

**SARASOTA COUNTY WATER ATLAS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA — FALL 2011**



Herman Johnson was born in 1961, in Eastman, Georgia. He was the son of a farmer, who eventually came to Sarasota at the age of 19. He's spent his adult life contributing to the city, first working as on the Hyatt condos, the as marble worker and finally at New College of Florida. Herman enjoys spending time with his family in Eastman and Sarasota, and is happily married with many grandchildren. On weekends, you may catch Herman fishing with his grandson around the Sarasota area.

Interviewee: Herman Johnson

Interviewer: Nick Manting-Brewer

Interview Date: November 12, 2011

Manting-Brewer: What we're doing today is we're working on a project for the Sarasota County Government where they want us to talk to people who have lived in Sarasota for a while and dealt with the water. Mainly, I want to know about your time in Sarasota and who you are, so that by the end of this, hopefully we'll have some idea of who Herman Johnson is. So, basically, before we move forward I want to explain to you what's going to happen with this interview. I am going to make a slideshow using your interview as a voice over. I will only use certain sections of the interview and I will let you see it before I settle on it, that way you can approve it. I hope you're willing to participate in this project. So if you could tell me your name and that you agree to participate...

Johnson: My name is Herman Johnson and I'll be glad to interview with you.

Manting-Brewer: Alright then, so Herman, can you—again, I'm sorry to make you repeat yourself—can you give me your name, your age and your occupation?

Johnson: My name is Herman Johnson, my age is 51, and I'm (my occupation) maintenance support for New College Fitness Center.

Manting-Brewer: You have a second job in addition to that, right? Can you tell me about that?

Johnson: I'm a marble installer. I worked for a marbling company for 18 years before I came here (to NCF).

Manting-Brewer: How did you end up at New College?

Johnson: A friend of mine. I guess the marble business got a little slow, and a friend of mine was telling me about an opening out at New College, and I was getting a little a burnt out with installing marble because it's heavy and I wasn't getting any younger, so I thought I better get out while the getting is good. And I came and applied at New College and I got the job. I'm not sorry I got the job, actually; I'm very happy.

Manting-Brewer: How many years have you worked here?

Johnson: Be eight years in August.

Manting-Brewer: You've enjoyed it overall?

Johnson: Oh yes, I have a real nice boss and I love the kids and... it's just a beautiful job, I love it.

Manting-Brewer: So would you mind tell me a little bit about where you were born?

Johnson: Yes, I was born in a small town in Georgia, name of it is Eastman, Georgia—50 miles south of Macon, Georgia. I grew up on a farm, farming with cows, pigs, horses, peanuts, corn, and even picked some cotton in my day. I attended a school up there in Eastman, the county name was Dodge County. I attended high school at Dodge County High. The name of our football team was the Dodge County Indians. I played football there, high school football. I was offensive and defensive tackler, I stayed on the field, so...

Manting-Brewer: So you were a big guy all your life?

Johnson: Yeah, all my life. I've got a brother, well it's ten boys and five girls all from the same mother and father. I grew up in a wooden home, something like Little House on the Prairie. I don't know if you're familiar with that show, but, I grew up like that. My dad, he was a farmer. My mother, she used to keep houses. And I always followed my dad around, all of us did. We all farmed, we know all about that, but until I... I don't know, I guess around 17 or 18, I just wanted to do something different than farm.

Johnson: I didn't make it through high school because my dad had to pull me out of school early because the kids, everybody was growing up and going away and the bills had to be paid, so I had to drop out of school at 16, in the 9th grade. I didn't get any further than the 9th grade, and... Anyway, I'm sorry that I didn't finish high school. Anyway, I'm happy because my dad needed me and the rest of the younger kids needed me so we had to do what we had to do. So, I had to come out of school to help put food on the table for the younger kids, so I started farming with my dad and, up until I was 17 or 18, and I'm like "It's time to make a change" so I came here to Florida. And, my first job I ever had here was out on I think it's 10th street, the Hyatt House, those condos, 888, near the Van Wezel. I worked there for like 3½ years, all the way up to the 20th story. I worked on that high-rise for like 3½ years. Then onto marble and I worked at the marble company for 18 years and from there, here to the college, and I hope this where I retire.

My sporting thing is fishing. I have grandkids now and my grandson loves to fish, so I love to go fishing quite a bit. I like to go out to the beach, because where I'm from all we had were like ponds. We had big lakes up there, but it's nothing like the beach, where if you got something that's bugging you, like a problem, I like to go out to the beach and I like to go out there and watch waves come in and out and what I do is, if I got a thing weighing heavy in my mind, I just send whatever is bugging me out with the waves. And so, when I leave the beach or the water, I always feel better. So, I love the beach, I go there quite a bit. But, things have changed... from the time when I first came here, used to go out to the beach and, you didn't have to watch your back, but now its really changed. This little spot I used to go out to all the time and go walking, out by, its off 10th street by the Van Wezel, they've got benches where you can go off and sit out there. The crime now has gotten so bad, so... I'm a big guy, 320 pounds, but at times I'm afraid to go out there. So now, I just go out there early. I don't let the dark catch me out there because crimes have been committed out there quite a few times. So they kind of took my little peace time away from me, but that's about it in a nutshell.

Farming/Georgia

Manting-Brewer: Do you mind if I ask you more specific questions. Can we go back and talk about farming a little bit? What was that like? Obviously eventually you wanted a change, but were you enjoying it for a while?

