



## **ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**An interview with  
James Russell Johnson, Sr., 1891-1986**

**August 30, 1980**

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### **INTERVIEWER'S NOTE**

This interview was conducted at Mr. Johnson's San Ysidro residence on 30 August 1980 for the San Diego Historical Society's oral history program. My name is Robert G. Wright.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Where were you born, Mr. Johnson?

**JAMES JOHNSON:** In Mesa, Arizona.

**RW:** When?

**JJ:** February 2, 1891.

**RW:** When did you first come to San Diego?

**JJ:** I came here in November of 1905. My mother and the three younger children came here in May of that same year.

**RW:** Why did they come on out here, then?

**JJ:** Well, my dad had been here to look the situation over here in California and he liked it quite well, so he went back home and sold out and moved out here. He had teams and a contracting business there. He worked for the government when they were building the Roosevelt Dam, and he didn't get over here until along the middle of 1906. On his way migrating over here, and bringing his equipment with him, he got waylaid on that break in the Colorado River [that created] the new river down through the valley. They held up everybody that was coming through and put them to work, and they didn't let them go until they got the [work done].

**RW:** That's when the big flood went through and created that Salton Sea. You were already here then, I take it?

**JJ:** Yes, I came here ...

**RW:** By train?

**JJ:** Yes. I worked up there on the Roosevelt [Dam] with him after school was out, that spring of 1905 and I went up with him and drove one of the teams there hauling lumber from the mountains down to the dam [site].

**RW:** You were only 14 years old then?

**JJ:** Yeah, I was pretty husky though ... practically as much so as I am now.

**RW:** Since you came to San Diego when you were 14, did you go to school here?

**JJ:** Yes. I got here in November and I started ... Well, they had the middle of the year term vacation and I started in the next session.

**RW:** What school was this you went to?

**JJ:** Logan Heights. [It was] different in those days than it is now. We came out here and bought a home out there on 29th and Grand. It had two names - the part up toward town and one name ... up to what they called the Rainbow which was 26th Street and from there it was Grand on out to National City.

**RW:** What was Logan Heights like in 1906, for instance?

**JJ:** It was similar .. Do you know anything about the Golden Hill area and how it was back in those days?

**RW:** It was very nice.

**JJ:** Yes, it was quite nice out there.

**RW:** What kind of mixture of people was there? Were there Chicanos there?

**JJ:** There were very few. There [weren't] very many black people there either out in that area. There was one Mexican family that lived up in the middle of the block where we were, and it is the only one that I remember being in that area. And there [weren't] very many, only three or four colored children going to school when I went to school.

**RW:** Do you remember anything happening during that time - any instances of anything unique?

**JJ:** The San Francisco earthquake in 1906 caused quite a furor here. And before I came here ... My brother who had come over earlier [was here] - an older brother and his family when one of the ships blew up out there in the harbor.

**RW:** The *Bennington*?

**JJ:** Yes, the *Bennington*. I remember them talking about that.

**RW:** You didn't see anything of it, or your brother, or anything like that?

**JJ:** It was before I got here. My older brother had married before he came to San Diego. He came because dad liked it over here and talked it up. So when he married they moved right out here.

**RW:** You finished school at Logan and then went to San Diego High?

**JJ:** I didn't finish. I didn't even [graduate] from the 8th grade. It was just partially done and I had an opportunity to go into a plumbing shop as an apprentice to learn a plumbing trade.

**RW:** What plumbing shop was this?

**JJ:** It was a man named H. D. Hubbs. He's long out of business here. Up between B and C he had a place at [1156 3rd]. I put [in] about two years there with him and then I gave that up because my dad had had an accident on the street. [The trolley cars] had those open ends and people would wait out there for the car and had a habit of reaching and pulling themselves up by the handle while it was still in motion. So he tried that on the front end and it knocked him over and bruised him up pretty bad. So I had to give up my job and I knew pretty much about his [work], so ...

