earplugs, all that stuff, I had already lost my hearing. Oh, you better believe it. You better believe it was noisy. You'd have to—and you can probably see it now. I talk loud. And that's an albatross for me because there's the old saying, is, the first impression is the lasting impression. And some people I have met before, you know, I talked loud to them and they think I'm aggressive. You know? You know what I'm trying to say?

DC: I think it's good for the microphone, so I'm OK with it. [laughs]

GJ: Well, you know. But anyway, a lot of people thinks I'm mad at them when I first meet people and I'm talking loud. But that's the reason why I'm talking loud, is what you just mentioned there, is because it was so noisy that you'd have to put your mouth right up against somebody's ear to make them hear you. So, after twenty-eight, thirty years like that, you know, you're in the habit of talking loud.

DC: Right, right. What about safety? And noise is a safety issue, to be sure, but I mean how

about those machines?

GJ: Well, sometimes they would—well we had several guys in there that had an arm off and a hand off, stuff like that. But I don't know if it was their fault. I think it was both fault. I think it was carelessness on the worker. Also I think it was negligence of duty for the supervisors. You know, they put them on a job—say now here's tongs, you use tongs. But maybe they wouldn't even come back and check and see if that guy's using tongs. Which I think they would be obligated to, you know, to prevent accidents. And a lot of times those presses would double trip.

DC: What does that mean?

GJ: That means go up and come back down before you push the button again.

DC: Oh, OK. All right.

GJ: Yeah. If you happened to have your hand in there, too bad.

DC: How big was this press that you were working on?

GJ: Oh, they was two hundred pound presses, the big ones—the big bumper presses and hood presses. Especially the bumper presses, they come down hard. Come down as hard to shake, well they shake the floor for several hundred feet around. And after . . .

DC: What—oh, go ahead. After . . .

GJ: After awhile the communication problem got so bad that they built these little office cubicles. You know, each line's got them now. Foremans mostly sits in that—you can sit, you know. You can go in there and talk to the foreman for fifteen minutes on your break, stuff like that. But they didn't always have them.

DC: Well tell me exactly what you would do. See if you can run me right through that job, like you know, you punch in, you go to your job, what exactly would you do?

GJ: Well, you get a pair of gloves first. Go up to the little cupboard, the glove cupboard, get a pair of gloves. The line would start, and you take your position, whatever press you are, down the line. And they're conveyed down, conveyor. Now, like I said, before you got the OSHA law the conveyors was all metal, you know, all metal grasping things. And it would just echo the noise, you know. It would just throw the noise more. But after the OSHA program come in, they were required to put fiber, like plastic things, you know, catch those. That quieted it down considerably. But that's on account of that OSHA law.

DC: But that was much later.

GJ: I had already *lost* my hearing because I been in there before they started doing anything like that, see? Well anyhow, the part would go on down the line until . . .

DC: Now what would the part look like before it went in the press?

GJ: A plain sheet of metal. And it was cut from a rolling—what do we call it?—flex machine. The steel came in and you've seen them on trucks, big coils, come in. And they'd drop them off with a big overhead crane there, the back of these flex machines. And then they'd go through these flex machines. And that would make them pliable, I guess, enough to where it wouldn't crack when the toggle press come down. You know what I mean? I think that was the purpose. So you just push that in with a tong, and before we got the mechanical handling—they call it mechanical handling—everything was done by hand. You put it in by hand.

DC: You put it in there.

GJ: Yeah.

DC: How much would that sheet of metal weigh that you would have to put in there?

GJ: Ohhh, those bumpers weighed sixty, seventy pounds. Yeah. Oh yeah.

DC: So you'd put those in with tongs, and then what would happen?

GJ: Well, it'd slide down and then you'd push a button and the big old toggle would come down, *errr*, press it into a shape. That bottom part of the toggle and the top part of the toggle were shaped like a bumper. It's like a mold, you know. And the press . . .

DC: How long would it take to actually do the pressing?

GJ: Um—just a little while—just a few seconds.

DC: Really, OK.

GJ: Yeah, just a few seconds.

DC: So how many of those would you push through in an hour?

GJ: Well, we have made as many as 4800 bumpers. Not an hour, but a day.

DC: In a day, OK.

GJ: Yeah, yeah.

DC: And then how many presses would be working to produce 4800 bumpers?