Johnson: It was fun. I don't know if you've ever heard the old saying getting up with the chickens. That's what time you get up, you get up with the chickens to farm. First daylight, until you cannot see anymore. Let me tell you, at the end of the day, you did a day's work, but you farm peanuts, and man, I tell you, the fields that we used to plant peanuts in... the old tractors I used to farm with did not have a top on it. It was hot as all get out, oh I looked like... in those field a dusty... you eat dust, smell the old fuel from the tractors. It was fun. I don't have no regrets because it was just nice to plant the peanuts and then a couple of weeks later, you see the peanuts sprouting up. Nowadays, farming has changed a whole lot from the times I was farming. When you plant peanuts or corn, after so long you have to go back and re-plow the peanuts. We had a plow that could plow weeds out of the peanuts without plowing the peanuts up, it would get rid of the weeds, to a certain extent. Then, after a while this guy I used to farm with, would hire up a bunch of people to go out after so long, where the plow wouldn't get the weeds, and you'd have to pull the weeds up by hand and it was like, I don't know, about 50 people in the fields, pulling weeds out of the peanuts.

And, I could never forget my mother, time was kind of hard, so she used to go out to the fields with us too and she would pull weeds. She would try to get up early in the morning. I don't know, about 4 o'clock in the morning, and there were so many boys, the boys always took turns cutting wood to go out in the wood yard because back then, we didn't have an electric stove. We had power, but we didn't have an electric stove. We cooked off a wooden stove, a stove you had to put wood in. She'd have to get up early in the morning, and I'd have to go out to the wood yard, and she said "Herman go outside and cut some wood and go in and get the stove started." And man, you have to go in early and

once you get that stove burning and the eyes were turned red on it and she'd go in and she'd start cooking and, I guess about seven o'clock it would be ready, whatever we was going to pack to go to the fields. It was something. (We) had like a meat house, and she would go out to the meat house and get a slab of bacon. I would go out there and she would fix the bacon and the sausage and that's what we'd eat all day long in the field. She would leave, I guess about three o'clock in the afternoon because she had to go home and get dinner started. But it was...

And I also farmed tobacco. I kind of was the one that led the mule around. We used a mule and a sleigh and the tobacco leaves that were getting ripe, you'd pick those off and you laid them on the sleigh. And once the sleigh got full, I would have to lead the mule back to the tobacco barn, where there was people there with sticks that string the tobacco up on the stick. Then there was guys up in the barn, and they would hang it up in these rafters so that it would dry out. Then from there to the tobacco mill. It was an experience growing up. My experience with animals, as far as hogs, I worked on a pig farm. Sometimes, we'd call them sows, the mother pig would have difficulties having pigs and I was kind of like a veterinarian. If she was having complications, I had to do what I had to do, have her pull the little baby pig out. Same way with the cows, I had to do the same thing with the mother cows, horses, anything to do with farming, I've done it.

Manting-Brewer: These animals, were they animals that you owned?

Johnson: A farmer (owned the animals).

Manting-Brewer: ...and the food that you grew, was it stuff that you sold or did you keep it?

Johnson: With the corn, peanuts and stuff, it belonged to the farmer, and at harvesting time we would gather them all on a big truck and take them to a peanut factory. Some of the stuff, you know if we wanted peanuts, the farmer was fine with it, we could get peanuts. I used to love to get them when they were green, because we used to boil them and have a peanut boil. After we piled the peanuts up, the plow that had, it would plow the peanuts up and flip them up, and so after about a week they would dry out and you could come back with a combine and it would pick the peanuts off and it would keep the peanuts in a hopper. And once the hopper is full, we had a big truck out in the field and we just dumped the peanuts into that truck until it was full and then off to the peanut plant we would go with them. But... it was... I loved it. It was fun. It just wasn't a whole lot of money in it, but other than that it was fun. The cheapest I ever worked, the cheapest I've ever gotten paid in my life was four dollars a day, and that was farming. It was tough, but it taught me a lot. I can tell my grandkids, it gave me something to tell my grandkids, you know? Because, they really have it easy, you know? They come to me and say things are hard and I tell them, you sit down here and let me tell you what's hard. What your granddaddy done been through. They can't believe some of the stuff I been through in my life.

Manting-Brewer: When you were younger, was church a regular thing?

Johnson: Yes sir...yes, sir.

Johnson: My friends today think I'm a nut because I was raised up off of country music. I love country music.

Manting-Brewer: Like who are we talking about?

Johnson: Well, back in my day, it was Merle Haggard, George Jones, Ronnie Millsap, man it was a lot of them, Charlie Rich, Charlie Pride. I can go on and on...

Manting-Brewer: Keep going, give me some names.

Johnson: ...shoot. Hmm. The Statler Brothers, Alabama, and what's her name? , they did a movie on her.

Manting-Brewer: Loretta Lynn?

Johnson: Oh yeah, give me some Loretta. Give me some...

Manting-Brewer: What about Johnny Cash?

Johnson: Oh, yeah I love Johnny Cash.

Manting-Brewer: What about Ray Charles?

Johnson: Oh yeah...yep.

Manting-Brewer: He's from Georgia..

Johnson: Mm-hmm. I could just go on with them...

Manting-Brewer: Alright, so tell me a little bit about church then, what was that like?

Johnson: We did a lot of that. My momma made sure of that. We, I grew up as a Baptist, in a little small church out in the country. I still go there when I go home to visit.

Manting-Brewer: What's it called?

Johnson: Evergreen Baptist Church. And, when I was going, some of the members are still there, but a lot of them passed on, but, I can remember some of them, the members that was there. It's almost like when I go there to visit the church, when I go home, it's like I can almost still see them because I can remember the corner that they always sat in. I remember I had a cousin. He sung bass. His name was James L. Flewelen. Man. Man, could he sing. Sounded like—I don't know if you're familiar with Barry White— but, that's who he sounded like.