**RW:** As a teamster?

**JJ:** Yes. So I kind of looked out after his [things], his business until he came out here.

**RW:** Where's 'out here'?

**JJ:** San Ysidro. That's before San Ysidro got started. It was just [beginning] to get started.

**RW:** What was starting in San Ysidro?

**JJ:** William E. Smythe - he was the instigator of the whole business. As I recall, it was the Columbia Ridge Company there in San Diego that he [became] affiliated with and they came out here [to get ready] for the deal to go through. Then they helped get [the land] laid out and get it on the market.

**RW:** Are you talking about Little Landers?

**JJ:** Yes, Little Landers.

**RW:** Did you meet Smythe?

**JJ:** Oh, yes, I knew him quite well.

**RW:** What kind of a fellow was he?

**JJ:** Well, he was quite a gentleman; you could tell it by looking at him, actually.

**RW:** Was he reserved?

**JJ:** Well, I think so: He was quite reserved: He got this idea about Little Landers. Everybody could have an acre or two or three acres and make a good living on it: My dad came out here and was selling real estate; that's how he happened to come on out here: He brought the family out here.

**RW:** That was San Ysidro?

**JJ:** Yes:

**RW:** Was it part of the Little Landers project?

**JJ:** Well, he bought property here and then he sold property: We made a home here.

**RW:** But he was here before the Little Landers project? **JJ:** No: We came out after it had just got started and they got the thing promoted and pretty well underway the last part of 1908.

**RW:** Would you say Mr: Smythe was a commanding person, [commanded] respect? Was he a tall man or a short man, or ...?

**JJ:** He was just a medium-sized person: He always wore a little goatee beard.

**RW:** Was he a sharp dresser?

**JJ:** He always dressed well.

**RW:** Did he demand respect? Was he overbearing, or ...? **JJ:** No, I wouldn't say he was overbearing, but he was pretty well respected as far as I remember.

**RW:** Was he easy to talk to, then?

**JJ:** Well, yes, I think so, as I can remember: He had a home built here and his wife and daughter and son, who was his youngest youngster, lived out here for quite a while.

**RW:** I wonder if he's still living in San Diego?

**JJ:** I don't know. I've got a clipping from the San Diego Union here about three years ago, I guess. It had quite an article in it about William E. Smythe. I put it away and [then] looked through my stuff, but I couldn't find it.

**RW:** Did you agree with that article?

**JJ:** Well, yes, it was pretty true to what I had always heard.

**RW:** Did you work for Smythe at any time directly?

**JJ:** Well, I never worked with him. They had lots of the river bottom [land] that they owned. It was all grown up with brush and they gave everybody that bought property here the privilege of having a job. You could work and so much of that pay would go [to pay for] your [land]. You could pick out a piece of property and part of your pay would go toward that, and the balance gave you something to go on. I worked on that [basis].

**RW:** It sounds like a good idea in principle.

**JJ:** Yeah.

**RW:** Did it work out practically, though?

**JJ:** Well, they got things done here for a long time and there was quite a few bachelors [who] built little places, spotted down in the river bottom. They'd buy one or two acres and they had that all laid out so it could be irrigated.

When that flood of the fall of 1915 and '16 took everything out here, why it just scooped up all of those places. I stood up on the hill where I had a dairy and watched that. Those old houses would just start to wobble a little bit and pretty soon they'd just roll over and down the river they went.

**RW:** People got out in time, didn't they?

**JJ:** Oh, yes. There was one man - he was a German. He had a big two-story house that he had moved up here from down below in the valley someplace and he put it on his property. It was just about down at the end of Smythe here, out in the river quite a little [way]. And his wife and his sister were living there with him.

When the water began to look like things were going to go, they tried to get them to move out, but he said, no, he wasn't afraid. He was going to stay there. He had one old mule that he kept there on the place. When [the flood] got too bad, the water had come up over some of the San Ysidro highway there. They had the little railroad, the little dinky railroad that ran from San Diego to the border. It ran right along the edge of San Ysidro Boulevard there and the water came over that, where the firehouse [was].

The water came through clear over the road and there was a little low spot and it was all backwatered in there from the river. And that was what took the railroad out. It washed the railroad out in places starting over this side of Nestor a little and spots of it down by Dairy Mart Road. The water was clear up over the railroad track.

