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Interview

with

LYMAN JOHNSON

July 12, 1990

by John Egerton

Transcribed by Jovita Flynn

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

July 12, 1990

JOHN EGERTON: I'm not sure exactly where's the best place to start, but let me start perhaps by talking about Columbia. I read your account of your early years in Columbia, and also the fascinating story you told about getting on the train or the bus up here, I forget which, and going to Columbia in 1946 when you heard about all the trouble there. That has been called a race riot.

LYMAN JOHNSON: Sometimes it's called a race riot, and then sometimes a race disturbance. It wasn't exactly a riot.

JE: It was an invasion, it looked to me like.

LJ: Well, when you call it an invasion, then that was the state invading the town.

JE: Exactly. And more specifically, invading the black neighborhood.

LJ: Black neighborhood. It wasn't a riot--a race disturbance, but not a riot. I take a riot to mean somebody is rising up and trying to rebel against the status quo. Well, these Negroes were not rebelling. They were trying to protect.

JE: They were defending themselves.

LJ: Defending themselves. Here was a Negro, the one Negro who started the thing was a young soldier who had just come back from World War II. Is this thing on?

JE: Yes sir.

LJ: He had just come back from World War II, and he came back to see his dear old mother. Well now, they came from a

poor, downtrodden, black community. They hadn't had anything to amount to anything of this world's goods. The old lady was still kind of down and out, but here the young man came back. He had just put in maybe three or four years in the service, and he'd fought against the Japanese over there in Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima and all around over in that section of the world. And he had been sold, three years, a bill of goods that all of this was for American democracy, and for a finer way of life than the rest of the world was having. And the kind of stuff that Hitler and Tojo and Mussolini were dishing out wasn't a high life, but the American way was good. So he comes back and goes back to visit his mother. She had gone up to a little repair shop, maybe two weeks before he came, to get her little radio repaired. Now, are you interested in all that story?

JE: Well, I read all that in here, so I've got that account.

LJ: So you don't need to. . . .

JE: No. I don't really.

LJ: The main point is that when the man was abusing his mother, "Oh, woman, go somewhere, go hide. Get out of here."

JE: Did he call her a "nigger?"

LJ: Yeah, he called her all sorts, "Nigger woman, get the hell out of here." And this man was up there at the front of the store, and she was back there begging the man, "Oh, go ahead, mister, and fix my radio. It wouldn't cost much." But he was working on the point that the damn thing was so bashed up and beat out, and so cheap to begin with, that it would cost him more

to fix it than to sell her a new one. He could sell her a new one for the price it'd take to fix it. So he said, "Go get you another one. That old thing isn't no good." But she couldn't understand that. She just thought maybe all you had to do was like put in a light bulb. It was ruined. So he got peeved with the old lady, and then started cursing her. So this young man was up there at the front of the store just beginning to boil. "Get out of here or I'll throw you out." And the woman started backing up towards the front door, and when she got up there where her son was, her son grabbed him and said, "Look man, do you know that's my mama?"

JE: And they had at it, right?

LJ: Now, when he manhandled the guy, he said to the rest of the Negroes in the front of the store, "Well, hell, that's what the government taught me, how to handle the Japanese. Man to man, hell, I was able to protect myself. So when I grabbed that man, I just threw him." That was an attack on the white establishment for a black man, at that time.

JE: Threw him through a plate glass window?

LJ: Yeah. "Oh, what the hell are these damn niggers up to?" And that is where, if there's any riot, that was all it was to it. They were going to put down the riot right there. That wasn't any riot. That was just one man's situation.

JE: And the guy got out of town, didn't he?

LJ: Yeah. When he looked around, all his boyhood days came back to life. He remembered, "My god, this is the place where they lynch Negroes for doing things like this.



JE: I'm in trouble now, huh?

LJ: Yeah. "What can I do?" So he ran one block down the street and made a turn, and when you turn in at that block, that is one block of Negro businesses, little Negro businesses, little joints. And so he went back down there, and of course, Negroes down there were shooting pool and cursing and swearing and gambling and fighting and fussing and cussing and carrying on, as usual, and he began to tell two or three of the people down there, the owners of some of those places, what had happened. They all got together and said, "Well, look man, we've got to get you out of town right now."

JE: They did get him out. Did he come back?

LJ: Hell, we don't know what became of the man.

JE: You never saw him again?