Manting-Brewer: What was his name again?

Johnson: James L. Flewelen, he was a city policeman. But, my mom, she always made sure that on Sundays that we went to church. Didn't have a whole lot of clothes to wear, but it was clean. A lot of my stuff, my mother washed with was homemade, like, the soap. She made her own soap. Made a lot of our clothes, and, wore a lot of hand-me-downs because it was just too many kids to go out and buy new clothes for. But, we always, on

Sunday we attended Sunday school and church, she made sure of that. Did myself a little singing in the choir, but I was never as good as I would have liked to have been. But , yeah she made sure we went to church on Sunday. And, what was our preacher's name? His name was Reverend Robe.

Manting-Brewer: How do you spell that?

Johnson: I never know...and who else did we have? We have a new one up there now, but I cannot remember his name. He preaches a good sermon. My cousin James L., his son, he's a preacher now. His name is George, George Flewellyn and he preaches there.

Manting-Brewer: How do you spell that last name?

Johnson: Flewellyn...

Manting-Brewer: Ok, I think I got it.

Johnson: And... Oh yeah, at Easter time. I wish I could still remember my Easter speech, it's been so long ago, I can't remember it, but at Easter we would have an Easter program where, you know the kids get up and say their little Easter speech. And every once a year we would have a homecoming, I guess that's what you would say, a revival where it was a whole of week of church and every night, we would always have, I think they called it homecoming, but there we would call it "Big Meeting." Everybody would bring a covered dish on Sunday and let me tell. Them little old ladies, could they cook. I would never miss Big Meeting, I was always there because I knew I was going to get a good meal because they could cook. They could, it was something how they would just come together and do things to help one another. I've just seen so much changes since the time I was growing up because if your neighbor didn't really have—the ones that had it would—they would share and, you know I sit back and I think about that and think man, I wish things was like it used to be where people would help one another, but now you know, it's not like that. It's like if you're down, they're trying to keep you down. I don't know, I was just raised, you see someone who is down, you just reach your hand down and help pull them up. And, I was just raised like that. I'm that same way now. You know, I'll go out of my way to help a person because you never know when you might need it, so you know you just...

Manting-Brewer: So, yeah, I guess that's a good segue into Florida, you moved here when you were 17?

Johnson: I came here to stay in the '70s, I just started coming down and, stay 2 or 3 months, and then I would get... It took a while. I kept getting homesick, you know I wasn't used to being down here. It was fast. It was too fast for me. I was used to the slow life. Just in the country, wasn't use to the lights. When I came down here, my sister would always sleep with the lights on and, I meant the TV's on all night. And it took some getting used to, because I was used to pitch dark in the bedroom. And, it took some getting used to. But, we started coming down here, I was 17-18. And, I would come and stay and then I would get homesick, go home, then I would come back. Go and come. Finally, I said, you know what, I'm sick of this, so I got to start new somewhere, and this is where I want to be. I just have to get used to the ways of Florida. You know? Because I

wasn't getting anywhere in Georgia. And so, I came. I just made it up in my mind to stay. I got used to being down here and now I love it. I can't think of no place I'd rather be than here.

Manting-Brewer: Well, okay then, so when you moved down here in the '70s, how were things different that they are today? What was going on where you were, like "Man, that's just not even here anymore or that's just completely different?" Can you give me some idea about that? What do you remember about that?

Johnson: Oh man, work...it wasn't nothing for you to let one job go and 15 minutes later, you've got another one. You know? Now it's just a completely...it's just different now. Jobs are hard to come by. When I first started, when I first got down here, I could go out to the beach and, it was some parts of the beach were nude. I couldn't believe my eyes when I went out there and like, when I...walking around on the beach. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Manting-Brewer: Do you remember which beaches?

Johnson: Yeah, it was where you go over to St. Armand's Circle.

Manting-Brewer: Lido?

Johnson: Yeah, Lido. I'm talking about right where the beach starts. You can just park your car and walk right out there and there it all was. It was just one part of it was just the nude beach, I would say topless I guess. But yeah I guess you could say that's nudes, but further down it was just regular beaches. But yeah, when I first came here it was just.. Lido...there were certain parts of it that was nude, and it was the darnedest thing I'd ever seen.

Yeah... but, yeah, and the beaches have changed in a way from what it was when I first came down here. I used to go down to the beach so much, until one day I was out on the beach and a dead body popped up out the water, right in front of me. And they 'bout had to pour gas on me and set me on fire. I'm telling ya, I was running for dear life. You'd of thought it was me that popped up on the beach. I'm telling you, it's the darnedest thing I ever seen, and it was little old lady. I ran for help and they came out and said she was on one of those dinner boats, they'd been looking for her for a day or so. And they thanked me, but as far as ever hearing anything about it in the newspaper, I kept looking in the newspaper thinking they was gonna say something about me, but I never did hear anything.

Manting-Brewer: When was it?

Johnson: It was in the '80s. I don't know '84, yeah about '84 I guess.

Manting-Brewer: And tell me something real quick, she had drowned?

Johnson: Yeah, fell off the boat. She was an older lady, I guess she must have fell off the boat and drowned, because I was just standing there, looking out on the water and she just popped up out of nowhere. 'Bout scared me to death.

Manting-Brewer: That's pretty traumatic...

Johnson: Yeah, but I've seen some things out on the water. Yeah, but that was the most frightening thing I've seen out at the water.