**RW:** Did it wipe out the German?

**JJ:** Oh, I started to tell about him. No, he lost his wife and his sister, but he got out.

**RW:** It destroyed the house, too, I suppose?

**JJ:** Yes, it went, too. They kept hollering to them on a horn for them to come out. It got too dangerous to stay in there. Finally, when he decided to leave a man went out in a rowboat and got the two women and [the German] rode the mule in. The man that went out in the skiff got the two women [but they] got dumped out in the river and they couldn't swim. But the man could and he got out. It was quite a long time [after that] they found the remains of the two women in a clump of willow where the water had washed sand and stuff over them. Somebody discovered a foot sticking up from the ground or something and [that's how] they found them.

**RW:** You jumped ahead to 1915. Can you go back to ..? Do you remember watching the revolution that took place in Tijuana? Could you describe what happened or what you saw?

**JJ:** There had been rumors for quite a while that there was going to be trouble down there. I think there were two generals that had been kicked out of the service here. One was - I think it was General Wood and one was [John Hoseby] who were the leaders of this outfit. They called it IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] - I Won't Work was the way they used to term it and the way people used to speak about it. They infiltrated down around here. [One] morning they came down and started shooting up the town [but I'm getting] ahead of myself. When it began to look like there was going to be trouble for sure, they began bringing a lot of the families out of Mexico and into San Ysidro. It kept a lot of them from being shot up.

The morning they came down and took the town, I was there with another boy. There must have been four or five hundred people [who] came out of San Diego quite early in the forenoon. We congregated up on the hill above where the San Diego and Arizona depot is, and we could see over there pretty good.

**RW:** Did you have binoculars?

**JJ:** I didn't, but some people did. You could see these revolutionaries coming down on their horses there and hear when they were firing.

**RW:** There were no canons involved at all, were there?

**JJ:** No, just rifles. I don't think there [were] any heavy [weapons] of any kind, just regular guns. I can't remember for sure. Mr. Lane and his family had a store right at the gate where you go in.

**RW:** At the border?

**JJ:** Yes.

**RW:** Mr. Lane?

**JJ:** His name was William Lane; his son was Bill. He had a son and three daughters and they ran the store there for years at the border. Anyway, right there [at] the corner of his store, [there was] a double wooden gate with wire all over it. And after the fight was over there were a couple of men on horseback [that] rode right up to the gate on the Mexican side and said everything was all okay, you could open the gate and anyone that wanted to [could] come over. About then there was a surge against the gate and it went over and everyone went right through.

**RW:** You mean the Americans?

**JJ:** Yes, the people who had been up on the hill went down by the store [to] the opening to get in.

**RW:** Were you one of them?

**JJ:** Yes, I and another young fellow. We went right through with the gang right over there.

**RW:** What did you see when you got into Tijuana, then?

**JJ:** They didn't have the bridge over there then, but the crossing ... The river bottom bed crossing just went through the river right across the same place where the bridge is [now] and [we came] up here [to] the head of what they call Revolution Avenue. Right there as you make the turn to go down the street, at the corner, they had dug a big trench there. I can't remember how many people it was - there were several - that they killed and they were burying them right there in the trench.

**RW:** Right in the street?

**JJ:** Yeah.

**RW:** They're probably still there.

**JJ:** Well, as far as I know. I've never heard anything about [anyone moving them]. There was a Chinaman in the bunch. He had been a restaurant owner. [The street] used to be First Avenue, but it's been Revolution since the fight.

**RW:** He was one of them that was killed, then?

**JJ:** Yes, and further up on Revolution they had the bullring just a few blocks up from where you turn on to Revolution. There were three killed in the bullring and then the bullring was burned down and they never built [it] up again.

**RW:** That was down where the Jai Alai Palace is now?

**JJ:** It was over on the opposite street from the Jai Alai, but it was down in that area.

**RW:** Was everything relatively peaceful, or did you feel a certain tension?

**JJ:** It [was] more like everybody was out on a holiday, it seemed to me.

**RW:** You say a lot of guns, too, I suppose?

**JJ:** Well, they had their soldiers that were [patrolling]. That [was the] outfit that had come in and taken over. Immediately, they put their men to work cleaning out all the saloons. Took all the liquor and poured it down the street and let it run down the gutter. They got that stuff out of the way, because, apparently, [the] men they took in were a bunch of winos and they were afraid to risk letting them get turned loose with alcohol. They just had liquor running down the street in a stream there on the right hand side of the road.