LJ: I don't know whether anybody ever heard of that guy any more. I think maybe he got to Nashville, Louisville, Cincinnati, and I don't think he stopped before he got to Detroit. Now, in order to show Negroes, you don't do that kind of stuff, then they--I won't say Ku Kluxers, but the Ku Klux element, began to organize. "Let's go get us one or two, and lynch them and that'll put them in their places. That'll bring fear to all in the place." So the Negroes armed themselves for two or three days. They publicly said they were going to lynch one or two.

JE: Now at that point, the state ended up troopers in there, National Guards?

LJ: No, the city police couldn't handle it, because the whites. . . . You know, I said you come down from the

courthouse, come down one block. Now, I know all about this. I was raised in that town, and here's the courthouse right here. Come down Main Street one block, and there are four buildings there that my people own, on Main Street, one block from the courthouse. And they were such imposing places that there wasn't any Negro in town who ran a business big enough to rent the thing. We rented those places to white people, see. Now, you come down here, and we were facing Main Street, but if you come down this street, there is the one block of Negro businesses.

JE: One block off of Main?

LJ: Yeah. That's all it was to it. But those Negroes armed themselves.

JE: What's the name of this street? Is that Franklin?

LJ: No, no, Eighth Street. The courthouse is at Seventh Street. There's one Negro block on Eighth Street. My uncle's and father's places were here on Main Street just beyond Eighth Street, one block from the courthouse. Negroes from all over the county and adjoining counties, some Negroes who had come in, like this young soldier, had brought back souvenirs and guns that they'd taken from the Japanese. They had all kinds of weapons. I'm going through all of this to show you the difference between a riot. A riot is where you are making an attack on somebody else, but these people bottled themselves up in their little businesses. . . .

JE: And just waited.

LJ: And the white people were afraid to go down in there. So they marched down Main Street, and the next street over is, I

think, called Woodland. The next street over here is called Woodland, Main and Woodland, and here is Eighth Street going across here. And that one block, whites would parade up and down here and up and down here, but nobody would go down in there. When the police started down in there, the Negroes said, "Look, we have shot out the street lights, so we can't see you. We can't see you. Now, don't any of you white folk come in here, because if you do, we going to shoot the hell out of you." And when the police started, Negroes did shoot on them. And when they shot on them, that was the attack on constituted authority.

JE: Did that hurt anybody?

LJ: I think so.

JE: Your feeling was that several people got killed?

LJ: Yeah, I think so. The white people wouldn't want to admit it. They wouldn't want to admit that the Negroes killed a single one.

JE: But you felt pretty strongly that they did?

LJ: I've got a feeling that some white folk got bumped off down there. They kept it quiet because they couldn't admit even that much of a defeat. But now, when you attack the police, the police may be wrong, the police may be using poor judgment, but they represent constituted authority. So then the police, the mayor, and so forth called in the governor, and the governor sent in the state troopers and so forth, and they're the ones that took over.

JE: Is it your feeling, when you look back on what happened subsequently, that the governor and his representatives, all the

way down to the National Guard and all, conducted themselves in a proper manner or not?

LJ: Oh, I think the state authority used quite a bit of discretion. I don't know whether we can give them credit for using proper conduct.

JE: Did they kill anybody?

LJ: I don't think so.

JE: Did they beat up on people?

LJ: I don't think so. You see, those Negroes were so well armed, and they put it out. I know what they told me. In the book I mentioned that I got off the bus, and I had to go right straight through, from the bus station here across town here, right through the places that were. . . .

JE: A war zone?

LJ: Yeah. That were under martial law. Every block they checked me, but when I got to the last block, leading out here to this section. This is where my father lived. My father and my uncle lived out here. They were old men about 85, maybe 88. Now, they were living out there by themselves. Now, my jive, my ruse, if you please, coming across here, was that I had been in the service myself.

JE: You passed for white going through there?

LJ: Well, I let them assume. I didn't put them up to their foolishness, but. . . .

JE: You didn't dissuade them from it.

LJ: I took advantage of every break I had. First, I had just been discharged from the Navy. Second, it was winter time, and that little Navy pea coat, you remember those things?

JE: Yeah, with the high collar.

LJ: Yeah. And it fastened all the way up. I was still wearing it. It was very warm and comfortable. So I had my Navy, I had my civilian clothes on under, but I had that Navy coat on.