Manting-Brewer: When you first got here were there a lot of people or was it pretty small?

Johnson: It was a lot of people...

Manting-Brewer: A lot of people?

Johnson: Yes, it was a lot of people...I don't know it seems like now it's more or less—to me—it's not as many tourists as there used to be. I don't know if it was the storms we was having a few years back had run them off, but this time, I remember it was hard to drive on [US Highway] 41 for the tourists. The restaurants was really busy, I mean it was just because you had all your tourists so it kept work for everybody, but to me it seems like it's changed a lot from the time I came down here. And shoot, a lot's changed. Let's see...I'm trying to think of some more things that've changed since I've been here...like places to go...When I came here, there were a lot of party spots, now there's nowhere to go. A friend of mine took me out Friday, it was a week ago, he said, you like country music, right? He said, well, get dressed, I want you to go with me somewhere. And, I said alright... I got in the truck with him, he pulled up to this country western bar, he said "Man, I love country music too, I love to get away." It was the name of the bar was Joyland...

Manting-Brewer: Is that the one right up here on Tamiami?

Johnson: Yeah, on 41. And when I walked up to pay to go in, they was having a concert at the time. So, the guy that I rode up there with, a friend of mine, he knew about everybody there. This guy is a pretty big guy that I went up with, the friend of mine. And they knew him, so they was like "Hey Curtis! How ya doing?" you know and "What's happening?" and he said "I brought my friend up and he likes country music." And he said "Well, we having a concert tonight, y'all. I'll tell ya what, you guys go in for free." The owner said "Have a good time, it's alright." And I went in and when I walked in, it's a big huge place and I've never seen so many people at one time in my life, especially in a bar, but it was the far most greatest time I ever had, in there. Everybody was down to earth. At first I felt kind of out of place because it was only two black, that was me and my friend.

Manting-Brewer: You and Curtis?

Johnson: Me and Curtis, and the way we was treated...it was like we was all family. Everybody that I talked to, even the girls in there, they was like, they liked the way I talked, you know, country, and they would just "Can you just keep talking? I can't believe you have this country accent" and I said "Well, I was born and raised in Georgia and you can take me out the country, but it's hard to take the country out of me." So I had a good time that night and it got me so pumped up and I said, man, I gotta go back there again, but I want boots. And he looked down and said "I don't know man, it's gonna be

kinda hard to fit that foot, what size is that?" I said "14" he said "I don't know" and I said, "It needs to be a wide" and he said "Well, I'll take you to my country western boot store. " I think that's the name of it Country Western Boot-something, and I went up there and he said "Well, can you fix my friend up with boots?" She looks down, she said "Sure not a problem, but I'm going to have to special order them. You've got a big foot. What size are you, about a 14?" I said "Yeah, how'd ya know?" She said "I fitted your size before so I can 'bout tell 'bout what ya wear." She said "I'm going to say a 14 wide." I said "Yeah." She said "I can hook ya up," she said, "but I may have to order them," I said just as long as you can order them, so I ordered me a pair of cowboy boots, and she said December 17th is when they'll be by, so that's my Christmas present to myself.

Manting-Brewer: You worked hard enough...

Johnson: Oh yeah, man, I'm ready for them. I'm going back to that same bar.

Manting-Brewer: With your cowboy boots?

Johnson: With my cowboy boots...

Manting-Brewer: That's awesome... That's awesome.

Johnson: Yeah, but...

Manting-Brewer: I just want to ask, and you can stop me at any time if you don't want to go down this road, but you were living here in the '70s. Were there mostly white people living here or was it pretty diverse?

Johnson: When I came down here, it was shocking to me to see blacks and whites getting along like they was, because I grew up where blacks went with blacks and whites went with whites. I grew up, I can remember the Ku Klux Klan, you know, I can remember as a kid where the Klansmen rode over to our house and shot up the rooftop, and my mom and dad would say, "Get on the floor, get on the floor!" And I could see them riding by with the sheets and stuff. You know, I've been through some things with that, but through it all my mother and daddy still taught us to love everybody, no matter what race they are. And when I first came here and I was seeing... I didn't... was taught not to... well, we couldn't even look at a white person, just dead in the... it had to be specific way we looked at them, it couldn't be dead in the eye because it would always be trouble... they would always be like "What are you looking at me for?" You know? And so, I just, it was just something to see when I came down here where blacks and whites were getting along, and it was just different. '69 I guess is when it integrated up in Georgia because we always had our own bus or always rode at the back of the bus. When I see these movies about blacks riding on the back, I been there. Until today, I don't hold against the white race because I think it would a better world to live in if people would stop faulting a white person for their hard times, just put it in the past, because the majority of my friends are white and I love everybody and I don't hold that against them. I think it was just stupid. I just don't believe in that and that's the way I was raised—I was raised to love everybody, but when I got here from Georgia and seen that, I thought "What in the world are they doing? They're holding hands and walking down the street together" and my sister's like "Yeah," she said, "I told ya, that's the way it is here." I

couldn't take it in Georgia anymore, and I thought I had died and went to heaven... to see everybody getting along and hanging out in the same bars together and going to church together. When I was coming up, everybody you know, the blacks had their thing and the whites had theirs.

Manting-Brewer: That was in the '70s when that was going on?