GJ: Well, let's see. I'd say seven or eight presses on the line. See, this press would press the shape of it, the other press would trim off a little bit of it, another press would trim off some

more of it, because, you know, they couldn't trim off too much at one time. Then there'd be another procedure down behind that that punched the—they had punches in the presses. Punches little holes in them where they can fit it on the bumper, with the screws. And on down, till you hung them on the overhead conveyor that takes them over to the nickel plate room. Then they go into nickel plate. When they go in nickel plate and come out, they're finished bumpers.

DC: OK. And do they go to the assembly line at that point?

GJ: Then they go to the assembly line. But that was over to Plant 8. Plant 8 or Plant 9. Plant 8, I think—assembly plant, yeah.

DC: So you guys would churn out—your record was 4800 you said.

GJ: Well, we got 4800 many days. Everything worked right and no breakdowns, 4800 was easy. Wasn't no problem.

DC: What kind of—or what did you like best about that job?

GJ: Well—I liked best about it, if you done your job and everybody else cooperated, you didn't have no problems. You know? But now, the one thing that I didn't agree with, and still don't agree with—this was a policy or traditional way that supervision operated—they'd bring a new man in. You know, you're not represented by the union till at least ninety days. In other words, you're going to join the union but you don't have any rights.

DC: You're on probation.

GJ: Right, you don't have any say. And they'd bring a new man in. Of course he's anxious to get a job. It's a good job, he probably hadn't had no better job, you know? Especially if somebody from down South that's still working with nothing, you know, coming up here. Now I understand they still got a few of them coming—well, not only that, but people around here, anywhere. Anyhow, appreciate the job and a little bit scared of the job. Scared of not doing exactly what he's told to do, and stuff like that, you know. And he wants to make a good impression. It was a practice, traditional policy, to put him on the lead press. Now you know why.

DC: He'd go faster.

GJ: Oh yes. He's going to bust his butt. And everybody else down the line has to keep up with him. They played that game all the time.

DC: And what would you do about it?

GJ: Well, we'd get together, buddy! And we would try to block it. We'd do everything to aggravate and we'd talk to the guy and everything, you know. Of course it wouldn't do no good. Here the guy was concerned about his job, you know what I mean? And we *really*

didn't *blame* him. It was just that he was being brainwashed, and being used. He was being used to *push* us. Well that was the problem. And of course, people are not stupid. They're not dumb. They do it.

DC: Well what could they do at that point? Yeah.

GJ: Nothing.

DC: So was your pay related to some kind of quota, or the number of . . .

GJ: Oh no, no. No piecework at all. No, we didn't have no piece work. Uh uh. No.

DC: All right. But if that guy pushed through the pieces a little bit faster, though, you would have to speed up to keep up with the line.

GJ: Oh yeah! Yeah, or let it pile up behind and then the foreman come get on to you, you know, for not keeping up.

DC: All right. But there wasn't any official rate—or was there?

GJ: Yeah, yeah they had—well, several years ago there never was no official rate. They had what they called timekeepers, old timekeepers that come down and time you: how you do this part, how long it take you to do this part and that part. And then they'd set the rate per hour at that. The time study.

DC: OK. That's what you were supposed to try to meet then.

GJ: Right, right. Right, right.

DC: OK. Did you get your job time studied?

GJ: Oh, I—not while I was on the job, but I've seen them time studying it, yeah. Yeah, they time studied every once in awhile.

DC: OK. Did they ever study you specifically when you were on the job?

GJ: Oh yeah.

DC: Yeah. Well what was that like when you got time studied?

GJ: Well, you feel—I'll tell you how you felt. You felt intimidated. Intimidation, I guess that's—if I had to use one word, that was the description. That's the way you felt. Somebody looking over your shoulder, watching over you. That's intimidating. But, nothing you can do about it.

DC: How would you respond, though? How would you . . .

GJ: Well, I tried not to bust the record. And everybody else that had any sense would, too. Because, you know, it's just as hard on them, that's all. It's not that you're not trying to do your job or you want to throw a monkey wrench in anything. It's just that you're getting tired of being pushed and, you know, it's like any other place of production—they're always trying to increase production, if they can. And if you go along with them, who *knows* how high the production is going to be after awhile? What are they going to do, hold a contest see who can stand the longest before they fall? You know what I mean? That's the way I looked at it. They'd get the fastest guy on that first press and try to make everybody else keep up with them. And if they thought that they could get more and that there was playboys on the line or we was slowing down, had a connived policy to slow down, they'd come and time study it again. And if they thought, you know—if the superintendent was pushing or the plant management was pushing for more parts, more production—which they would do—they'd send time studies up again, see if they can't get a few more—maybe ten or fifteen more an hour. Yeah.

