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Josephine Johnson

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ORAL HISTORY OF APPALACHIA  
 400 Hal Greer Boulevard  
 Huntington, West Virginia 25755-2667  
 304/896-6799

Owens Glass Project

ORAL HISTORY NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

MORROW ACCESSION NUMBER: # 501

ORAL HISTORY

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DATE: 5/31/94

Josephine O. Johnson  
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DATE: May 31, 1994

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OWENS GLASS HISTORY PROJECT

TAPE #2

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: JOSEPHINE JOHNSON

CONDUCTED BY: CHRISTIE KASPRZAK

DATE OF INTERVIEW: MAY 31, 1994

Christie: Today's date is May 31, 1994. I'm Christina Kasprzak, and I'm interviewing Josephine Johnson for the Owens Glass History Project. And we're gonna begin with uh, when she began to work at Owens, uh, how old she was and how she first started the job.

Josephine: Well, I was only 17 when I went to work at uh, Owens-Illinois. And I would say that I received my job or my position at Owens-Illinois through my brother, Bob Owens, who had been there several years before uh, I went with Owens. And I graduated in June of '44, and then not too many months after that, and I worked in the same office all the years that I was there. It was the machine repair office. And um, the machine repair shop and all the, at that time, it was only men, were out in the shop. And probably there was 60-70 of 'em. And they were responsible for the um, repairing of the bottle machines. And the office that I was in, we were, we ordered the parts for the repairs of the machines. And we did the overhauls of the machines, the furnace rebuilds, and anything that pertained to the making of the bottles. And we also had to do with the um, selecting of the equipment for the selecting of the bottles that were made, glass products.

Christie: So when you say you got your job sorta through your brother, did, had you wanted to go work there before you finished high school? Or...

Josephine: Yes, I would say that I did. I probably would want to go to work there. Yes.

Christie: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

Josephine: So I was pleased about that (laugh).

Christie: (chuckle) So the job that you described, it was pretty much the same the whole time you were there?

Josephine: Yes, it was just uh, all-, yes, it was pretty much the same. But over the years, um, I not only worked for the machine repair supervisor, I also worked for what you would call the production manager, and maybe the forming supervisor, and the mold repair supervisor. Uh, when I went there, each one of them had a secretary, but as the years went on, jobs were combined, and so I worked for all of them.

Christie: Okay. So did you have opportunities for like advancement in pay and promotion in other ways?

Josephine: Well, I think our pay was good. We were um, you know, we received our increases. Uh,...

Christie: Was that annually?

Josephine: ...yes, uh-huh...

Christie: Okay.

Josephine: ...mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

Christie: So then you took on um, additional jobs because of the other secretarial work?

Josephine: Yes, I rec-, I was compensated for that.

Christie: You got, okay, that's what I was wondering. (chuckle)

Josephine: Mmm-hmm. Yes, uh-huh, (chuckle) yes, uh-huh.

Christie: Okay. Um, so did you enjoy the work itself [inaudible]?

Josephine: Yes, I did. Very much. I met um, a lotta nice people there, and the department that I was in, as I said, it was the men and uh, they were like family to me because I went there so young and uh, it was during the war. It was, and it was just the older, some of the older people then. And then the other men came back from service. But I knew each and every one of 'em personally, and I knew their families and their children and uh, so they were just very, very special to me.

Christie: Did you see them outside of the plant?

Josephine: Well, not, yes, I'd see the families outside. Yes, uh-huh. And I still have contact with a lotta of 'em.

Christie: Do you?

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, yes...Still have contact with, with a lotta of 'em and talk with 'em on the phone and, and uh, keep in touch with them.

Christie: Aww. That's great.

Josephine: Mmm-hmm.

Christie: And um, what about your other, you s-, mentioned earlier um, that you had a number of family members on and off that worked for the plant?

Josephine: Well, I had m-, as I spoke, my brother, Bob Owens, and then I had a brother, Andrew Owens, who worked in the shipping department. I had an uncle, Chauncey Elkins, who was, when I went there was the paymaster. That was before computers and everything. (laugh) And I had a cousin, Ernie Jones, who was over the accounting department. And um, a cousin, Jennings Cole, who was in the purchasing department. So I had a lotta family there.