JE: Did you have a hat on, do you remember?

LJ: Yeah, I had my regular civilian hat. And every one of these places, "Hey, where you going? Where you going?" "I came down to visit my father over here. Just got out. Just got released about three weeks ago."

JE: And where your father lived, that was the only black residence in that neighborhood, wasn't it?

LJ: That's right. They said, "Well, where they live?" And when I told them out here on East Ninth Street, well, these out of town guards had been given a map, here was the Negro neighborhood over here, here's a Negro neighborhood over here, here is a corridor going all the way out here to the next town. Now, from this courthouse way on out there to the next town, for five miles out that way, we're the only the black on that side. So when I said I was going out to East Ninth Street, they didn't know any better. They just assumed only white people out there.

JE: So you didn't tell them anything?

LJ: No, it wasn't my business. So then I got through. But when I got to the last checkpoint, these people said--this was about 2:30 in the morning--they said, "Now look, fellow, you

better stay here with us until daylight because some of the. . .  
." Now, this is the way I surmised what was going on in the  
white mind. These were white people telling me. . . .

JE: Whom they thought was a white person?

LJ: I assume that they thought I was white, and this next  
point actually makes me think that they actually believed I was  
white. "Look man, you better stay right here with us until  
sunrise, because there's one bunch of damn niggers over here and  
one neighborhood of niggers over here. And they come down almost  
to this highway going out this way. And they swear that for  
every Negro we kill, they're going to kill two whites. They  
don't care who they are. They're going to kill two whites for  
any Negro."

JE: That's what the guys told you.

LJ: "So we've been told, by God, don't kill a single one  
unless you have to." So I think they were telling me that they  
were under pretty strict control there. He said, "You see, these  
are the damnest, meanest niggers anyway in the world, and they're  
armed to the teeth, and they're willing to die, and they're  
willing to kill. So we were told, 'Don't beat up anybody. Don't  
kill anybody, and just keep order the best way we can.' Now, you  
stay here until sunrise." And that's when I said to myself,  
"Hell, if I stay here until sunrise, they might turn on me and do  
all the things they were told [laughter] not to do," because  
they've told me all their secrets. You see the point.

JE: Yes. All right, now, I've got your account here of all  
of this, and so I don't need to probe that too far.

LJ: Yeah, okay.

JE: But I do want to get your impression of something out of that. I've got a sort of a theory that this period of time that started in 1945 with the end of the war and going up until about 1950, looking back on it now, looks like a lost opportunity, a golden opportunity thrown away, for whites and blacks in the South to make some peaceful accommodation with one another and avoid all the bloodshed and trouble that subsequently came down the road. You mentioned the war. We'd already been fighting against racists. Hitler was the world's worst racist. We came home, white and black, feeling good about having won victory.

LJ: Over there.

JE: Over there, in this kind of liberal war. And it didn't make sense at all to come back and think that we were going to come back to a society that was segregated.

LJ: What about the young Negro soldier who came back to South Carolina. . . ?

JE: And got his eyes poked out.

LJ: And they poked his eyes out. "Look, you're not over in Germany. You're not fighting in Japan now. You're not fighting in Israel. You're back down here in South Carolina, nigger." And they were the police that poked his eyes out.

JE: Yeah. So would you agree with this theory that this could have been a time when people were. . . .

LJ: That was an opportune time, yes sir. And just rational people should have seen that that was the proper thing to do. If

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these Negroes had gone from the cotton fields of Alabama and Mississippi and the tobacco fields and cotton of Tennessee and Kentucky. . . . They had been emancipated. Their eyes had been opened, and you can't close a person's mind once it gets open. You can't pluck out of a person's mind an idea that's growing and growing and growing and getting bigger and bigger as days go by. Look a here, some of those people--I was in the Navy, man. I was up there at a time when they didn't have any place for an educated Negro. What part of the service were you in?

JE: I was in the Army.

LJ: I was in the Navy, and the Navy admitted that they had no place for us educated Negroes.

JE: I think at the end of World War II there were three Navy officers who were black.

LJ: Well, no, they had. . . .

JE: It was a small number, whatever it was, it was a very small number.