DC: An hour! That's a lot. Ten or fifteen an hour.

GJ: Well yeah, yeah. Every little increase, you know, you just keep doing it. First thing you know, it's, like I said, you're running the race. See how long the guy can stand without falling. Not much you can do.

DC: Did you ever have any need to use your committeeman when you were working? I'm talking about when you first started out, like in the '50s, on this pressed metal job. Did you ever have any use for your committeeman?

GJ: No, I didn't. No, I didn't, but I know a lot of guys did.

DC: In your department?

GJ: Yeah.

DC: What kinds of problems did they have?

GJ: Well, all of them would have problems with the—not really, I mean—they really didn't use their head. It was very, very noticeable that they were really slowing down the job. Just didn't want to do it. Didn't like their job, or what.

DC: OK. So they were slowing down unrelated to . . .

GJ: Yeah. They didn't like their job, or they didn't like it or they didn't like the foreman or something. And they had a right to call the committeeman if they want, you know, if they thought they were right. So they would.

DC: How did you like your supervisor at that point in time?

GJ: Well, I got along with him pretty good. I think it's because, like I said, I didn't—I think they understood after awhile that I didn't call the committeeman unless I had a good point. And I think that's the reason why I got, you know, I didn't have to use them. But I always knew they was there. I paid union dues like anybody else, and I didn't side in with the corporation. I mean, I'm a *union* man. I wanted them, I needed them, I'd call them. But if I did, I'd win. Because I had a good point. I had—that was it. And I think that's the reason why I didn't have too many problems with them.

DC: OK. Well you mentioned that incident with the attempt to lay you off for three days, back in '67, '68, around there.

GJ: Oh yeah.

DC: Were there any incidents at all back in the '50s that you can recall in which you had to use the union?

GJ: No. No, no. Uh uh, no.

DC: OK.

GJ: Oh, oh! Take it back, yeah. '58, I was transferred to the foundry. Now just before the wide track come out. And thank goodness for the engineers come out with the wide track because when they come out with that wide track—the first car that was a little bit wider wheel base—man, they went selling a lot of cars. Well in '58 I was transferred to the foundry. And now when the '59 wide track come back, I went right back to my home plant at 14. But anyhow, in the meantime, this is when I'm over at the foundry. Like I told you, I didn't work on Sunday. And my fellow employees was kind of tickled that I didn't work on Sundays because that's that many more hours that they'd get. And I know that. But I always expected my Saturday—I always expected—I expected if I refused Sunday it would be counted against me on my overtime hours. That was fair. But I also expected if they going to ask me on Sunday, it's only fair to me they come and ask me on Saturday, too. Well once in awhile, I'd find out they wasn't doing that, and I'd complain. But now getting back to the Sunday work, when I was in the foundry—so, they scheduled the whole department to work on Sunday. I never worked on Sunday. Never worked. The records will show that. But over there they scheduled the whole department to work on Sunday. See I'm a new guy, just transferred—rather than being laid off, I had enough time to transfer to the foundry. And I didn't understand that because, I guess because I was spoiled over at Plant 14. They always went along with me because they could always pick up a guy in my place to work Sunday. Like I said, they was tickled that I wouldn't work Sunday. They'd get more hours.

DC: But you were in a new department.

GJ: Yeah, yeah. And so I told them, I said, "I won't be here tomorrow." That was Saturday. And Larry Sheridan was my foreman. And I forget what the guy, the general foreman's name was. Can't think of it. Anyhow, he come up and said, "Johnson," he said, "I'll see

you tomorrow." At the end of the shift. And I said, "No, you won't see me tomorrow, Larry." This was my first Sunday there, see. They didn't know nothing about my past.

DC: You're *brand* new there.