Johnson: It was still going on up there (in Georgia) like that. But, you know, they integrated where we all went to school together, but it was still tough on us as far as interracial relationships. Yeah, they'd ride by and make fun of you. Call people out their names. I had a cousin that married, he married a white lady, and he stayed down here for years. And I think this was even in the '90s or late '80s and he went back to try to stay and his wife would be out at the clothesline, hanging clothes and they would call her out of her name and call him out of his name and finally he had to pack up and move here, until later in the '90s. He went back in '96-'97, he moved back and things was different and he moved back and he's still with the same lady, but they just didn't go for it. I guess all of those people who was there when I was coming up, they're gone—you know—now. It's nothing like it is now. I had a nephew, matter of fact that's him on the wall over there on that obituary (referring to a picture on the wall). He got killed in a truck accident about four months ago, and his friends came to the funeral. And let me tell you, I believe it was more whites than it was blacks in that church. That's how well thought of he was, but things had just changed. He loved to hunt, and all of his friends were white. He logged for a living. There was about 10 tractors and trailers at his funeral, you know the big trucks and stuff? Because he drove trucks and the truck that he used to drive, they drove it up at the funeral, and they sent him away beautiful. But yeah, I said "Man, things have changed."

His dad, who was my brother, has a place out in the country. We all go to his house because he's got—it used to be a hay barn—and... he cleaned it all out and he put this wooden heater in there and he's got a pool table, and when I go home to visit I make it my business to go by his house, and when I go by that old wooden barn, it's just a-bumping. He's got a stereo system set up out there and when I walk in there there're just more whites than blacks and they hang out there. It's changing, it's really changing from the time I grew up. I would say when I grew up, my brother had something like that—and I could remember before leaving there, and he's been living there for years it used to be just all of us family and maybe one white might stop in and wanna play pool and that would be the guy he was farming for, and—but now it really has changed and to me it is a beautiful thing to see everyone together. I know that's the way God meant for it to be. So I, I tell you, I really enjoy the change. I love it.

Manting-Brewer: So, just to go back. In the '70s it had to be a huge difference, even if there were still some issues, I'm sure there were...

Johnson: Oh yeah.

Manting-Brewer: ...going on, but to like move from a place where you have to deal with the KKK to a place where you were seeing interracial couples, that's a pretty big change.

Johnson: Oh yeah, man. Well at night, when I lived in Georgia at night we didn't even go out. As far as, you didn't want to break down at night. I promise you, you didn't. And, I lived about 10 miles out of town, so the old truck I used to drive—it stayed broke more that it did running—but, we would always go in and get our shopping done before dark, because if you broke down at night—let me tell ya—you were bound to run into some trouble. Yeah, you didn't want to get caught and broke down by the road. You'll get bottles thrown at you, they would shoot around your feet. It was horrible.

Manting-Brewer: Did that ever happen to you?

Johnson: Oh yeah, I've been shot (at) right in between my feet, standing there... standing. At the old home house in Georgia, and I still have the bullet the guy shot between my legs with the gun... and I couldn't show no fear. I don't know I just couldn't show no fear, and I should have, but I don't know, after a while enough is enough. He said, for no apparent reason he pulled out his gun, and I told him I said "Well, what are you gonna gain from killing me?" and he said "Yeah, it'll be one less of you around," you know? "That's what I'll gain from it, you keep smarting off at the mouth you gonna get it" and so he whipped the gun out and pulled the trigger. And I didn't move, which I should have, but I didn't. And he said "Oh, you're not going to run" and I said "No sir, I don't see no reason I should run" and this one guy that I was farming for, he came up and said "What's going on?" He (the shooter) said "I'm about to kill him." He (the farmer) said "No, you're not." He said "You gonna get your drunk behind in your truck and get off my property. He's not bothering with you. Herman doesn't bother nobody. Why are you up here picking at him? Get in your truck and leave." "Oh, you're going to take up for him?" He (the farmer) said, "Get out of here or I'm going to have you locked up..."

Manting-Brewer: Did you know the guy who did it?

Johnson: His name—I'll never forget it—his name was Carl Shepherd, he's no longer living.

Manting-Brewer: How did you know him? It was like he just came...?

Johnson: He was... he painted houses. This here was like in the, I was visiting a guy I used to work for. He had a pool company and he dug swimming pools and did carpets and chain-link fence, I used to work for the guy, and I was waiting for him to come out of the building, so I was out back. And this guy was doing some painting to the warehouse, done been drinking, you know and the man wanted to pick on me, so he got to smarting off at the mouth. I done been in Florida now for a while. Back then, I was afraid, but after I came down here and stayed for a while (I decided) I wasn't running no more.

He said "Hey boy, whatcha doing, boy?"

I said, "I'm waiting for Tommy. I haven't seen Tommy. I'm here to visit him."

He said "Whose fancy car is that you're driving?"

I said "It's mine."

“What are you doing driving something like that?”

I said “I paid for it, I don’t see no reason I shouldn’t.”

He said “boy, you smarting off at me?”

I said “No, I’m not.”

He said “Oh yes you are. I’ll pull my gun out and make you run.”

I said “No sir, I’m not going to run.”

He said “What?”

I said “No, I’m not going to run.”

He reached in his truck—in Georgia you can still have a gun rack in your truck—and he just reached up in his gun rack and shot right in between my legs.

And, he said “You gonna run now?”

I said “No, sir.”

Tommy came out and ran him off.

He was a mean old thing, I remember Carl. I remember before I left there he was always a troublemaker. He’s gone now. He’s dead and gone. But, through it all, I still say my good times outweigh my bad times.

Manting-Brewer: Let me ask you, really quickly a little more about Florida. So, when you came to Sarasota, how did you get down here? Was it by bus?

