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Excerpts from Interview with Ed Johnson

by

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Ed Johnson

This is a very old community. It dates back to before the Revolutionary War. Throughout the 1700s this place is just being filled up with settlers. And their means of support was farming. And from that day to this, it has been the central activity out here. These days, what is prominent are the few dairy farms. And they got into that business, I'm told in the 1920s. So we had a number of dairies. The number has declined over the years, so that now the prominent ones are the Snipes, and the Kirks, and the Teers, and the Fousts (??) over toward the southwest. They all own hundreds of acres, farm them, keep them in agriculture. And if land is agriculture then you can't put houses on it. And so that has kept the community rural, up until recently. It's beginning to crack a little bit. I think that if the dairies were to go under, then the place would fill up pretty quickly, become a bedroom community for Chapel Hill.

How would that change it?

Just the whole atmosphere would change. Now, when you look around, you see fields and crops growing and animals out grazing. Tractors you see fairly frequently out on the roads, going from one field to another. In the summertime you see up on the ball field softball games. A whole lot of I guess little things that would change if this became a bedroom community.

One reason that I personally moved out from Chapel Hill was because I was beginning to feel kind of crowded in the neighborhood where I had settled in. I guess I've always been fond of streams and woods and mountains and so on, from the old days I was in Boy Scouts, hunting and camping. And I felt that I wanted some land where I could do things my way, and where I wouldn't have to look a hundred feet and see the side of another house. And found this land -- found it really before I knew what the neighborhood was like. And only later did I find out that it was a really nice community. So I don't know -- just being closer to nature I think that makes it appeal to me. And the dairy farms are very much a part of that. They sort of give the whole community its foundation and its character. It's the people themselves. They have fairly large extended families; they're settled in; they've been here for generations. They sort of set the tone for the whole place. If it became unprofitable for, say, the Snipes to keep that dairy farm in operation -- that's an operation that is the livelihood of quite a few families. Charles Snipes and his brother James are the older generation, they're probably 50s or 60s, and then there's a generation of children under that, most of whom are married and themselves have kids who are, oh anywhere from toddler up to teenager. And all of these families are being supported in good part by the dairy farm. And if the dairy farm were to go under, then perhaps the way that they could get some money out would be to subdivide. And then there would probably be no call for them to continue to live in the community, they could live anywhere. In fact they might have to live closer to where they could find employment, and they would leave. It's like a ship losing its keel.

I think that people were apprehensive (about the reservoir). I think most people perhaps had not thought it through to realize the implications. You know, when you find that a lake is coming in, you can think of some positives that might spin off from that -- recreation opportunities; fishing opportunities; boating opportunities -- lakes are pretty, and so on. So I'm sure that there were some people around who were thinking along that vein. And some might have been thinking ah-hah, I'll get rid of some land, maybe a pretty price. And I think the more people began to think about it, the more they began to see some unfortunate consequences. They had questions in their mind, and people were not answering the questions. For my part, I knew about plans for the reservoir before I even bought the land out here. When it was finally announced officially, I sort of shrugged my shoulders and said O.K., well we're going to have a lake. I was sort of philosophical about it.

Meeting in community building, chairman of county commission two or three folks from OWASA, people knew each other -- What we wanted to hear at that point was how the reservoir might impact on our lives, especially the farms. And especially we were worried about the timbering and the surveying and all the earth moving, and how this might disrupt the neighborhood and what they were going to do to minimize the disruptions. And that's not what they talked about at all. They told us what the schedule was going to be -- we'll have the surveyors out on such and such a day, and then we're going to start timbering on such and such a month and start moving dirt. Then they told us how high the dam would be, how many cubic

yards of dirt, and when they'd start filling it, how many acres were going to be covered by water. A lot of engineering details.

After 20 mins, Earl got up and bellowed "What the hell do you take us for, a bunch of idiots?" began to get defensive several people asking "some pretty hard penetrating questions in a hostile tone of voice" -- went downhill quickly "We used to say that they seemed to come into that meeting with the attitude that we would all rush up and say where's a shovel? We want to help too! And that was not it."

I think that the potential was there for OWASA to have been sympathetic and addressed our concerns, and to have said sure there're going to be problems, and we're going to work with you to find solutions. I don't think that it necessarily had to be that there was going to be a big fight that lasted for years. I think that was the opportunity that OWASA had to get the community's cooperation.

over fall began to look into regulations and see where OWASA had fallen down.