GJ: Right. And I said—he said, "Why not?" Well I said, "I'll be in church tomorrow, Sunday." I never missed a Sunday at church in forty, about forty-two years. And I said—I've gotten away from it a little bit, but not that much—and I said, "I won't be here tomorrow." Well he said, "If you don't come in *tomorrow*, you don't come in *Monday*." Well I said, "I intend to be here, Larry, Monday." You know? He said, "We'll see." So we left it that way. I went home. That was Saturday evening. So in the morning, I got up, went what I'd been doing for forty-some-odd years. Well, I come in Monday. He looked at me, he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I came to work." He said, "Well I told you, you needn't a come in today if you didn't work yesterday." So it went on—we argued and argued, and finally I called the committeeman. Wasn't Dave Moore there. It was a different district over there, foundry. And I forget who that was—can't think of his name. Anyhow, we had a meeting up at the general foreman's office. And kept arguing and arguing and arguing and finally the decision was—see, I explained it to them why and everything else. And it wasn't only that they didn't believe me, it was mainly because they didn't want nobody breaking their policy. That was all. And so the decision was that, "You go on back to your job, Johnson." They told Larry on the phone, "Put him back on the job." Said, "We'll get with you later, and make our decision." Because they told me right then and there that the policy was that if the full department was scheduled, I was expected to come in. And from what they was telling me, they couldn't afford to make any special limitations for me. I kind of understand that. But yet, you know, I didn't want to go against my policy for over forty years either. So they said, "Go on back to your job." Well, they said, "We'll see what we can do about this." Well I didn't expect the—well, actually I expected to be fired. I expected to be looking for another job somewhere, to be honest with you. And I had already made that decision. And I think they knew it.

DC: And this is 1958 in the foundry?

GJ: Yeah. And so I—they went and they asked me when we was there in the general foreman's office—they called the superintendent, too, in there, too—and they asked me what church I go to and what my pastor's name was, Sunday school superintendent, and all that stuff. And I was on the board of the church then. I was on the board of that church for twenty-seven years. And, of course, they didn't ask me that. But, you know, they found out later. They questioned my pastor. They questioned my Sunday school superintendent. "Yeah, he's here every Sunday. Yeah, he teaches a Sunday school class." And I did. I taught the high school class for about twenty-three years. "Yeah, his wife teaches class. Yeah, he's a member of our board of the rectory. He's here. He's not pulling your leg," so to speak. "He's telling you the fact." Well, the superintendent got on the ball and checked all of that out and found out positive answers to all of it. And he told Larry, he said, "Don't require him—don't even ask him to work on Sunday." Said, "Chalk him up for the hours." Said, "He's already told me he's willing to be automatically charged. Don't even have to ask me." If the plant works on Sunday, full, they can charge me for the overtime hours.

And he said, "That's the way we got it set up, so everything is clear." And, man, I was really relieved. I didn't want to quit my job and have to go out and get another job. All my kids was still home then. And I was really relieved. And that was a paramount situation that I won. That was—that really was.

DC: Yeah. You would've been gone.

GJ: Oh *yeah*, yeah. And I was ready to go. But I didn't—they didn't ask me to work Sunday anymore after that. Although if I was due to be asked, out of fairness to all the rest of the guys, they charged me with the overtime hours. See.

DC: When you say they charged you, what does that mean?

GJ: Well that means is if you worked them. See. They go—they offer overtime hours equally to everybody because it's time and a half pay. Premium pay. So it's only fair that if I refuse to work, I'll be charged for it. So I didn't. I had nothing against that at all. I told them—in fact, I agreed, you don't even have to ask me to work Sunday if it's full department and I'm expected to be here.

DC: So other people can get those hours.

GJ: Right. That's right.

DC: It didn't cost you anything. It's just that they were marking down . . .

GJ: No, it didn't give me no penalty or anything like that. I didn't miss no days work.

DC: Was there any contract provision about working overtime?

GJ: Well, I think the contract was that—I think the local agreement, really, was that if the full department was scheduled, everybody had to work.

DC: Really? OK.

GJ: Yeah. So you can see, right there, how glad I was that it turned out the way it was, because I was fighting against the contract, really. Well they could've—they could've very well said, "No, Johnson, we're not going to—even though we know you're telling the truth, even though we know where you're at Sunday. We are not going to trash our policy." They could've said that. But I was ready to go. I had talked it over with my wife and everybody. All the people at church knew about it. I had everybody praying for it, to be honest with you. Yeah.

DC: Can you tell me why you got transferred to the foundry.

GJ: Because they had a big layoff in 1958.

DC: OK. Because of the layoffs.

GJ: I mean, just about everybody was laid off.

DC: So you had enough seniority to be able to land another job.

GJ: Yeah, I was laid off for eleven months.