Johnson: Yeah, the first time was with my sister and my brother-in-law to visit in the summer. I came to visit and I was seeing things I didn’t see. That was back in ’73. I remember. It was ’73 because my sister and my brother-in-law just bought a brand new Chrysler and wanted to go on a road trip and was like let’s go see your sister and brother down there, so I was like I’m game. So, we came down. I got to seeing things that was happening here that wasn’t going on in Georgia. And, I first came here, all the old stores that used to be here on Martin Luther King Boulevard. A lot of buildings. Where they put his park, Martin Luther King Park. It wasn’t there. There was like, I call them little huts, and people was living in them. That was there. Matter of fact, I was at the park last night...

Manting-Brewer: Wait, people were living in the park?

Johnson: Well, it was like before it became MLK Park, it was like apartments, efficiency apartments. It was there. Later on, they bulldozed all of those little huts—what I called them—down and put the park there. It hadn’t always been that park. It was some little apartments. There used to be a drug store on Martin Luther King.

Manting-Brewer: Do you remember the name of it?

Johnson: Um, what was the name of that drug store? Was it Neil Humphrey Drug store? I believe, not sure but I believe that was it. There was a barber shop called, was it Bud's? Bud's something... and matter of fact, there used to be a car lot on MLK. What was the name of it? I think I bought a car from there... years ago. There used to be clubs all up and down MLK...

Manting-Brewer: Did you go there a lot?

Johnson: Oh yeah, I used to go to this one called Brass Rail, it was right at the railroad tracks. It was a liquor and lounge. I used to have fun in that place. There was another one called Up Top Lounge on MLK, I used to go there.

Manting-Brewer: What do you think happened to those places?

Johnson: I think crime was the issue with that. It just got so bad, and the law enforcement said, maybe if we shut down these clubs we can cut the crime. Oh yeah, I don't want to forget about Geechee's Barbeque.

Manting-Brewer: What was it?

Johnson: Geechee's Barbeque, I believe. Oh, after the clubs, about 2 o'clock or 2:30, that's where everyone went in the morning, at 2:30 in the morning to grab a rib sandwich. Ah, I can remember that...

Manting-Brewer: Was it good?

Johnson: Oh yeah, it was delicious.

Manting-Brewer: So let's be honest here, was the food better here or in Georgia with your family?

Johnson: Let me tell ya, it's going to be hard to beat that country cooking... You gotta go back home. That's one of the reasons I go back home, for a home-cooked meal. Man, those girls up there can still cook because their mothers taught them to cook and they just got it naturally. It's like with me. My mom, she had more boys than girls. All the boys can cook. My momma taught me how to cook from Thanksgiving dinner, that's what I'll do this Thanksgiving: the turkey, the dressing, the giblet gravy... I'll bake the ham, I'll do the collard greens, I'll make the potato salad. I'll do some baking. Pumpkin pie, potato pie, I can even make baked biscuits from scratch. I can do it all because my momma said "When you go out on your own, I don't want you to have to depend on nobody but the Lord and yourself, and always keep your bus fare because if things get to where you cannot handle it in Florida, she said you can always catch a bus back home." She said "no matter what, always treat yourself to something every payday. Treat yourself to something, I don't care if it's an ice cream cone, that way all of your hard work week, you won't feel like you worked for nothing." So I always treat myself to something every pay day. I don't care how many bills I got to pay. I'm going to take care of me. So, I would say when it comes to eating I gotta take it back to Georgia. Some good cooking go on there.

Manting-Brewer: So, I want to change course a little... I want to know more about your family. Tell me about your wife and your children. Where'd you meet her?

Johnson: I met her here. I met her in a bar (laughs). I met her in a bar, about 20 years ago, I guess. Myself, out of 15 kids, I'm the only one that don't have blood kids. I have two kids that I raised from my first marriage. They're grown now. My son is out in Washington State. My daughter, she's a CAN, she's up in Georgia. So, she has three kids and her son—which I claim as my grandson—she named him after me. I always wanted a Herman Jr., but I never got. I just never got that opportunity to have my own kid.

My wife that I'm married to now, she has five and they're all grown. When I first started dating her, three out of the five was still in school, so I've been knowing them for quite a while now. I got grandkids, I think the oldest grandkid is what, she's 20 now, but she was little thing when I met her grandmother. I got two I said I raised, Deon and Malia. You know you got your picks. You love them all, but Deon and Malia is the ones that I took under my wing. Deon, he's 14 now and Malia, she's 15. They're sister and brother, I was there when they were born. And, me and Deon we get together every weekend. He's moved in with his dad, so his dad makes sure he and I have quality time. Malia, she's with her mother and she comes over every weekend, so I get to spend time with them. But, me and Deon, we spend more time together.

Manting-Brewer: What do you do when you guys spend time together?

Johnson: We grab—I call it our rib day—he loves barbeque ribs, so...

Manting-Brewer: Where do y'all go to get them?

Johnson: Well, in that same location where Geechee's Barbeque was, I got a cousin that does ribs. And his name...you know, I really don't know his real name. I call him by his nickname...

Manting-Brewer: What's his nickname?

Johnson: Noonkie.

Manting-Brewer: Noonkie?

Johnson: Yeah, but he has a real good rib. If you're ever over in that area, you should stop in. He starts on Friday and Saturday. He cooks and he sells out. He's got a great barbecue.

Manting-Brewer: And chicken?

Johnson: Yeah...oh man, yeah. He does chicken and ribs and he also do sides. Me and Deon go there every Saturday. Then, sometimes we get together and go fishing. I like the yard sales, so if me and my wife, she works, but the weekend she's off we get together and go yard sale-ing, and then when she has to work, then we go and do things together. Yeah, is there anything else you'd like?