Christie: And then you said your husband

Josephine: Yes...

Christie: ...was there, right?

Josephine: ...and then I uh, my husband, Ben Johnson, was a mold maker. And uh, I met him there. And uh, he stayed with Owens-Illinois until um, he decided to go with the American Flat Glass Workers union, and he was a, uh, third vice president of the union. And then he left Owens-Illinois and went full-time with the union and was located in Toledo, Ohio. And that's where I, after I retired then I went to Toledo to live.

Christie: How does um, how were you involved in the union? Were you involved?

Josephine: No, I...

Christie: You weren't.

Josephine: wasn't union...Our office was never union.

Christie: Okay.

Josephine: I was married to a union man (chuckle), but...[inaudible]

Christie: (laugh) Did that cause any...

Josephine: No...

Christie: ...conflicts?

Josephine: no, no, no. Ben had very much respect for the, for Owens-Illinois and uh, for all the salaried people. No problems at all. Mmm-hmm.

Christie: So he was more of a negotiator, not...

Josephine: Yes, he was.

Christie: ...really...

Josephine: Uh-huh, yes. He really was. Now he negotiated the contracts, and he negotiated many of 'em with Owens-Illinois.

Christie: Mmm-hmm. Did he participate in strikes...

Josephine: Yes, they had a big strike at Owens-Illinois...

Christie: ...over the years?

Josephine: ...one time. And uh, that was when he was still with Owens-Illinois, uh, as a mold maker, and I remember that the salaried people went in. So (laugh) uh, but he didn't ev-, he never told me not to cross the line. He said, "That's your job. You go." So I always went in even though he was there. And then after he went with the union full time, there was a few, some strikes, not very many days. But no, there was never any problem like that because I was salary and he was union. (laugh) I ha-, I respected his job, and he respected mine.

Christie: Aww, that's wonderful.

Josephine: Yeah.

Christie: And um, what about since you both worked at the plant, did you, did either of you have like the shifts or...

Josephine: No...

Christie: ...were you day workers?

Josephine: ...no, uh-huh. I always, I, the office was always day. And then Ben was a day worker.

Christie: Oh, okay.

Josephine: Uh-huh. There were shift workers in his department, and there were shift workers out in the shop where I worked in the office. But Ben never worked, uh, shift work. His, I think they worked 7 'til 3:30 when he was a mold maker.

Christie: So how'd that work, um, with the children? Did you have, I know a lotta people with both parents working have...

Josephine: No problem...

Christie: ...[inaudible] you didn't?

Josephine: No, no problem.

Christie: They had regular, well, they had school... [inaudible]...3:30.

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah, no problems there.

Christie: Well, that's good. Um, so when did you say you retired?

Josephine: I retired in September of '87. And um, after I retired um, I went to Toledo 'cause Ben was still working. And uh, so I went to Toledo. We maintained our home here because he would soon

be retiring, and uh, so I went there, and Ben would have retired in um, June of um, '89, but he passed away in November of '88. And uh, we lived there. Ben traveled a lot, and uh, but he had to have a residence in Toledo where the national office was. So after Ben passed away, then uh, I came back to my home here in Huntington.

Christie: Mmm. Um, one thing I was thinking about, when you said that um, in the machine repair department when you started, they were all men. Did that ever change? Were there ever women in that...?

Josephine: When I retired, there was one lady, one girl in the shop, Juanita Munsey. There was one girl in the shop. And well, she had been there maybe a year or so before I retired and seemed to work out fine, you know. Mmm-hmm. But that, there was only one girl in the shop.

Christie: What kinda training did it take to get in that department?

Josephine: In the machine repair? Usually, they would uh, they would have uh, job bidding, you know, within the plant, uh, if there was a vacancy. They would bid on the job.

Christie: Did they have to have certain kind of training...

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh.

Christie: ...before they could even bid for the job?

Josephine: That's right, uh-huh. Mmm-hmm.