DC: You were laid off for eleven months as well?

GJ: Yeah, *before* I got called back into the foundry.

DC: Oh, OK. All right. So what did you do during that layoff?

GJ: See I didn't get called back in the foundry till they went to building the wide track drive.

DC: So, oh OK. At that point. I thought you went back to pressed metal when they started the wide track. But that's when you went back to the foundry.

GJ: That's when I went to the foundry.

DC: All right. So what did you do during that layoff, that eleven month layoff?

GJ: Well, I drawed my unemployment compensation. And at that time, they had SUB pay, which wasn't very much at all—$12.60 or something like that, supplemental pay. That goes along with your unemployment. And three, let's see, about—I was out about eleven months—about, I think it was in June or July—but anyhow, I made it. I don't know—oh, oh, I went back to driving the cab again. Yeah! Yeah!! Yeah!!! I was thinking—right, this is the third time. Yeah. Went back to driving the Yellow Cab again.

DC: OK. Did that affect your unemployment at all?

GJ: Just up to a certain point. See, I had enough dependents that I could still draw my unemployment up to a certain point. Certain percentage of it and still make my wages at Yellow Cab. And you didn't make that much wages at the taxi cab.

DC: Right. And what was your wife doing during those years?

GJ: Well, nothing. She—a housewife. That's the reason, I guess that's the reason why we never had no *extra*ordinary—oh, we had problems—you notice I didn't say I didn't have any problems—I'll say *extra*ordinary, heavy problems like a lot of people do have, see, with their kids.

DC: Yeah. And you had four kids, is that right?

GJ: Six.

DC: *Six* kids. OK, I'm sorry.

GJ: She was a housewife. She stayed home with the kids. And, as the old saying—all of them believed in this old cliché down South, you know—the man brings in the bacon. Well, that to me doesn't mean that the man is Lord and Taj Mahal and all of this stuff. It just means that he's got a duty to do and so does the wife. And that's the way we operated.

DC: Well she would've had her hands full.

GJ: She *did* have. Yes. Absolutely. I wouldn't have traded jobs with her at all. [knowing chuckle]

DC: So what exactly did you do in the foundry?

GJ: Oh, man. [laughs] I grinded the stupid blocks that come down the line. I ground all the excess—see, they made them right there. And there's also—there's all excess steel or iron on them, you know—you have to grind them off. And I don't know how many times I went to the first aid there with pieces of metal in my eye, you know, little metal dust. And it'll rust, that cast iron, you know—it'll rust and just turn your eyeball red.

DC: Did you ever get protective eyewear?

GJ: Yeah, but it'd get underneath. You're not solidly protected. Everybody—they had more visitors in that first aid on foundry than they did anywhere else in Pontiac Motor. But I was operating a big grinder and chisel, chiseling off the big parts and then grinding it down, smoothing it down [interviewer talks over him] blocks.

DC: How long did it take to learn how to do that?

GJ: About thirty minutes. [laughs] About thirty minutes. It was pretty simple. You just grind it down, smooth it down, knock off the big chunks with the chisel and hammer, and then take your overhead grinder and grind it and smooth it down.

DC: How did it compare to the pressed metal job that you had?

GJ: Well, it was dirtier and hotter, of course.

DC: Even hotter, OK.

GJ: Oh yeah! Those—they don't run them through cold water when they come out of there, you know. They're on the line. They cool off a little bit, but you remember, when they come out of that shuttle, they're red hot. And it was hotter and harder and dirtier, of course. And I've often said, it's sort of humorous, that you know, even in those days, it was a long time ago, they had a whole lot more racial problems then than they do now, and I've often said, made a humorous remark, that we didn't have too many racial problems

there because everybody was the same color. [laughs] After about— that might sound offensive to the colored person, but I don't mean it to be that way at all. It's just a little humorous. You know, I just made a little joke out of it.

DC: It was grimy in there.

GJ: Oh yeah, you were just, you were just black. Everybody was black.

DC: What was the racial makeup in the foundry when you were working there?

GJ: Oh, it was pretty much, I would say it was, uh, [short pause] 60/40. Sixty percent black, forty percent white. Yeah.

DC: OK. Were there many women working in the foundry?

GJ: Uh, quite a few. Quite a few. Quite a few.

DC: OK. Were they black women or white women?