**RW:** The streets weren't paved there then in Tijuana, were they?

**JJ:** No.

**RW:** Were they predominately Mexican, or were there a lot of Americans fighting, too?

**JJ:** No, mostly whites. They had some ... It seems like I remember there being [a] colored person or two that showed up, but I'm not quite certain about it.

**RW:** How could you tell the good guys from the bad guys? Did they have uniforms?

**JJ:** Oh, no, they were just like a bunch of old hayseeds that went down there with their blue jeans and their Levi's and shirts and with gun belts strapped on them. That was one way you could tell them - either carrying a rifle or having a gun belted on them. When [the Mexicans] retook Tijuana, the government sent some troops in. The San Diego and Arizona Railroad went through up that far. It had been built, this part of it, before San Ysidro got started. Well, I'm kind of off the track now. I get off and start talking about something else, and then I forget what I was talking about.

**RW:** You're telling a very good story here. I just want to be sure to get as much as we can. Were you thinking of something else? Did it have to do with the railroad or the revolution?

**JJ:** When they got ready to send in their troops they loaded up boxcars. I wasn't here at that time; I had gone back to Arizona to [work in] the cantaloupe fields. While I was gone they said they loaded up some boxcars with hay and put their troops in it and when they met the outlaws, they ripped up the town. I can't remember how long it was after, but it was while I was over there. I went in July and came back in November that year.

**RW:** Can you remember on that particular afternoon any particular men that stood out - any leaders, or ...? JJ. No, I can't say [anything] about that.

**RW:** Did it smell pretty bad when you were down there - the bodies and the heat and the liquor?

**JJ:** Well, when I was over there it was so recent that the bodies hadn't had time to deteriorate. It had just happened. It [was] a little after daybreak, I guess, when they hit the town. And I think it was before noontime that they had taken the town and given the word that people were free to come in. Another thing they did when the people went over there, [was to] put their men in all of the stores. The curio stores and places just sold off anything. You could go there and lay down a piece of money and pick up [anything] you wanted and carry it off. There was quite a bit of [this] and a lot of [stuff] got through the border here before they put a stop to it.

**RW:** Did you pick anything up while you were there?



**JJ:** I bought a serape for fifty cents. It was about three feet wide and three or four feet long. That was all I got. I said, "How much?" And they said, "Whatever you have," and I had a fifty-cent piece. And the people at the border never bothered me coming through with the serape. People went into homes. I understand they took valuable stuff.

**RW:** You came back to San Diego and continued to work here in November?

**JJ:** I went over there after this had all happened and worked through the cantaloupe season loading cantaloupes onto boxcars. At that time you got pretty good pay for that. Then I came home that same year.

**RW:** What did you do when you came back?

**JJ:** These people started out to look for oil here, [either] real estate or just business people, but they sold stock to quite a lot of people.

**RW:** Did you get involved in it at all? JJ. Yes. I worked there for two years as a tool dresser on it.

**RW:** They were actually drilling on it then?

**JJ:** Yes. They got down to between 35 and 3,600 feet while I was with it and then they used to run two shifts - twelve noon to midnight and then midnight to noon. And every two weeks we'd change shifts. Two men would work, a driller and a tool dresser. I worked there for two years. Then I gave it up and soon after that the thing went broke.

**RW:** What made them think there was oil down here?

**JJ:** Well, they started a well over in Telegraph Canyon and another one up here in Goat Canyon over across the river.

**RW:** Goat Canyon?

**JJ:** Well, that's what they used to call it.

**RW:** What do they call it now?

**JJ:** I don't know. It's that canyon that goes right up along the Mexican border.

**RW:** They drilled at both sites then?

**JJ:** All three of those places and then there was another place a little ways up the coast.

**RW:** What was the name of the site you worked on?

**JJ:** They called it the Lo Tango Well. I worked on that and they paid me \$6.00 a day and they took out \$2.00 each day for stock in it, shares. Of course that all blew up.