I think maybe at the very beginning we were focusing on more legal things. Then later on we got into concern for more direct impacts on agriculture. It turned out to be very fuzzy. No one was sure. And I guess most people thought the regulations were going to be made more severe. Then we began to worry about social impacts. So there were a lot of things. It came along gradually over the few months after that October meeting. I guess the more we thought about it, the more we began to realize that gosh, we have something pretty neat here. And it's worth preserving.

I've always noticed that when it comes to community action that frequently the people who are volunteering to get involved are the newcomers. You can see this at all levels -- you look at for instance who's

sitting on the county commissioner board. There's not a single one of them who's a native of Orange County. They're all people who have moved in. It's almost as if the old timers have a different mode of approach to problems than the newer ones. The newer ones like to hustle around and organize and do things in their way and the old timers I guess have perhaps a more relaxed mode of doing things. They just like to talk quietly to somebody who's a family friend who goes back several generations and pass along a few concerns and hope to change a vote at some critical meeting. So there was that mix of approaches. And sometimes the newcomers are more aware of the things that are at risk than the old timers, who take everything for granted. So we were pointing out to them things that they should value. Just the very fact of having the woods, the stream. And I think that everybody in the community began to value the pristine nature of Cane Creek, and the fact that it's really quite a community resource.

Tape I side II

He told us climax forest bottom land hardwood. And we said well sure, we know that it's peaceful down there and there are big trees. But then he told us that environments like that were quite scarce here in the Piedmont because they were all going for development, or lakes. And that ours was particularly nice, and he reeled off some of the species of both plants and animals that were down there, that were not quite on the rare and endangered species list, but some of them were nevertheless quite scarce. And so we came to think of that as indeed a good community resource. I guess you could say that our consciousness was raised as we got more and more into this. I had a childhood friend from Chapel Hill who got into

sociology, and he began to point out various things that might be consequences of the reservoir, and he really did a lot of consciousness-raising.

People who move out in the country and, say, build next to a field, where crops are grown, are not nearly as tolerant of some of the things farmers do as country people. We're sort of patient with a lot of things that farmers just have to do that are occasionally a little bit annoying to the rest of the folks. But the person who moves out may not like this kind of thing at all, and they can institute lawsuits against the farmers. A couple have been instituted in the neighborhood over the years. These things can be quite discouraging to a farmer.

CCCA organization

I guess at that time, in 1976, there were perhaps three community organizations, the biggest being Cane Creek Baptist Church, to which many of the people in the community belonged. The other one being the community building, and then the volunteer fire company, which was quite young at that time. I guess it was just natural that CCCA sort of evolved along that line. Like all these others, we had a need for money, and the only way we knew to raise money was to, say, put on some suppers, or do something in town, bake cakes and sell 'em in town. And we were fairly successful at that, and in fact the whole effort of coming together to try to put one of these events on was a process that sort of bound us together. And we found that we were attracting the interest of people who lived out here who before that had not felt a part of the community. There were a bunch of 1960s-style counter-culture folks scattered around. And they were quite sympathetic to

our efforts, and they came in and found that they liked these folks out here, and the old folks kind of thought they were neat too. The counter-culture types I think never would have presented themselves to the Cane Creek Baptist Church for membership. That was one of the things they were probably rebelling against in the first place. The volunteer fire department, that's fairly specialized. That requires one's volunteering a good chunk of time.

Chapel Hill

I think the rural parts of the county have always had a bit of suspicion about Chapel Hill. Now it's more true as you get into the northern part of the county. Down here in the southwestern half, I think it's more bordering on a love-hate relationship. You look at the Snipes' dairy farm and see what it's called. Anilorac. Anilorac Farm. And if you spell that backwards, that's Carolina. And it turns out that the Snipes, although I think they never attended UNC as students, they're big Tar Heel fans. They go to the football games and the basketball games. So there is a kind of a respect for the University and for Chapel Hill, and at the same time there is some apprehension. I think as Sam Crawford put it once, it's like being next to a sleeping giant. You're always kind of afraid it's going to roll over in the night and crush you.

momentum went up and down -- small numbers met with lawyers, then tried to get lots of people to show up at meetings. some decisions went for, some against. I guess for all the legal battles we always figured we were

the underdog, little Davids fighting against Goliath --but, hell, David won. We figured maybe we would zing 'em between the eyes one time. One good zing and we felt we might win it. And there were a lot of opportunities. And we did pretty well, overall.