GJ: Well, they were mixed. They was mixed. But there was still more blacks than there was overall white. But you see, the white women working in there are still the same women that worked during the war. See, that's when the women got all these industrial jobs, during the war. Because all the men was somewhere else.

DC: Well how did the blacks and whites get along, then, in the foundry?

GJ: I never seen too much trouble. Never seen too much fighting, too much arguing, or anything like that. No. I thought they got along pretty good. I got along with them good. I never had no problems at all.

DC: OK. Did you ever have any need, besides the first time when you saved your job, by not working Sunday, any other times when you had to use your committeeman in the foundry?

GJ: No, uh-uh. No, I got, like I said, I was in the—when they sell them '59 wide track drive, brother, they really, they really, they sold more cars than they ever had. A record that year. They called me back to my home plant.

DC: OK. So how long were you in the foundry altogether?

GJ: Uh—about eleven months. About ten or eleven months in the foundry. And I didn't like it.

DC: Ten or eleven months in the foundry, OK. And then you—so you weren't upset about being sent back to your old job.

GJ: Oh no. No, no. Nooo.

DC: OK. So were you on the same pressed metal job, then . . .

GJ: When I come back?

DC: When you came back.

GJ: Yeah. Yeah, it was in—the whole department, see, had different job, different lines in that same department. So you would be liable to do any job on that line in that department.

DC: In that department. Would that change on a daily basis?

GJ: Fourteen ninety-three. Yeah, probably.

DC: Oh, really?

GJ: Yeah. If your line was broke down, you know, you could go to any other line in that department.

DC: OK.

GJ: Or any other department if another foreman needed it and you, and your foreman couldn't use you, you know?

DC: Were there many breakdowns?

GJ: Quite a few. Quite a few, yeah.

DC: OK. So then it would be just go wherever they could use you.

GJ: Yeah. They'd just—if this foreman needed some up here, go there, go there. Maybe some might have to go home, but they'd send them home by seniority, you know? Or, I've even went over to the other plants. Repair plant, 16.

DC: Would that be for a short term stint over there?

GJ: Just short term. Just short term. Maybe one day.

DC: Oh, OK. You mentioned that the foundry is about sixty/forty black/white. What about the pressed metal?

GJ: Might've been even more than that. Might've been more like thirty/seventy.

DC: OK. In the foundry, that is.

GJ: Yeah. More blacks than there was white.

DC: What about in the pressed metal?

GJ: Pressed metal it was, I'd say about equal. Just about equal. Yeah.

DC: About equal, OK. And that's in the '50s you're talking about?

GJ: No, I'm talking about, uh, no, not in the '50s. No, I'm talking about—see, they didn't advance much until after the '54 Supreme Court decision, stuff like that, and all this school integration started and all that. No, that was, I'd say '60s.

DC: In the '60s, OK. I wasn't very specific with my question.

GJ: In '60s, in the '60s.

DC: But say, like when you went back from the foundry to the pressed metal shop, what would you say the ratio was at that point?

GJ: I'd say about sixty/forty the other way. Sixty whites, forty black.

DC: Still pretty mixed, then.

GJ: Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah.

DC: Well, we've gotta wind up pretty soon—the tape's going but there's so much more to talk about. I wanted you to tell me a little bit more about the religious conversion that you had, in '54. It sounds like that was a real big part of your life.

GJ: Yeah. Yeah. We—they—well, I remember, I didn't tell you this, either. My oldest daughter had spinal meningitis when I was stationed over to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, and my commander had got me relieved from duty to arrange a funeral for her. And they thought it had already hit the vital parts of her brain and everything else. And so I went in the next day to visit her, and the doctor asked me to notice if she does thing like she used to do all that, she'd always—I had a little pocket comb clip, clipped to my pocket. She'd always take that comb of mine and comb my hair. And she always wouldn't eat a bite unless I'd eat a bite first. And all a sudden she done just those things. Told her doctor about that. He said, "Well," he said, "I think we might be wrong." Said, "She might pull out." This is after I was already relieved of duty for three or four days. And I'd run in there and the nurses was—they got attached to her real easy. And two or three of them was crying when they come out of the room. And I wondered what was going on and the doctor told me they were happy. And so she got over it with the only effects is she's deaf in one ear. It did affect her hearing. And—but we sent her to Flint, School for the Deaf in Flint, read lips and stuff. And everything's fine with her. She's ordinary. She's just like me or you or anybody else. And she can hear you if you happen to be on the side where her ear is not affected. But then if you're on this ear, you'll have to tap her on the shoulder or she won't hear anything—sees your lips. But anyway, we come back—I may have already told you that. So they had a revival over here. Me and my wife, their parents—her parents