LJ: Long about, toward the end of the war, long about the middle of '44, or maybe the beginning of '44, they made twelve ensigns, and they announced then to all the rest of us that, "We're making twelve ensigns. We won't make any more, and they won't be promoted." In other words, don't aspire for anything. So what they did in my group, they had 47 of us so-called educated Negroes stationed up there at Great Lakes. They didn't know what to do with us. I remember Commander Caufield who ran Great Lakes. He was the commander of the center. He told me, "Well, my God, sailor," that's what he called me, "You fellows,



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some of you got more education than these officers that are appointed to serve over you. We don't know what to do with you. We don't have the nerve to be trying to tell you, when you outrank us in education. So you find something to do on your own." I think there were about twenty of us who decided that the best service we could render would be to run a school for illiterates, and many a time, 5,000 black sailors would be dumped on Great Lakes from down in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, right out of the cotton field, hadn't been to school one day in their lives. We'd take them in little batches for seven weeks. We said, "Give them to us for seven weeks, and we'll have them passing what the public school called third grade tests." We must have had something on the ball.

JE: Cause you did it.

LJ: We did it. That was the biggest contribution that I rendered, and as I look back over it, all that came to our school came there, they couldn't read their names if you wrote them in boxcar letters on the blackboard. Sometimes we'd check up to be sure. I'd write them on the board, and say, "All who can read this will please take the afternoon off." And they'd all sit there and just wait until somebody told them what it said.

JE: So you knew they couldn't read?

LJ: Just sit there and wait to find out what did that say. So now that the war is over, look how many people, who had not been out of their town--we'd ask the question, you know, "Did you ever hear of Germany?" "Yes." "Where is Germany?" "I don't

know. Out there somewhere. Up there near New York or something." See?

JE: Okay, here you are now: You've got a master's degree from the University of Michigan. You've been in the Navy. You have taught school. The war comes along and you go to the Navy. You get out and it's 1945, let's say '46.

LJ: '46.

JE: Okay, back there in your very own home town now this trouble breaks out. And your Daddy's down there. He's an old man by now. What kind of thoughts must you be thinking when you ride the, was it the bus or the train?

LJ: Bus, at the back end of the bus.

JE: Back down there, sitting in the back of bus, riding down through Nashville coming to Columbia, Tennessee, in the winter of 1946 to see about this trouble. I mean, I said a minute ago, this was a golden opportunity, but it must not have looked like one to you at that point?

LJ: Well, it did, but if you're going to be effective and reasonably successful, you mustn't do like Martin Luther King, going round bragging about "I'm ready to go." You got to bristle up sometime, and say, "Look, I fought not to go Heaven, but to enjoy Heaven here, to bring Heaven right here." That's my philosophy, and most of these people were not imbued with all the high falutin' philosophical ideas of Martin Luther King, nonviolence. They said, "Why did we go in the trenches? Why'd we go through all this? Why'd I leave my wife and children, two years?"

LJ: Yeah. But the bus driver was going down Broadway, and it was crowded, a white bus driver, all the seats were taken, and many people were standing. When the bus leaves way up there in that end of town, it's practically all white, but as you come down toward the Negro section, it begins to fill in, fill in, fill in. So when it gets down here at the middle of town, just about all the late comers, who have to stand, are black folks. Then as you pull down a little farther, whites begin gradually to get off, and Negroes fill in the seats, and then we go on down. All back down in that section is the Negro section. Well, along about midway point here, I'd already gotten on up there somewhere and had gotten a seat, and this white bus driver, "Why don't you nigger women get the devil away from me. I'm tired of you hanging around here." I was in my Navy uniform then, more than just my jacket, see, my pants and everything else. Had my white hat on. I got up and went up to the front of the bus and said, "Don't call these women niggers anymore. That ain't what I'm fighting for. Can you understand that?" That man, I guess he weighed about 200 and I was weighing about 155. He could have picked me up and thrown me out the window. "Don't you call these--that ain't what I'm fighting for man. Where'd you get off calling these people nigger women?" And boy, well, that's just typical.

JE: That's how you felt at that time.

LJ: Yeah, hell, that's what I'm fighting for. I'm fighting for freedom.

JE: Did you think that this--I mean, were you hopeful at all, or were you pretty much in despair when you got back and saw the kind of shape we were in in this country, particularly in the South, right here in Louisville?

LJ: Well, I just figured that somewhere along the line sensible white people would wake up to reality, and stop living in a fantasy world of race superiority, and just recognize that maybe they had been sitting in the most comfortable seats up until now, maybe they'd been receiving the best benefits of our affluent civilization, but now, by God, you've got to share some of this stuff from now on. Did you ever this song, "You Can't Keep Them Down on Farm?"