Christie: What about your position? Did you have to have training or did you...?

Josephine: When I went to work there, there was a lady in that office, and uh, then there was two of us there for approximately uh, five or six years. And then, she uh, she quit and then uh, I just, it was only me then. It was never uh, uh, there was a, the supervisor, and he had an assistant. And so there was just three of us there at the office.

Christie: So um, like I mentioned earlier about the uh, political climate, do you remember um, maybe during World War II or even Vietnam if there was any uh, important changes in the plant, and wha-, what they were manufacturing or...?

Josephine: I don't.

Christie: With so many young men going off to war, did you notice that there were more older men or were there more women being employed to take their places, just while they were gone?



Josephine: Well, there was always women in the selecting department. But I don't ever remember during World War II that any women, you know, took the man's job. I didn't see that at that time. But there was uh, I'm sure that uh, uh, they was hiring more women in the selecting or the cold end.

Christie: Mmm-hmm.

Josephine: But when I went there, uh, most of the men were already in the service.

Christie: Oh I see.

Josephine: Mmm-hmm.

Christie: And um, what about blacks? Was there a time when um, when the plant started hiring more because of all the changes in the politics?

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, but I, I, I saw that, but I wouldn't know that much about it. That was like a personnel.

Christie: Oh I see.

Josephine: You know, mmm-hmm.

Christie: Was there, was there anyone black in your department that you remember just off hand?

Josephine: Let's see. Was there ever a black (whisper) in my department? I don't think so. I don't (whisper). I remember there was a custodian. And there was blacks in the plant, but there was never, never any in the machine repair. I think I'm tellin' ya right.

Christie: Well, that's all right. I'm just, you know...

Josephine: Mmm-hmm.

Christie: ...what you could remember. I know a lot of changes came about over the years.

Josephine: Mmm-hmm. Yeah, there was uh, there was, throughout the plant, there, there was, but I don't, don't believe there was any in the machine repair department. Mmm-hmm.

Christie: What about, were you aware, over the years, of the different uh, management changes...

Josephine: Yes, very.

Christie: Were you?

Josephine: Uh-huh.

Christie: How did that affect your job in diff-, in different times?

Josephine: Well, when I went to work for Owens-Illinois and for many, many years, I thought management was, I guess maybe I would say, supervision to me then was like when I started to school and what a teacher was. They were to be, you know, but I saw a change over the years. And I didn't always see that. Um, when I went there, supervision was um, well, I don't know. I just saw a change in supervision, and it wasn't for the best toward the last, toward the l-, my last years there.

Christie: It seems that in the earlier years, maybe there was more of a family-type kinda atmosphere?

Josephine: Mmm-hmm.

Christie: I know the last time...

Josephine: But it didn't end up, I don't mean that it didn't end up family atmosphere. It just, they did not have the grade, the type, that I had seen all of my years.

Christie: The quality...

Josephine: That's right.

Christie: [inaudible]

Josephine: Morals, quality, that, it just wasn't there.

Christie: Now the new management often came from out of town, right?

Josephine: Yes, there was uh, um, a lotta of 'em came from other plants outta town. But uh, I don't think that's an excuse.

Christie: No, well, Paul Nidday, when I talked to him earlier, said he thought that that caused maybe a little bit of friction because West Virginians were all the people working and you get other people outta town...

Josephine: Yeah, you, yes, you would...

Christie: [inaudible]

Josephine: ...hear that. You would hear that. Uh-huh. But um, supervision did change, and not for the better.

Christie: Um, wa-, was that because of any strikes or because of

the downsizing...

Josephine: Oh no, no, no. I don't, no it wouldn't be because of strikes. Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm. But um, I just saw a change.

Christie: Yeah. What about the um, the downsizing of the factory? Did that change your job a lot? I mean, they quit making boxes...

Josephine: The corrugated.

Christie: Apparently.

Josephine: Yes, probably, when they began to downsize it, that's when I uh, that was when I began to work for the uh, plant engineer and the uh, production manager and uh, the other department heads.