was up here and they was pretty religious—up here at that time, going to this church over here on Baldwin. And we'd go to Sunday school and take the whole—kids, go to Sunday school. But like I said, we wasn't religious then. But I still remember back to the time I told you about, Ronny, my older son. And I had—I know one time I was there at—I remember this—I was there in the hospital at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Army hospital, visiting Sheila and I remember me and my wife both saying out loud, it was kind of funny, she said the same thing I said: "Lord, if you'll only get her out of here, we'll do anything." I remember saying that. Well that was in 19 and—I think it was 1950. '50. Believe it was 1950. Anyhow, '49 or '50. Anyhow, so see I'm back out of the Army now, and I'm over here and this is 1954. And they had a revival meeting. Special pastor invited, you know. Ten day revival meeting. And I remember Reverend Jason Felder [sp?]. I remember his name, you know—when there's something connected like this that's important, that you never forget. And his last remark, punch line, so to speak, was, "Did you forget your promises to God? Did you forget your promises to God?" And I know that my wife—it must've hit her the same way it did me—because when they had an altar call to go to the altar, we both went. And so that was the gist of the religious situation. And you might think I'm a religious freak, but I'm not. You might think I'm a fanatic, but I'm not. I'm no better than anybody else. But I do believe in God. I believe in church. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in all of that. And I have, like I said, I have gotten away. Go on trips. I go up to the casinos, gamble. I didn't used to gamble. I've gotten away from that a little bit. And I've strayed away a little bit, but I won't stay away.

DC: It sounds like a really important time, that revival. What immediate changes were there in your family life at that point?

GJ: The whole family?

DC: Yeah, in '54.

GJ: Yeah, we were—that was our life, going to church, going to Sunday school, going to prayer meeting. Yeah.

DC: Was that the church on Baldwin that you were talking about that you went to?

GJ: Yeah. Yup. Now, we had friends . . .

DC: What denomination was that?

GJ: Huh?

DC: What kind of church was it?

GJ: It was a Holiness church. It wasn't Pentecostal. It wasn't Pentecostal. You use the word Holiness, most people think Pentecostal, but it wasn't Pentecostal. No, they didn't talk in tongues or anything like that. It was a Protestant church. But it—we had friends that we used to run around with in Pontiac, talking about when we went together, you know, before

we actually got married. Running around to this place and that place. And I played music and all. We went to all these places and everything. But we had friends after we started going to church. We'd see them every once in awhile—they'd say, "Well what do you and Gene do now for *fun*? What do you do for *fun*?" We said, "We're planning—we're busy, we're satisfied. We have lots of fun. We got lots of friends." That's all we'd tell them. That's all we *needed* to tell them. We were happy. Sure.

DC: So your Sundays sounded like they were filled with church.

GJ: Oh yeah.

DC: Tell me how a Sunday would go. What all would you do?

GJ: Well, my wife would get up and around on the Saturday night before. I remember she had these little white shoes, soled high top shoes, little leather kids' shoes. And this liquid white polish. She'd polish all them little pairs of shoes and line them up on the kitchen counter. Well Sunday morning they got up, and she'd prepared that the night before, you know, so every Sunday morning we knew, they knew, everybody knew in the family we was going to be in church. Sunday school and church. Oh yeah, it definitely changed.

DC: Yeah. Was church an all-day affair on Sunday?

GJ: Well, we went to Sunday school. Sunday school started at 9:45. Then regular church services started at 11:15. And then they'd have youth service at 6:00. And regular church service, preaching service, at 7:00. It was almost an all day, right. Yeah.

DC: Would there ever be meals in between, or would you go home in between?

GJ: Went home. But a lot of times there'd be meals, though, if we had, like the revival special. Yeah, stay all day.

DC: How about during the week, were there programs or events during the week?

GJ: Youth groups, they would be doing something through the week with the younger people. And we had Wednesday night prayer meeting, of course. And we were there, too, at that. So it was pretty much, well it was a way of life. It was pretty much busy. We got into it full.

DC: Did your family ever go on any vacations or anything like that at that point in time?

GJ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, sure.

DC: Yeah. Where did you go?