JE: Yeah.

LJ: Well, that was the general idea. These poor people, not only poor blacks, but poor kids from up there in Appalachia, poor white kids, they began to find out that the world was not all up there in Appalachia. My gosh, there's a great big world outside of Appalachia. They were surprised when they got out, and found out, "Gee whiz, look what's all out here. Look what these people have been enjoying all these years and we haven't."

JE: When do you think you started having those feelings, Mr. Johnson?

LJ: Well, I tell you, my Daddy just about taught them to me when I was two years old, one year old. I was brought up a civil rights man, and all my family. My father taught us, "Now, you can't whip this white man. Can't whip him. Get along with him. But use every trick in the trade to catch up with them." For

instance, I took three years of college Greek. My father and my uncle were just that much--if white people study Greek, you study it. If they study chemistry, you study it. Whatever, how does he get to be in an exalted position? What avenues did he follow to get up on top? Now, take a degree of humility along. Take a degree of compassion along with you, but by God, get over the idea that just because you're black, you're not entitled to go into the hotel downtown there and get you a good meal. "Now, son, don't walk in there tomorrow morning and fight the manager of the hotel because he won't serve you. Because if you do, you'll get your head beat." So then, in my family, we were taught how to be cunning enough to get as much as we could with the least danger as possible.

JE: So you could live to fight another day?

LJ: That's right. I told Martin Luther King right here in this town, I said, "Martin, you can help us more if you stay alive. Now, you quit being so reckless with your life. You can't help me dead."

JE: All right. Regardless of when these ideas got imbedded in your mind, let's just say that in 1946 they were deeply impressed upon you.

LJ: Yeah, they were accentuated. I came back here one of the two or three times that I came on furlough from the Navy to visit my family, I was sitting on the bus here. Now, in Louisville you didn't have to sit in the back of the bus.

JE: The city bus?

JE: But did you see anybody white who was willing to join that fight at that time?

LJ: No.

JE: Between '45 and '50?

LJ: Oh yes, I had quite a bit to do with starting the Teachers' Federation, Louisville Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO. Now, at that time between '45, no, we started back about 1942, '41. But from '41 to about '55, white people, generally still steeped in white supremacy, belonged to what they called the Kentucky Educational Association or the Louisville Educational Association. I referred to them as the Association Gang.

JE: They were all white?

LJ: Yeah.

JE: And was AFL? Was the Louisville Federation, was it all black?

LJ: No, we started out, mostly Negroes started the thing, but we told the national office, "Don't give us a charter until we get some white people to join us, because we don't want a segregated thing. We've got a black association and a white association. We don't want two federations, black and white." I think our charter started out with 36 members. The first 25 we got signed up were black.

JE: This was in the '40s?

LJ: About '41. We could have gotten a charter with 25 members, but we wouldn't start because then it would have been an all black affair. Then after we got started, we'd catch hell getting whites to come in. So we waited until we got some, to

answer your question, we got 11 people who were willing join with us. They liked the federation attack on educational problems better than they did the association. So they joined in with us. Then we were a mixed organization. The Federation was mixed. Then on the local level, we sort of soft pedaled taking in black members. We didn't just go out and recruit black members. We did go out and recruit white members.

JE: Trying to get an even balance.

LJ: The percentage was just about one fourth black in the school system, and we were afraid, looking at the general situation from a practical point of view, we were afraid to get more than one fourth or one third blacks, because you've heard of what they call a little tilting point. So as long as we could get whites to come in and be about two-thirds, if not three-fourths, of the total membership, we could still count on getting whites to come in.

JE: Okay, what about in the city at large. What about people like Barry Bingham and Mark Ethridge and Wilson Wyatt? In that period of time, '45 to '50, did you look upon them as being even mildly sympathetic to what you were trying to do?

LJ: Yeah, very much so. It took a lot of courage for Wilson Wyatt to try to be a popular fellow with whites and still be as fair minded on the race question as he was. It took a lot of courage on his part, and I gave him credit for it. That's Wilson Wyatt. Mark Ethridge, I think he's the one who came from Birmingham, Alabama.

JE: No, he came from Richmond, Virginia, but he was a native of Macon, Georgia.