Christie: Did they have to lay off people in all those departments?

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, oh yes. Uh-huh, according to the number of machines they had, well, that was the number of heads or empl-, you know, people that they would have in the department. I was never laid off from Owens-Illinois.

Christie: You weren't? I was gonna ask you that.

Josephine: (laugh) I was very...I was nev-. Isn't that something? I worked all those years and I was never laid off.

Christie: So they would usually lay off people and then often bring some of them back?

Josephine: Yes. Uh-huh, yes.

Christie: For different time periods?

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, uh-huh. When they, when they had a plant lay-off, then when they would recall, they always would those people had first refusals. You know, some of 'em might have other jobs, but uh, and didn't want to come back, but yes, they were always...Now that's personnel, but that's the way I understood it.

Christie: Right, right.

Josephine: They were always, they had a chance to come back if there was a job opening.

Christie: Do you, can you remember maybe the difference in the size of like the machine repair department from the time you started 'til the time you left?

Josephine: Oh yes. It was, yes, when I went there, the number of employees, I would say might've even been 70 men, and when I left there, there probably wasn't 18 or 20.

Christie: Wow.

Josephine: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. And when I went there, there was the ma-, bottle machines that they had. They had, they had five furnaces, and each furnace could have as many as five or six machines on it. And when I left there, there might've been seven machines.

Christie: Hmmm.

Josephine: Mmm-hmm.

Christie: That's a ver big difference. So over the years, um, sounds, I think you said all your supervisors were always men?

Josephine: Yes,...

Christie: Is that right?

Josephine: ...yes, they were. Um, there were no women supervision when I, when I was there. There was some later, I heard, but as far as a department head or supervisor, there were no women when I was there.

Christie: Okay, what kind of um, kind of benefits are you getting from Owens after you left?

Josephine: Well, I have uh, I have my retirement, and I have my hospitalization, and um, my life insurance. Owens-Illinois was good to me.

Christie: Yeah. It sounds like it. Well, what about maybe um, more...

Josephine: And they're still good to me. (laugh) Each month they're real good to me.

Christie: ...(laugh) That's great.

Josephine: Yeah.

Christie: What about socially, um, the kind of events that they had. Did you participate?

Josephine: Well, yes, uh, I was associated with the um, credit union which was a part, you know, that was there. And I served on the administrative board for years. And then Owens-Illinois was also good to like the children. They always had a Christmas party,

and Santa was there and the tree and the toys and the gifts. At Easter, they always had something for them. They used to always have um, plant picnic; they always reserved Camden Park one day a year for all the family to go. Um, they had a rod-n-gun club out at, in Wayne County that they would have many out there. They had um, service awards and recognition of, I think it started from 10 years on up. They did many, many, many things for their people.

Christie: Do you have anything in particular that you remember, a particular award ceremony or anything that you participated in that was important to you or with your husband?

Josephine: Well, uh, I got, you know, like 10, 15, 20 and 25 (laugh) 30 and 35 year awards, so uh, um,...

Christie: You got a lot of recognition?

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, yes, I was treated very nice. I was treated very nice. And I worked for some very nice people.

Christie: And you said your husband played softball, right?

Josephine: Yeah, he did many, many, many years ago when they had a softball team. (laugh) Yeah, he played. Uh-huh.

Christie: Did they have any women?

Josephine: I don't remember that.

Christie: Oh you don't.

Josephine: Uh-huh, uh-huh. I don't remember that part. Mmm-hmm.

Christie: Um, another thing that I was wondering about the union, I know you didn't participate in it, but since your husband had, um, they had separate unions according to what job... [inaudible]

Josephine: Well, they had a mold makers' union. And then they had the GB, well, it started out as the GBBA, but I think now it's the GBBAW, but they had one for the mold shop, and they had one for the hot end, and then, but I really don't know enough 'bout that to tell you exact-... Did you ask Paul about it?

Christie: Um, a little bit, but since he wasn't in it either...

Josephine: Yeah.

Christie: ...he wasn't sure.

Josephine: But uh,...

Christie: And then they had them separate for men and women, right?