**RW:** You think there's a possibility there's oil out there now?

**JJ:** I don't have any idea.

**RW:** Who were some of the men involved with that? Do you remember any of the names?

**JJ:** No, I can't remember. There were several of them. One or two of them used to come out to the well and stay an hour or two and see how things were going. There's so much, especially names, that I can't remember.

**RW:** Did they use steam-driven ...?

**JJ:** Yeah, a big boiler and then a walking beam and a steam engine. And we used to do our own tool sharpening and everything right there on the job.

**RW:** That sounds like a pretty interesting story. I don't know what more we could ask about that, but I want to be sure that that's on tape. Did they build a wooden derrick?

**JJ:** Oh, yes, they had a 74-foot derrick. It was a regular building layout that they used all over the state at that time. They had everything right there to work with. They had their own water there to handle the boiler and the whole works. They drilled a water well there. The water was never good; it was always brackish, but it worked for what they wanted it for. They capped the hole and as far as I know it's still there just as they left it.

**RW:** Do you think you could go to it right now?

**JJ:** I don't know because I don't know how much building they have done there now.

**RW:** About this time World War I was coming along, 1917. Did you join the Army?

**JJ:** No. I went in to be examined there in the building there [on F Street] in San Diego between Union [and State Street], the government building that has been there for years.

**RW:** The old courthouse?

**JJ:** Yes, I got a notice to come in there. In the meantime I had gone in the dairy business and had married a girl who was born and raised right here. She was born in the house on the Tavan Ranch, his daughter.

**RW:** Tavan?

**JJ:** T A V A N. He was a Frenchman and came here when he was about 18 years old and he married a girl that was born in Missouri.

**RW:** You worked for him on the dairy?

**JJ:** No, my dad-in-law eventually bought [out] the store that the Little Landers [Project] started here in San Ysidro, and he and Grandma Tavan ran the store. They had 50 acres up there, a little of it on the lower side in the edge of the river and the balance across the railroad tracks up in the hills. That's when I quit working at the well and went down there. I married while I was working up there and the ranch was laying there doing nothing and

he said, "If you want to, take it over and go right through with it just like it was your own, all I'll expect is for you to keep the taxes paid." So I decided I wanted to go into the dairy business with a cow that they had and another one that I had accumulated. I made me a dairy.

And during the war when you [reported] to see whether you were going to have to go in the Army or not, my wife, the two of us, went in the room together. This [was] up on Camp Kearney Mesa where they had all their Army training camps. I had one of the top ten dairies here in San Diego County and the government went through the Milk Association which I belonged to and picked out the cleanest one, [mine], and they confiscated the milk [for military use]. As long as the war lasted I had to sell my milk to them and that was what kept me from going to war. I wasn't against going, and I used to have kind of a funny feeling seeing all of these young guys going. Once in a while you'd get a comment - they'd see a young fellow that was still driving around. But [the government] figured that [the milk] I had that they wanted was worth keeping me out of it. So that's how I didn't happen to go.

**RW:** What happened after the war then?

**JJ:** [Someone] built a racetrack here just across the border. Did you ever know about that?

**RW:** I heard just a little bit about it. What's [the] name [of the owner]?

**JJ:** Kaufraw built [the] racetrack. He went across the border right through the Customs House a little way over the hill and they built their barns up here on the hill. They built the racetrack down in the river bottom. I used to peddle milk all around up there during the time that they raced. They would have those 100-day meets. I got the itch to get a horse or two and I finally got ahold of two or three and sold out my dairy and stock, and I fooled around with that until almost 1930.

**RW:** You mean racehorses?

**JJ:** Yes.

**RW:** Was it a profitable thing?

**JJ:** It wasn't for me, no.

**RW:** You might have been better off staying with the dairy then?

**JJ:** Oh, much better.

**RW:** How did your wife feel about that?

**JJ:** Oh, she [had] considerable [amount] to do with me getting into the race business. She [was] nuts about it. RE: Oh, yeah?