LJ: Yeah, Georgia, and he used to be the editor of the Courier.

JE: Macon paper, and then he came up here to be the head of the Courier-Journal.

LJ: Now, he could write some mighty fine editorials, and fair. But after all, he had to be careful not to go too far, because it might cut his bread.

JE: Wait just a minute. Now, let me draw you a little scenario here, and challenge that statement just a little bit. If you look at Louisville in 1945, and compare it to Nashville or Atlanta or Birmingham or any of the other cities in the South, Louisville looked fairly good.

LJ: Oh yeah, I agree with you.

JE: It had black policemen. It had black firemen. You didn't ride in the back of the bus.

LJ: In my early career, looking for a job, I settled on trying to locate in one of two places, Knoxville or Louisville. I had a feeling that Knoxville was more liberal than any other city in Tennessee on the race issue.

JE: Yeah, you might have been right.

LJ: And in the balance, the little check points that I had, Louisville outweighed Knoxville, and I nursed the idea of coming to Louisville.

JE: And you made a good choice. Compared to those other place, this place was doing a better job. So my question to you



is, if it was already ahead of these places, and it had a liberal newspaper, and it had a liberal mayor during the war, why would you feel that they couldn't go too far? On the contrary, why wasn't this a wonderful time for them to go the whole route, and open the restaurants and the schools and the housing projects and all the other places?

LJ: You'll have to ask them why didn't they do it. Why didn't they see that it was to their benefit to do so?

JE: Did you feel critical of them for not doing that?

LJ: Them, who are them?

JE: Wilson Wyatt and the whole. . . .

LJ: No, I think they went as far as they could go. I tell you. . . let's put it like this: The superintendent one day got after some white teachers, and really read the riot act to them, the city superintendent. Now one of them was a member of this group that was bold enough to join the Teachers' Union, Federation, but most of those whites did it on the quiet. They didn't want us to run any newspaper accounts of them being outspoken union people or even members. Some of them didn't mind it and became officers, and of course, they had to let their names be used. But here was one woman who was trying to get along with the superintendent, who was opposed to the mixing of the races, she said, "Lyman, you don't know how this superintendent treats us white teachers. Sometimes he clubs us over the head more than he does you black teachers." He called us Negroes in those days. I said, "What do you mean?" Then she told me about the meeting that they had two days ago where the

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superintendent said, "Every little thing you can think of you come griping to me about it, and you don't like it. If you don't like teaching in these schools we have here in Louisville, why don't you quit before you get fired? You come bringing me all these complaints. I'm going to chalk you up, and when you get so many of them, I'm going to call it quits. I'm going to fire you."

JE: So they were under pressure.

LJ: Now, she said ( ). He said, "You see, you're white. Now, if you were a Negro like Lyman Johnson and that bunch, I would be raising hell too. I just couldn't stand what they have to go through. But you're white. Now, damn it, don't come complaining to me about anything. You're white." She said, "And Lyman, you know, when we agree with him that we're white, then we've lost our battle, and then he can treat us worse than he treats you, because he sympathizes with you." Now our mayor did practically the same thing. We went down to argue with the mayor. We carried a committee of five people.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A [STARTS ABOUT TWO THIRDS (COUNTER 5080)  
THROUGH WILSON WYATT INTERVIEW ON TAPE 1, SIDE A]

JE: I've just got a little bit of tape left. This is a continuation. You were talking about Tarleton Collier.

LJ: Tarleton Collier was as nice a person as we'd like to have for his time, for his time. I made the point quite often. For instance, at a national convention of Teachers' Federation, there were some teachers that came out from Atlanta who wanted to establish two chapters in Atlanta, one black and one white. I took the floor and I argued against it like everything. And this man, I had checked up on him, who was a big promoter, I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, there are some people who were reared in the South, who perhaps have gone out of the South on occasion but have gone back to the South to settle and establish themselves and their careers, but here's a man who comes from the City of Brotherly Love. He was reared, he spent most of his life in Pennsylvania, and now he's down here in Georgia, he's down here in Atlanta, and he's promoting a dead issue that the whites of the South are trying their best to eradicate." I said, "That's what I don't like about some of these northerners who go south and out-southern the southerners."

JE: But Mr. Johnson, here's really at the heart of what I wanted to ask.

LJ: But wait a minute. Do you see the connection there between Tarleton Collier and Mark Ethridge? Both of them came from the deep south.