Josephine: Yeah, I think, it was, they called the locals. Local numbers, you know,...

Christie: Okay.

Josephine: Like Local union 75 was the one that my husband was in. He was president of the union when he worked there at one time, and then he was, I believe, the financial secretary. And then they had one on the machine line and I suppose one for the girls in the selecting. But now I, that part I mean, I know but I don't know exactly...

Christie: Right.

Josephine: ...uh, how it was. If Ben were here, he could tell ya. (laugh), but I can't.

Christie: (laugh) It was my understanding that they were separate, I guess, early on, and then they had the same unions later on. But I, you know, I don't know that much about it either.

Josephine: I haven't really...I know there was numbers. And I know even Kerr Glass was a part of their union at one time. Mmm-hmm...part of their union. But I, I don't know that really. Now Sandy, she might've been able to tell ya when you talked with her.

Christie: Yeah, she knew, she knew some of it.

Josephine: Yeah, yeah.

Christie: And um, how 'bout any kind of um, legal changes? I know, I've heard of two different lawsuits, um, like the Opal Mann suit. Did that, um, did you see any changes in the plant because of it?

Josephine: I wouldn't, I, I wouldn't know anything, I mean I heard, but I don't really...

Christie: You didn't...

Josephine: ...uh-huh.

Christie: Well, what um, did you take advantage of any of the um, outside opportunities like, I know, um, Owens apparently paid for school or to training or the number of different things like that?

Josephine: No, I didn't uh, I didn't uh, participate in any.

Christie: But your job didn't require...

Josephine: No, mmm-hmm.

Christie: ...A lotta the jobs, I guess, required more and more

training where you, you got...[inaudible]...on the job.

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh.

Christie: Okay. Um, so you really only, at one time, had, you said there was two women in your office, and she quit. So you didn't work closely with any other, any of the other women?

Josephine: No, most of the other women that were in the office they were in the accounting department which was, we were up on the runway right parallel with the hot end and machine bottles and machine line. And the accounting department was uh, a distance from us, the same building, under the same roof, with a distance away. So that's where um, that's where most of the women in the salary group in the office were. Now there was up on the runway where I was at one time, there was a girl in the mold office, mold shop, mold repair office, and one in the Q-n-S office. Uh, and maybe one that combined with the forming office and the production manager. And then other than that, and the purchasing department was street-level with Ninth Avenue; they were closer to me than uh, uh, the other offices was. And there was uh, two or three girls down there and two or three fellas. And then uh, eng-, plant engineers office was close, and there was a girl in there until they combined, and they I started doin' that. But uh, no, I wasn't uh, I was kinda uh, up there by myself, so I guess that's uh, I knew them well. I, it wasn't that.

Christie: Right.

Josephine: Uh-huh.

Christie: Were soma your, would you say soma your closest friends worked there or...

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, yes, uh-huh.

Christie: ...were most of your friends outside of the plant?

Josephine: Well, I uh, Sandy Peterson and I are very close friends, uh-huh, uh-huh.

Christie: She's a wonderful person...

Josephine: Yes, she is. I really, really like Sandy very much.

Christie: Did you all do a lot of things outside of work then or?

Josephine: Well, at that time, we probably talk and see more of each other now than we did, you know, when, uh, when we worked there.

Christie: Been busy I guess.

Josephine: Uh-huh, uh-huh. But uh, yes, I have lotsa friends from that.

Christie: And you still keep in touch with 'em?

Josephine: Some of them I do, yes. Uh-huh, yes, I do.

Christie: That's great. Um, I was wonderin' about how you felt, I know you said a lotta things changed from the time you started 'til the time you left. When you were leaving, was ther-, did you just decide to retire, was there a reason or was it a certain number of years were up an-, and that's why, or did you...

Josephine: Well,...

Christie: ...stop enjoying the work as much maybe?