**JJ:** [I decided] why not try it. Then I fooled around and I stayed with it for four years.

**RW:** You said 1930 though. Are you sure that's the right date? That's almost 12 years - well, ten years anyway.

**JJ:** Well, I didn't get into it for quite a long time, just at the end of the Kaufraw part of it. When they went out of business, they built that [other] one up there.

**RW:** Where Caliente is now?

**JJ:** Yeah. And you see from 1926 when I sold the dairy, I got into horses and then in 1930 I got out of it. I didn't have very good luck.

**RW:** You spent about four years at it then?

**JJ:** I raced here through the winter. Then they had a track in Illinois just across the river from East St. Louis. I went there and to Reno and to Nebraska and I've been to Vancouver, Canada.

**RW:** You mean the tracks all around?

**JJ:** Yes, and Salt Lake City and all of them. I got by. I wasn't broke, but I just wasn't doing [very well].

**RW:** Did your wife still think it was a good idea?

**JJ:** She liked it. She liked to go to the races pretty regular. I could always have free passes for that. She passed away in 1931.

**RW:** That was pretty young. What did she have?

**JJ:** Well, they called it a strangulated hernia and she died in about two days. (Looking at pictures) This little girl here and one of the boys [are] my daughter's two kids.

**RW:** Did you remarry after that?

**JJ:** No. I thought once was enough.

**RW:** What did you do in the 1930s then?

**JJ:** Well, I bought a boat. After I got away from the races and my wife was gone, I bought a small boat. My brother and I fished together here locally up until 1950. I put in 20 years commercial fishing.

**RW:** Oh, really?

**JJ:** We could only ice about two ton of fish in it. [It was] just a small boat.

**RW:** Did you have a name on it?

**JJ:** Yes, when I bought it, it was the *June Bride*.

**RW:** Did you change the name?

**JJ:** We cut off the *Bride* and called it just *June* and had it reregistered. We fished lobsters in the winter and then whatever we could get out here locally.

**RW:** Who did you sell the fish to?

**JJ:** The regular market in San Diego down there on the waterfront where it is now, or used to be. I guess it's still there, down at the foot of Market Street. It's right close to where the old ferry used to land on the San Diego side.

**RW:** Oh, I remember, just opposite the police station. Did you ever run into Mrs. Ghio that started Anthony's [restaurant]?

**JJ:** Well, I know some of the Ghios, a man by that name.

**RW:** She had a father that had a fish store on E Street.

**JJ:** Yes, I remember them. But I know one of the boys quite well, down on the waterfront. In 1937, I think it was, I went to Costa Rica on a tuna boat and stayed there a year and a half. Van Camps had a freezing plant there.

**RW:** In Costa Rica?

**JJ:** Yes, in Costa Rica and that was our headquarters for a year and a half.

**RW:** What was the name of it again?

**JJ:** Sandy Point. There were seven of us that went from here down on the boat and we just made enough money out of it while we were there to spend and horse around. But when we came back up here, I went in partnership with a man named Benson - John Benson. He had a small boat here and we fished albacore through 1943 (when I started with him) until 1950. And we did quite well with that. Then he had a stroke and passed away, and I gave that up and worked here at Rohr's for seven and a half years.

**RW:** Doing what at Rohr's?

**JJ:** Sheet metal department. I liked that quite well and then they retired me from there when I was 68. They made it mandatory. They started in on me when I turned 65. They said, "Well, we like you here all right and as long as you can get our plant doctor's okay, we'll keep you on until you're 68," which they did and then it was mandatory.

**RW:** You started when you were 60 years old, then? You've had quite a varied career.

**JJ:** When I started [on this interview] I didn't think I was going to be able to do you any good.

**RW:** The tape is excellent. You've been involved in so many things.

**JJ:** Yes, quite a few. And since I [left] Rohr's, I've retired here with my kids and made my home here. Since we moved here in 1909 this has always been my home address here in San Ysidro.

**RW:** Is it still your house?

**JJ:** Well, it belongs to my kids. I bought an acre here, half of it over on that side, and this piece here. They built a home on it and they insisted that I stay here with them. And that's the way it's been.