JE: That's right.

LJ: And they were showing how they wanted to. . . .

JE: They didn't fit the stereotype. But here's the point that I find hard to understand. Here is Louisville, Kentucky, in 1946-47-48. It doesn't have a Talmadge for a governor. It doesn't have a Bull Conner for a police commissioner or any of these racist segs for mayors and whatnot. It's got Wilson Wyatt. It's got Barry Bingham. It's got Mark Ethridge and Tarleton Collier. It's got Lyman Johnson. It's got Frank Stanley with a newspaper that had been there since the '30s. It's got Central High School that's been--Central High School started in 1888. Atlanta didn't even get it's first black high school until the '40s. Atlanta didn't get a single black policeman until 1948, and Louisville had a black representative in the state legislature in '36. And I'm saying, this must had been accomplished. Why didn't this city go ahead and do the rest of it? Why didn't it become the national model of a real integrated city?

LJ: The only answer I can give is [pause], "Why aren't you Negroes satisfied? Look how good we are to you. Now, don't bug us too much." That was the attitude. "Don't bug us anymore." And then they'd do all that you just mentioned. "Just look around, look around." What did the superintendent tell me when I was asking him--I was leading a committee of black teachers, fussing and scuffling and trying to get equal pay with white teachers back in 1939, '40, and '41. We were getting 15% less pay. When we were given a job, we'd be put on the schedule with white teachers and then clipped 15% for no other reason than the

fact that we were black. The superintendent called me out one day. He brought in five Negro principals and five Negro counselors and me. He had eleven of us Negroes out there at his board of education, and for an hour and a half practically every statement he made was, "Mr. Johnson, don't you see how nice Louisville is in comparison with Birmingham and Atlanta?" I said, "Mr. Superintendent, right out of your office upstairs I've already gotten the information. Your statistics department furnished me with the information, and I think at one of the cities, I think Birmingham, I'd be getting 56% of what the white teachers made. Over in Atlanta, I think it was 64%." He said, "And you're not satisfied with 85%?" I said, "Hell, no, I want 100%. That's your trouble, Mr. Superintendent. I got a master's degree from the University of Michigan, and you've got a man teaching in the white high school who has a master's degree from the University of Alabama, and he's making 15% more money than I do. He teaches the same number of students. He teaches out of the same textbook. We have the same number of classes, and the same number of days per week, same number of hours per week, and he gets 15% more. I've got a master's degree from a school that doesn't recognize the school that the other man got his masters from." I said, "How do you square that with fairness?" He said, "If you're not satisfied with the way we treat Negroes, why don't you quit?" "Because I don't want to quit. You're going to have to fire me, man." See?

JE: Yeah, I see what you're saying.

LJ: He was trying to show me I ought to "behave," in quotation marks.

JE: You ought to be satisfied?

LJ: I ought to be. He said, he used the word, "Aren't you satisfied? You're making 85%. Look, look, you show that you know what's going on. If you lose your job here, where else in the state of Kentucky will you get as much as you get here?" Well, I guess at Bowling Green I would have gotten about 65%. I'd have gotten about 65% down in Hopkinsville.

JE: So the very fact that you were ahead of other people was used as an excuse not to go any farther.

LJ: They were, oh, shall I use the word, kind of smug, sacrosanct. They were sort of feeling like we're so much better Birmingham. Oh my goodness! Mobile, Alabama, you might not get 50%. In my hometown in Columbia, Tennessee, they offered me \$55.00 a month, Columbia, Tennessee, \$55.00 a month with a year beyond a master's degree. And I said, "Well, Mr. Superintendent, if a young white teacher started out with no experience--I admit I have no experience as a teacher, but I do have a heck of a lot of academic credit--if a white teacher comes in with a master's degree and a year beyond a master's, in your field, not in education courses, but in your field, how much would you give him?" He said, "\$110.00." I said, "You'd give him \$110 and give me \$55! How you square that." He said, "You see, that's the schedule. You get 50% of what the white people get." I said, "You can take the job and stick it up your ass." And my father

said, "Son, I didn't teach you, that isn't the language I taught you." I said, "Papa, this is a new day. This is a new day."

JE: All right, so we went on through the '50s, and bits and pieces of the South came straggling along to the starting line, and by 1954 when the Brown decision came down, it was like the beginning, you know? It wasn't the accomplishment of anything. It was just the very start after all those years, and it's taken Louisville just as long now, almost, to get where it is as Birmingham and Atlanta and Nashville.