Josephine: ... it was, I didn't, I did not enjoy the work as much the last couple of years I was there, but I still enjoyed the people that I was so fond of. Um, but um, I had enough years and enough age, and um, I just thought it was time to go. (laugh)

Christie: (laugh) [inaudible]

Josephine: And then I could be with my husband all the time. And uh, but maybe if it woulda been, at the time I left had it been like it was several years ago, maybe I woulda stayed a couple more years or something, I don't know.

Christie: The atmosphere had sorta changed.

Josephine: But I was not, you know, uh, I, I won't say that I was unhappy with my job. I'd just say I didn't enjoy it as much as I did.

Christie: What are some of the things that you enjoyed so much in the early years?

Josephine: I 'magine the people that I worked for. Uh-huh.

Christie: Did you know...them personally?

Josephine: Well, yes. I mean, you know, when you're with them that many hours of the day, that many years,...but it didn't end up that way.

Christie: Now did the management um, did they change often anyway, like every so many years, would they get new management in?

Josephine: Yeah, the plant manager who, I don't know, they probably changed ever-, um, oh, I don't know, four or five years or



so. But uh.

Christie: So it was a real new adjustment every time... [inaudible]

Josephine: Well, um, well, that wasn't any adjustment for me, 'cause, you know, the plant manager, but then the, I worked for supervisors and department heads, and they didn't change all that often, but they changed some.

Christie: Mmm-hmm.

Josephine: They changed some, but nothing stays the same. (chuckle)

Christie: Right. Plus you said you took on more and more...

Josephine: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

Christie: uh, work with...

Josephine: But over the years, I worked for some very, very nice people. But it didn't stay that way. (laugh)

Christie: Yeah, yeah.

Josephine: Yeah, but it didn't stay that way. So uh, and I'm very sorry that the plant had to close. It was sa-, I mean, when I heard it, I was very sad, very sad.

Christie: Did you still know people that were working there?

Josephine: Oh yes, oh, yes, I knew lotsa people that were still there. Oh yes I did. Uh-huh.

Christie: [inaudible whisper]

Josephine: Yeah, so it was, I was very sad to hear of the closing of the plant.

Christie: Do you know why it was closed or did you hear rumors about why?

Josephine: [inaudible whisper]

Christie: Well, um, we've really covered everything. Is there any particular event or feelings that you have that you'd like to say?

Josephine: Well, no, other than uh, uh, you know, I would say that Owens-Illinois has been very good to me. And they were very good to me, and uh, I enjoyed the years that uh, that I uh, that I was there. And uh...

Christie: Did you feel you had good opportunities...

Josephine: Yes, uh-huh, uh-huh. I had...

Christie: good experience...everyone you think?

Josephine: Well, I would say they treated everybody, you know, that way. Mmm-hmm. I have nothing but something good to say for Owens-Illinois. I couldn't say anything, but uh, it just was different the last coupl-, three years I was there. But uh, the years before that made up for all that. (laugh)

Christie: Yeah. (laugh) Well, I know they, they had to cut back, so I guess people were working a lot harder and more hours maybe um, [inaudible]

Josephine: Mmm-hmm. But it's uh, but I wish the plant was still there. I really do.

Christie: You think it was important for the community?

Josephine: Yes, I do. Mmm-hmm. I think it was a great loss to the community when Owens-Illinois, but they did a LOT for the community. Mmm-hmm, they really did.

Christie: It seemed like it was...community in itself.

Josephine: Yeah, mmm-hmm. It was a great loss to Huntington, to the city of Huntington. I think.

Christie: What about your family...Do you feel like your family um, I guess all the activities included your children and your husband and yourself?

Josephine: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

Christie: [inaudible]...a real benefit for your family.

Josephine: Yeah, it was, it, Owens-Illinois was a family-type plant, you know, at one time. That's the way I remember it.

Christie: Were your children friends with other people's children...

Josephine: Yes,...

Christie: ...that kind of thing?

Josephine: ...yes, uh-huh.

Christie: So you see them outside of work anyway?

Josephine: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.

Christie: Well, I don't know what else to ask. If you'd like to add anything.

Josephine: No, that's all that I have, and I appreciate your...

Christie: (laugh) Oh, I appreciate you taking out your time.

END OF INTERVIEW