It was a problem keeping community interest and morale and enthusiasm up sometimes.

I don't think you'll find too many regrets in the neighborhood about it. As for its causing a spirit of resignation and I give up and you can't fight city hall, I would say that's probably not the case. We kind of did fight city hall on another issue and won it. There was an attempt to put an airport out here, and the airport is not here. The airport issue is coming up again. So you can hear things in the community begin to rumble and coalesce again -- here's another fight we've got. I think it's got some of us involved in community affairs on a low level but semi-permanent basis. We have a Bingham advisory township council that meets fairly regularly. A lot of the people who sit on it have some roots back in the Cane Creek Conservation Authority. We like to keep an eye on things and express our opinions and feelings, both to the planning department, the planning board, the county commissioners. And I think we have had some effect somewhere. There's another issue that's going on that we occasionally agitate on, and that's OWASA's disposal of sludge from the sewage disposal plant in the township - - I think the township's probably getting about three-quarters of all the sludge that accumulates, and we're worried about its concentration in one of our watershed. We have agitated on that issue and we have had some

effects. So it could be that one of the legacies is a sort of a heightened awareness of things.

I hope that one of the effects was that people in Chapel Hill will be more careful when they put forth projects that benefit themselves but ask for people out in the county to make sacrifices. I have heard some influential Chapel Hillians say that they had their consciousness raised on this level because of the Cane Creek fight.

The issues are very important. This is a part of the country that's changing rapidly. That suggests that there needs to be a lot of thought given to growth management and long-range planning and such. And that whole approach can run headlong into exactly the opposite opinion of many landowners that by god it's my land and I don't want anybody telling me what to do with it. You find some of that out here at Cane Creek -- it's more a northern Orange County attitude than around here. We have zoning in this township, partly because the people out here didn't fight it as it has been fought in other townships in this county. I think that maybe the Cane Creek thing made us sensitive to this issue, and made us think perhaps we do need to establish some limits on what people can do. I guess my opinion was that maybe in older times you didn't need zoning because everybody was a local person, and if somebody said well, I'm going to build a store or a hog farm or whatever on my land, and if this upset the neighbors, then they would let him know. And in that way you had some kind of control over land use. I can remember for instance when I first moved out here, that kind of pressure was brought to bear. Across the creek over here, there was an absentee landowner who had leased his land to a couple of Chapel Hill guys who had turned a field into a motorcycle racing track. And there would be Saturdays when the road out here was just jammed up with cars, and you'd

would hear the motorcycles racing around the track. One time, they had Sunday morning races, and the people in the church heard it. Phone calls were made, and the lease was stopped, because of the phone calls made to the landowner. But then we could say to folks in the community, you know that was a good absentee landowner. But suppose you had an absentee landowner who said the hell with you, I'm going to do what I want to. And these days you have more and more absentee landowners who don't give a damn other than making some money. I think arguments like that helped people see that perhaps zoning and land use planning had some wisdom in it. There was a mixture, but probably the newcomers were a little over-represented on those community panels and committees and such.

Over on Apple Mill Road, there is a field that used to be tended by the Teers. It's been marked off into lots. There's a little right of way, and you see stakes up -- lot one, lot two. Those things are going to start popping up around here. In five years maybe we'll have a better handle on that.

sense that older folks won't sell but younger ones might.

We were fighting a tremendous power system. It was OWASA ostensibly, but behind OWASA lay the town of Chapel Hill and the power of the University. And then therefore the whole power establishment of the state. It's like playing a game where the rules of the game are rigged against you. You can try to change the rules of the game -- that is, you can try to get legislation passed, but that was beyond our capacity to do that. So we were stuck with having to play the game by the rules that were already in place.

It was quite irritating. There were some good points that we thought that we were making, and we would make 'em and people would say you know, fine, but irrelevant. That was very irritating. So the best forum for

making those points was out in the public forum, trying to communicate with Chapel Hillians.

I think we realized that it was going to be a very much uphill battle, but we were pretty upset, and we were willing to make that uphill battle. It was the younger tyros who charged in and wanted to do something.