LJ: I don't know, I think it's in the book there, I don't know, somewhere you may have picked it up. I used to be on the Board of Education here?

JE: Right.

LJ: I found the Board of Education, I chided the board any number of times, right in open session. I said, "Oh my God, Mr. Superintendent and fellow board members, you're dragging your feet on this business of integration. The hometown that I come from, and the little town down there, it's famous all over the world for having started the Ku Klux Klan--Pulaski, Tennessee. Why they're so far ahead of you in integration that you ought to go down there and find out how to do it." Yeah, yeah, I told them.

JE: Do you think that left to its own devices the South would ever have done voluntarily what it finally did when the blacks went to the streets and the Supreme Court handed down the decision it handed down?

LJ: Hell, naw.

JE: Never would have happened?

LJ: I'd have been out there picking cotton. Hadn't been for the Civil War, I'd have been out there picking cotton right now. Oh, I guess they'd have made me, they'd have looked at me and said, "Oh, he'd a pretty smart nigger, we'll make him supervisor over a bunch of other damn niggers." I guess they'd have made me head waiter.

JE: But the desegregation of society?

LJ: Hell, naw.

JE: Never would have happened?

LJ: No, indeed. Oh, there would have been a lot of integration under cover.

JE: Such as, what kind?

LJ: Look at my complexion.

JE: Yeah.

LJ: All of me didn't come from Africa, buddy. All of me didn't come from Africa.

JE: Well, that kind of integration's been going on for centuries.

LJ: Been going on ever since they brought these little black girls over here and put them out there in the cabin, and Marse Charlie can't control his peter. So he goes down there in the cabins and says, "Come here, nigger gal. I'm going to use you tonight." And he leaves a baby down there, and when that little black girl comes up with the yellow baby, it tells the story right there. That's better than a University Ph.D thesis.



Yeah, whenever you see, down in the cabin, some little black girl carrying around a little yellow baby.

JE: Do you suppose that that very issue, the whole sexual thing, maybe lies at the heart of all the difficulties that white people have had facing up to this issue?

LJ: I think so. I think it's the immorality of a double standard. They pretend to be so saintly, so holy, so righteous. I tell you, go way back over there, Thomas Jefferson had any number of little yellow babies on his plantation. He admitted it. "I guess half of them are mine." He admitted he had a bunch of kids. But in general, a white man would father a baby and then deny it, see. Not some old scoundrel, some old, no good, unprincipled white person took advantage of this black girl, but no, he himself did it. I told a young man who was up at the University of Michigan with me--he came from, I think he graduated from the college department at one of the Alabama schools, and of course, I came from Tennessee, and we ended up both in the graduate school at the University of Michigan. We'd sit down together, just fussing over some of the--this is back in 1931. Goes way back before this period you're talking about, at the beginning of the period you're talking about, before the 1954 decision. He said. . . .

End of Tape

Interview

with

LYMAN JOHNSON

July 12, 1990

By John Egerton

Transcribed by Jackie Gorman

The Southern Oral History Program  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Original transcript on deposit at  
The Southern Historical Collection  
Louis Round Wilson Library

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

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JOHN EGERTON: You were talking about Tarlton Collier.

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Birmingham and Atlanta?" I said, "Mr. Superintendent, right out of your office upstairs I've already got my information. Your statistics department furnished me with the information. I think at one of the cities, I think Birmingham, I'd be getting fifty-six percent of what the white teachers make. Over in Atlanta, I think it was sixty-four percent." He said, "You're not satisfied with eighty-five percent?" I said, "Hell no, I want one hundred percent." I said, "That's your trouble Mr. Superintendent. I've got a Master's Degree from the University of Michigan and you've got a man teaching in the white high school who's got a Master's Degree from the University of Alabama and he's making fifteen percent more money than I do. He teaches the same number of students and he teaches out of the same text books. We have the same number of classes, the same number of days per week, the same number of hours per week, and he gets fifteen percent. I've got a Master's Degree from the school that doesn't recognize the school that the man got his Master's from." I said, "How do you explain that with fairness?" He said, "If you are not satisfied with the way that we treat negroes why don't you quit?" I said, "It's because I don't want to quit. You'll have to fire me."

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END OF INTERVIEW