**RW:** And that's the way you were able to retire, then?

**JJ:** Yes, it's been very satisfactory. And they haven't seemed to mind it too much.

**RW:** Do you remember anything else that happened [in] San Diego or San Ysidro that not too many people know about?

**JJ:** I haven't kept up on things around here very [much]. I just slide along and don't pay too much attention anymore.

**RW:** Do you remember when they had a watch factory here in National City?

**JJ:** No. They had one in Otay.

**RW:** Do you remember that one?

**JJ:** When we moved out here in 1909 they had gone defunct.

**RW:** Already?

**JJ:** Oh, yeah, it didn't last very long. They built a two-story brick building there and I attended many a dance over there in the old watch factory.

**RW:** I wonder why it went defunct?

**JJ:** Well, I guess they couldn't get the business or something. They couldn't make it pay off, as I understand. After the flood here in 1916 (that winter of 1915 and 1916) when [everything was] washed out, they abandoned the railroad. While I was in the dairy business I bought four acres right across the road, on San Pedro Boulevard, across directly from the bank. They've got a big place where they park trailers and stuff [that's] been [there] for years. I bought four acres there and it got pretty badly tore up. I got it for a song and I bought a tractor and a scraper and regraded all of that ground and put in alfalfa to have feed for my stock.

Then after awhile the Spreckels company decided that anybody that owned property [adjoining] their railroad right-of-way [could have] the privilege of making an offer [for] that portion that bordered [his] property. That was a 50-foot right-of-way and Mr. [William G.] Daniels [who] was the head of [the Spreckels] company in San Diego sent me a card and wanted an offer for that piece of ground 414 feet long.

**RW:** Did you make the offer then?

**JJ:** Yes, I made him an offer [of] \$100 and [he took] it.

**RW:** Of course, \$100 was big money in those days.

**JJ:** They were pretty nice about it. I thought at the time I [did] pretty good. I hung on [to the land] for a few months and turned around and sold it for \$1600 cash. Of course now it would be worth a lot [more]. After that flood [though], property went for just a song here in San Ysidro and especially in the river bottom. Things didn't move very [well] up here on the hill, either, at that time or for a long time. It was pretty slow going.

**RW:** Well, we've had some ups and downs in real estate here in San Diego over those years. Sometimes they were good and sometimes they were bad when the economy was bad.

**JJ:** I can look back and see when I had a little money I could have used it to great advantage. But I didn't see the advantage clear enough to let go of the money. It was too hard to come by to take a chance. I could have bought property along Broadway over there in Chula Vista - lots all up and down there, for \$500 a lot. In those days there wasn't much on it.

**RW:** I understand you have some pictures that you have taken years ago?

**JJ:** I don't know where they are. I wouldn't have the slightest idea where the girls have them. I don't think there would be anything that you would be interested in.

**RW:** What we do for the Historical Society is to get photographs or artifacts that would have historical significance. For instance, if you had a drill bit from the old oil well, that could be put on display at the Historical Society.

**JJ:** Oh, I haven't got anything like that. I might have one picture that I got recently from a man ... they had the drill at the border ...

**RW:** Do you think I could take this and get it reproduced and bring it back to you?

**JJ:** Yes.

**RW:** What's your daughter's name?

**JJ:** Adele Norton.

**RW:** If you don't mind, I'll take [this picture] to the library and ask Sylvia Arden if she wants it reproduced. We have a photographic section that can reproduce it and then I'll put it in the mail and send it back to you. Getting back to fishing, what were you paid for the fish? Was it pretty low, or ...?

**JJ:** Oh, yes, sometimes it was so low they wouldn't even buy it, during some of those early years.

**RW:** Let's say you got a six pound albacore or something like that?

**JJ:** Well, the albacore always paid. During albacore season when they had any kind of a run, people could go out there and make a pretty good chunk of money pretty fast. During the time that I was fishing with John Benson, we got as high as \$690 a ton for some that we brought in on a good day. I worked on a share basis on this boat with him. He owned the boat and I worked with him from 1943 to 1950, for seven years there.