Manting-Brewer: What kind of spots do you go fishing at?

Johnson: We go out on the bridge there (Lido), where they have the bait house. We go there. Sometimes we go down to Blackburn Point before you get to Osprey, we go there fishing. Out by Van Wezel, we go there. Ah, there's several spots. Um, right on 41 there, there's a park, hasn't been there that long. On 41 here, up from Subway. We go there fishing. We got quite a few spots we go fishing. He's a better fisherman than I am. He can catch them. I just go out there, more or less now, to relax.

Manting-Brewer: What kind of stuff do you normally catch?

Johnson: Flounder, trout, sometimes we catch...well we run into a stingray from time to time, but we cut the line on him. What's the other fish we catch? We catch a variety of fish, sometimes we throw the net and we get all mullet when (it's) mullet season. We throw the net out and we get a lot of mullet. Sheepshead...we throw the net out to catch our bait a lot of times, so we save on buying a lot of bait because we catch all of our bait and then we start fishing.

Manting-Brewer: So tell me something, you were telling me the bridge is different than it used to be, that it is not the same. You told me before it had changed.

Johnson: Yeah, well they rebuilt it. They still left the old part there so you can go out and fish off. We go out and fish off it now. It was like we used to fish off that bridge at night, I guess. There used to be bars out on St. Armand's Circle and they would be coming from those bars out there at night, and they would throw bottles at ya. Yeah, they would throw bottles at ya.

Manting-Brewer: When was this?

Johnson: This was in the '90s when I was out there. They wouldn't call you out your name or nothing, they were drunk, that's all it was. They would throw bottles or cans, but it wouldn't be directly at you and they would laugh about it and honk their horns "Get off the bridge!" Yeah. But, I don't know now, I think they did it for safety reasons as one of the reasons to stop people from fishing off that bridge. Now, they just use the old bridge to fish off because it's a lot taller than it was before. Now, people use it now for health, some people walk it, some people run it. My niece, she goes over there every night.

Johnson: All my grandkids, they don't call me granddad, they call me Big Daddy.

Manting-Brewer: Big Daddy?

Johnson: Yeah, so my niece was like you ought to come walk with me sometime over the bridge, Big Daddy. She said, it's fun. I said, yeah, I've heard stories about that bridge, coming down ain't bad, but man, going up it's tough, and I said I ain't got enough wind. All the more reason for you to be going up walking. But, yeah I guess it's changed. When I used... like St. Armand's Circle. I used to go out there to a bar, a club, Ruby Tuesday. Started like on a Thursday night when they started opening, not for sure, but Thursday night was my night. It was the first club I had ever been in that had fog machines. When I walked in, I was like "What's this smoke doing on the floor?" I had never seen anything like that. I'm like, "What's the smoke doing on the floor?" and this friend of mine that I was with was like, "Man, that's fog. You never heard of that?" I'm like, "Naw, I thought

maybe that was smoke,” and he was like, “That’s not smoke that’s a fog machine, man.” He said “It’s like disco.” And back then that disco was going on. Every Thursday night I went there and I thought that was neat. The disco dancing, how they kept up with one another, how they break away from one another and come back together. And now it’s no longer there. I mean things is just changing all around me.

Manting-Brewer: You were telling me before that you did not feel like the beaches were safe...

Johnson: I just, as far as going out. I used to go out there at night and sat there as long as I want. Now, the cops will come out and ask ya to leave or something. You used to just stay out there like you want to, and I know they are only trying to protect ya because the crime rate has gotten, you know, so bad now. I mean, somebody could walk up out of nowhere, you know? So yeah. I think they’ve even got curfews now, so you can only stay out there... I’m not for sure. It’s the same way with MLK park. I think it’s like 11 [p.m.] there. And we’ve been hanging out, just running our mouth and at 11 o’clock the police will ride by and say “Time for y’all to leave,” the same way at the beaches now.

Manting-Brewer: I know that they have a curfew now, so it wasn’t always like that. But now, no, you can’t.

Johnson: Oh no, you could go out there late at night. I used to.

Manting-Brewer: So you’ve been fishing the entire time you’ve lived here, pretty much? So has the type of fish you caught changed? Are there more or less?

Johnson: It’s like I don’t have good luck like I used to. I used to pretty much guarantee that I was going to bring home fish. I pretty much struck out. My nephew said he went the whole weekend and he said “Nothing.” Nothing the whole weekend, and he’s a good fisherman. Nothing. It’s just changed. I don’t know if it is from the red tide or what, but it has changed. I’ve been deep sea fishing. And just, we just had a great day. There have been times we go out deep sea fishing and nothing.

Manting-Brewer: Do you own a boat?

Johnson: We would rent a boat and have a captain take us out. We’d rent it for a day. All of us would, you know, put money in and we’d go deep sea fishing. Let me tell you, my first experience with deep sea fishing, it scared me to death. Wouldn’t see nothing but water.

Manting-Brewer: What year was this?

Johnson: My last time deep sea fishing, man it’s been a while. ’02 or something.

Manting-Brewer: But the first time you went out, when was the first time you went out?

Johnson: Like ’91 or ’92. Oh man, we was knockin’ them out. We was getting them. Man, huge fish. We would use small mullet for bait that the captain, (he) would catch our bait for us. One time... What he would do was throw your hold out for ya and you would get a nibble and he would set your hook for you so you didn’t lose your fish and then

he'd hand it back to ya and let you reel it back in. And one time, I was reeling a fish in, and this was a huge fish itself, and there was a fish three or four times bigger than he was came up and cut him right in half. Right in half. I couldn't believe it, right in half. So there are some big fish out deep sea, some big fish. But, we had a good day that day. You can forget about doing anything else but taking a bath and going to sleep. It drains you. But, when we got done, the captain said it's a traditional like thing he always does after fishing, and he would fillet all the fish for you, and then when he gets them all clean and you would have to eat sushi. He would say, you just gotta do it.