GJ: I've, shit I've—my kids have been to more places [in the] United States than most adult—by the time they were six years old—than most adults do all their life.

DC: Tell me where all you went.

GJ: We traveled every time—went every time I got a furlough, every time they got laid off, we got laid off. Used to get laid off for a whole season, twelve weeks. We'd go down to Missouri when my Mother and Dad retired up here and we went back down there. We'd go down there and, oh, sometimes for the whole layoff time. And then we'd go up north, up here to the sand dunes [in northern Michigan]. And then we'd go out to my brother's house. He lived in Las Vegas, my older brother, the one I was telling you about. We played guitars together. He lived in Las Vegas. We'd go out there. Then we had some friends south of San Bernardino, California and we'd go out there. Shoot, we went just about everywhere. We'd go to Florida. I had a sister in Florida. We traveled all over the country.

DC: You had people to visit everywhere, it sounds like.

GJ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Yeah, still do.

DC: Well that's good. What about the music, then. Tell me more about . . .

GJ: Well, I—like I said, I played ordinary, rough, hole-in-the-wall, country-western songs. And then when I, when I joined the church, of course that stops. And I played in the church orchestra. We had about a seventeen-piece church orchestra.

DC: So you still played music, but in the church, not in these places.

GJ: Yeah. Sure. And it was just like a difference of playing two different instruments. You know, the old straight line country song music and square dance music and then playing our church hymns. It's like playing two different instruments. But it didn't take long, get right into it. And I enjoyed that. [somewhat unconvincingly]

DC: But you gave up the other.

GJ: Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, I gave up all of it.

DC: Was that because of the types of places you played, or . . .

GJ: Because I played, no.

DC: No, I mean, why would you give up the other music, the country-western and the square dancing?

GJ: Well I didn't go to those places no more.

DC: So it was because of the kinds of places where you played.

GJ: Right, right. Absolutely.

DC: OK. That's what I was wondering. You've had a very interesting life and we've only covered about half of it so far.

GJ: Well, yeah. I've had a hard life in certain portions of it, but I've had a very good life in other portions of it. So I can't complain. I don't complain. And I am, like I said, I've accomplished—I've never had no great, high summit expectations of my accomplishments, but I've accomplished what I *needed* to. I'm satisfied, I'm happy.

DC: What were you doing when you retired? What job did you have in the press room when you retired?

GJ: Oh, I was—what do they call it? Future projects, uh, pilot. I was pilot utility, I was pilot, working in the pilot area.

DC: What does that mean?

GJ: Well, that means that you're testing future parts for future model cars.

DC: Oh, OK, so you're working for the future . . .

GJ: Getting them ready for production dies. We had to fit them to gauges and make sure they was OK to process engineering. And it was engineering—any ECR, engineering change requests, we'd have to wait till they made that, that change. Then we'd check the parts again on our gauges in the pilot area. And then when process engineering okayed it for production, that was—our job was finished on that part, and we'd get another part.

DC: Was that in the same room as all the other machines?

GJ: No, no. No, it was across the aisle, across from the machines across the aisle in a little bit quieter place. Only it wasn't divided with a wall—separation—it was just across the aisle, right.

DC: Just a little distance.

GJ: Right.

DC: Yeah. How long did you do that job?

GJ: Until I retired.

DC: But I mean when did you start? How many years did you do it before you retired?

GJ: About five or six years.

DC: Well I may pester you again in the future some time to learn a little bit more about the later years of your career. I'm going to have to wrap up here pretty quick now, because I need to get back to . . .

GJ: Oh OK, Dan. Well I've been as straightforward about it as I could.

DC: Can you think of questions that I should've been asking you that I wasn't asking you?

GJ: No, sir, you covered just about my whole background. You kind of surprised me. But I've been as open as I can . . .

DC: You've been wonderful.

GJ: . . . even to the point of embarrassment on some of the things. But nevertheless, I said to myself when I come over here, I thought about this. I think, "Well, I'm going to call and cancel that." No, I thinks, "Nah, I ain't going to be—I ain't going to chicken out like that. This is actual, this is real, let's go through with it." So.

DC: You know, it makes a huge difference because otherwise all of this story is gone when you're gone, you know? And people need to know what life was like for the people who were working.

GJ: Well, I hope they get something out of this.

DC: Oh, they will, believe me.

GJ: And I would appreciate a copy of the tape.

End of Interview