**RW:** During the war years then?

**JJ:** Yeah:

**RW:** Did you use hooks or bait?

**JJ:** We had what you call a jig boat, a little eight ton boat. We could ice eight ton of albacore.

**RW:** You caught them with hook and line then?

**JJ:** Trolling.

**RW:** No netting at that time?

**JJ:** No: They did have a few little small purse seiners that did try to fish little bluefin tuna and sardines and one thing and another. When I was in Costa Rica in the late 1930s there were all those bigger tuna boats that went south and all were looking for yellowfin and were bait fishing - hook and line.

**RW:** In other words, actually the Depression didn't hurt you too much then?

**JJ:** No, we managed to get by. Never did have to look for outside help.

**RW:** Have you been satisfied with the growth of San Ysidro, the way it has developed?

**JJ:** I have been greatly surprised with the way it's taken off and what's happened with it. I like it here. Now, my son-in-law has thought a time or two that he would like to sell off and move somewhere else. My daughter was born here. She was born up there on the hill at the old ranch, she and my son, older than her. He took his family and moved up to Oregon. He moved up there in 1957. The girl has been well-satisfied right here. They have a nice piece of property here and a home not too bad.

**RW:** Do you have any problems with the Mexican side of things?

**JJ:** No, we've never had any.

**RW:** Did you ever learn Spanish?

**JJ:** Well, I learned enough in the early times when I had the dairy business: I sold milk over there for ten years and had a retail route. I started in there when Kaufraw built this racetrack up there which started [in] the fall of 1916.

**RW:** Did you have any problems with the Mexican side at all?

**JJ:** No.

**RW:** Has there always been a wetback problem with aliens coming across?



**JJ:** Oh, yeah. In the earlier days when we came out here they just had a three barbed wire fence that went through the border. Going back to the Little Landers days, when we were clearing the brush in the river bottom, the guys would just go across the fence on what is called Revolution Avenue, the one where the saloons are, and come back with a bottle of tequila. They could get a bottle for fifty cents.

**RW:** I thought they were a non-drinking group?

**JJ:** There were some of them that liked to drink a little.

**RW:** Did you ever have any experience with aliens coming across and any problems?

**JJ:** No. The only problems I ever had was when I had the dairy business up there. I was mentioning about this wire fence - their stock used to come through the border. They'd go right through or between the wire or jump over. They'd come over here and get in your hay or alfalfa field or corn patches, or whatever you were growing: And you had to be on the watch all the time for that. Then for a long time [we] had a stray [pound] where [we'd] gather this [livestock] up, and [the Mexicans would] come back over here and beg off and usually we'd turn the stock loose. But if they [came] back again [we'd] make them pay for it. Other than that, I don't remember having any trouble with them. We always got along pretty well.

**RW:** You've lived to be 90 years old. What is your secret?

**JJ:** I don't know. I guess it was just bred in me; I don't know any other way to put it. I've lived longer than any of my family so far, but they've all lived up into their 70s and 80s.

**RW:** Your dad included?

**JJ:** They've been a pretty healthy sort of people. I haven't got anything that I could say.

**RW:** You've worked hard in everything you've done,

**JJ:** Everything I've done hasn't come easy as far as labor is concerned, but it hasn't hurt me any. I've had some little trouble. In 1972 I had two new hips built and now I'm having a lot of trouble with my knees.

**RW:** Arthritis?

**JJ:** Yes.

**RW:** Did you have any trouble fishing out of San Diego during the war? I know there were a lot of naval restrictions.

**JJ:** I've lost my little book that had all the [rules] issued to all the fishermen. We were allowed to go in and out. For a long time they had a net that they put down at six o'clock in the evening until six o'clock in the morning over at Ballast Point. No boats could pass either way. They allowed all the fishermen to go in and out freely because that was a necessity for food. I can't find the book that every fisherman had. I don't know whether it has been dumped, or what.

**RW:** That is something that could be put in the Historical Society. You might ask your daughter.

**JJ:** I did, but she didn't know anything about it. It was issued for the duration of the war and we always had to carry it when we were going or coming.

**RW:** Thank you very much for all the information you have given me.

**JJ:** I didn't think I had this much gab in me.

**RW:** I'll just thank you and I'll see that this picture gets back to you. If you think of anything else, just have your daughter call the Society.

***END OF INTERVIEW***

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