I was like "Sure, I'll eat some," not knowing... I'm looking for what he's going to cook it on, you know? I didn't see nothing that showed how he was going to cook this and...

I said "What you gonna cook it on?"

He said, "Naw we'll just put some sauce on it?"

I said "Soy sauce?" I guess.

I said "Raw?"

He said "Yeah."

I said "Well, I ain't eating that."

He said "Why, I'll go first?"

He took a chunk of it and ate it.

And he said "Whoever doesn't eat it is a chicken."

And I didn't want to be a chicken, so I tried it, and it wasn't my bag. I tried sushi, it's not my bag. Raw fish, I'm used to my fish meat being cooked. But yeah. Been times where we went out and just didn't catch anything. But, yeah the fishing has changed from the time when I first came down here. Wasn't no problem, you could pretty much figure you was going to catch fish, but now, no...

Manting-Brewer: I'm trying to think if I have any more questions: Where do you live now?

Johnson: I live on Orange and 24th street.

Manting-Brewer: You like it down there?

Johnson: Well, not really. It's kind of rough in there, but it's home. It used to be kind of a laid-back place to live, but out of the 20 years I've been there, its gotten worse.

Manting-Brewer: What kind of crimes happen, like robberies?

Johnson: Yeah, well robberies, they break in your vehicle... go in your yard and take stuff out your yard. It's just I don't know. I've been sitting out in the yard and I've seen a kid run up, ran up to me saying, "Help me, help me!" And I'm like "For what?" He said

“I been shot.” And, I guess he had been in a gun fight with someone and he got the worst end of the deal. And, the cops were looking for him and I tried to help him out, but took off running. He took off running. They caught him. He was shot in the leg, but still.

Manting-Brewer: What year was this? Recent?

Johnson: Yeah, like '04 or '05.

Manting-Brewer: Geez...

Johnson: Yeah... you can hear guns shooting at night. I've been sitting there in the yard and you can hear bullet shots hitting the trees. It's kind of rough. But for now it's home. We want to move and get another house or something.

Manting-Brewer: Where are y'all looking at?

Johnson: Well we thought about going off in Whitfield Area. I would love to get out on DeSoto with those big lots out there, with those big houses out there, but it's probably a little too ritzy for our blood. But you know, that's one of the areas I love, because, you know, I do a lot of yard sale-ing out that way and it kind of reminds me of home because it is out of the city. You off to yourself out there and it's kinda country-like, and I would love to get to move out there. I love DeSoto.

Manting-Brewer: Do you ever buy your seafood in town?

Johnson: Yep.

Manting-Brewer: What's the best place to buy seafood?

Johnson: I like Walt's. Oh yeah, Walt's Fish Market.

Manting-Brewer: Where is that?

Johnson: It's down off Tamiami Trail. Off 41.

Manting-Brewer: Good prices?

Johnson: Yeah, but I've got an old buddy off Lockwood Ridge, every Saturday he's got a sign. George, I don't remember his last name, but let me tell you. He got a real good smoked mullet. Every Saturday he's there and I go over there and buy me a smoked mullet. He also sells fish. He said that's his living since he's retired. A little extra income.

Manting-Brewer: First, I want to thank you for your time. I really appreciate you helping me out with this... If there's one thing you want people to know, what would that be?

Johnson: I would say that for me, a country boy from Georgia, Sarasota made a lot of changes for me in my life. I used to, back where I came from in Georgia, I always wished that... there were things I wanted to do. Things I wanted and I couldn't have in Georgia. Sarasota, well Florida, made it possible for me. I used to want things and I couldn't have them there. That would be one of the things I would like to tell everybody. Florida has

been very good to me. Until today, I have my ups and downs, my good times here in Florida have outweighed my bad.

Manting-Brewer: Have you lived in more places here than Sarasota?

Johnson: I lived in Bradenton, and I lived in Palmetto.

Manting-Brewer: So this area?

Johnson: Right. But, Georgia and Florida is it.

Manting-Brewer: Since the 1970s...

Johnson: Yeah, yeah... I've been right here. Here is it. My first wife, we stayed here for awhile.

Manting-Brewer: Oh yeah, when was the first time you got married?

Johnson: Yeah, we got married in my brother and sister's house off of Coconut. Um, that was '78 I guess. '80-something we got married. It's been so long ago. '84, I guess. We stayed together for a long time and then things just didn't work out. I ended up back here when I left her, I came back here I know it was in the late '80s, early '90 s I said goodbye to Georgia full-time, because I used to come back and forth. Must have been late '80s, early '90s. I had enough...and I been here ever since.

Manting-Brewer: So you've been living here for 40 years, sorry 30 years?

Johnson: Yeah, I was talking to my sister, she said "Herman, you've been down here a lot longer than you think. Off and on..." Because she's been here...

Manting-Brewer: Your sister in the military?

Johnson: No, my older sister Sarah, she's 63. She's retired. She did 32 years at a job here in Sarasota. Trop-a-tone Patio, she worked there 32 years. She retired a year ago.

Manting-Brewer: She lives here?

Johnson: Yeah, she's still here. My baby sister, she's still here. She live off 40th street and Old Bradenton Rd. She's disabled.