

Graying of the Fleet – Voices from the West Coast

Participant: Ray Johnson

Title: Member, Rotary Club of Port Orford

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Location of interview: Port Orford

Ray: [Unrecorded conversation]...she was also, we went, we both... we met at Oregon State.

C: Oh, really.

R: And, and so we just, she had grown up spending a month at the beach every summer. And so when I got ready to...I grew up in Eastern Oregon, but when I got ready to retire from my job down in Los Angeles area, well I was all over the world matter of fact, you know, but she would not even think of going to the desert. You know, that was not her thing. She had to be at the beach. Well, being at the beach we didn't... we bought out at Sixes and that's six miles north of here. And so that was just the way things had to be. And we had, she, we really enjoy the community. It is, we did and I still do. But it is, uh, just, you know, I got 16 acres of that and that's more than I can take of. I'm sure you guessed that I must be up in the, close to 90 or something like that. I'm 91. So I have... I got my problems of short term memories and the whole thing that go with it, you know. Anyway, it's worked fine.

C: Well, I'm hoping if it's okay with you if we can video tape this today. Is that fine? Okay. So, in order to do that you just have to sign your permission so I just want to make sure I get that done before I start recording anything. Let me make sure I have your permission to do that. Alright.

R: Are you a part of that, uh, program down here where they have the reserve and the...?

C: I'm not. I'm a student at OSU, but I haven't done anything down here with the Extension office or the reserve or anything like that, so...I'm not involved in any of that but...

R: Okay.

C: Okay. Great. So just to get started can you just say your name and where we are today.

R: Well, my name is... I signed it Charles R. Johnson. I go by Ray Johnson and, uh, so it's just... we, I don't get, as long as I'm reminded what my name is I manage to do fine.

C: Yeah. So, how long have you lived here in Port Orford?

R: We bought in '78. And I, I, I may be an engineer but I don't keep track of the time, of the years. You know, it's like, it's something in the neighborhood of 30 to 40 years but it's...

C: Yeah, and you were talking about how your wife loved the ocean and that's how you settled here.

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R: Well, yeah. My wife's name was Charlotte Johnson. Married name of course. But her, it was Charlotte Best when she, when we went to Oregon State. And she was a nurse and we just... had spent many years, lots of 'em in Los Angeles area with aero... 'cause I was part of the aerospace industry down there. And then, uh, I spent many years, about 5 to 10 years down in Australia so, being a, supporting a satellite that my company made, trying to show the customer how to fly their satellites. You know, so good deal anyway. Really enjoy Australia a lot. You know, 'cause they've got very good beer.

C: Nice. So how did you pick Port Orford when you were looking to buy land near the ocean.

R: Well, we, when we... I was working in Colorado at the time. My wife was still in the Los Angeles area. And it was a choice that the company would move her to where I was, but I was ready, almost ready to retire so I, we said we would go and look at the Oregon Coast. We started... drove from Los Angeles to Oregon to see the relatives and then stopped and shopped for places to live all the way from Brookings, uh, to, oh, I'm trying to think, up north of Newport. And, uh, we found a pla... we found a, some place and says, "Oh!" We looked at it and then at Christmas time I came back from Colorado again to Los Angeles and then flew up to look at this place. And I crawled under the house and I took pictures and the whole works and I went back to, sent the pictures to my wife and she says, "Well, that's not that bad." Well, gee, uh, I told her that the place was built on stumps and it was not the best place but she had, she wanted to be someplace close to the beach and so that's why we're here. Why we settled on this place.

C: Yeah. What was Port Orford like when you first moved here?

R: About the same as it is now. A few, a few have died and not many have grown, have uh... we end up with a school population going down every year. Needless to say there's no jobs for, uh, except as a retired community. it is, that's what it is now. And... I had great dreams of raising plants and selling plants all over the world. I bought a... I had forty dollars worth of plans when we moved up here. That spring in the, early in the... and this was, we settled in August and by... I came home again from Colorado, oh probably about Christmas time for a couple of weeks. And then it, uh, it was beautiful except a week, two weeks later or a month later it turned cold and cold enough that these plants that I had brought along weren't gonna survive. And so, we gave that up early in. By that time, uh, we'd settled in and my wife, we'd let her nurse's license expire but she found a way that she could get it back by, 'cause she wanted to work with some Alzheimer's people. She did and we got the nurse's license back but then she never, never earned a livelihood or contributed because of her... in her nursing profession.

C: What do you like best about living in Port Orford or I guess closer to the Sixes...but, what's the best part about living here?

R: Well, to me, it's a very... it was easy to get involved. I was a part of the Sixes Fire District. Got it started. Helped get it started. I was, for multiple years I was the Secretary/Treasurer of that organization 'cause we were a special district and so it's just...and then, uh, it was like, my wife died 21 years ago. I say that, you know, and, uh, but she had managed to get herself involved in the community when I was working away from, I was in Australia and I was here and there and every place. And, but she had settled down and she became involved with the, and, she and about

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three other people set up the Common Good. The Common Good being a local food bank. And it was just a support group for the whole community. And it's still going. And so, miracles do happen.

C: Yeah, that's a great story. I'm curious, and it's okay if you don't know in great detail, but I'm just curious what you've seen living here of the fishing industry. What has it, what role does it play here?

R: Well, it's a very definite part of the industry because as a part of... with the Common Good, if the crab season, if there was no price or no, if there weren't any crabs or something we'd go, we'd always see more clients come to the Common Good and it was just one of those, it was probably a, oh a quarter of the clients were involved with the fishing industry. And it, it, basically only lasted for three or four months when they were going and picking, had their crab pots out. And we could see the difference in how many clients we were getting.

C: Do you think that changed at all over time or was it pretty cyclical just depending on the fishing season?

R: It was very cyclical, depending on whether there's any crabs and, or whether they were turned on to, that the crabs didn't fill out on time and so, you know, crab season usually started about the first of December and went for three or four months but, uh, if the shells hadn't filled out then they really didn't, they had like two weeks, then three weeks, then four weeks to wait for the crabs to get ready to harvest. And then one thing we found that here in this community is that the school population is going every year. And, so there's no jobs for the younger people except in the, working on the, as a part of the fishing fleet. And the other way, thing that fills in is that it's a tourist retired area and we have people coming by, you know, every summer. That they're, they had a dream and one of the dreams is that they would come up and in the summer time we would find people come up to be gold miners on the Sixes because it was, had it's little gold rush long ago. And so there was just people coming up to go, looking under the, in the river, under the rocks to see if they could find a nugget or two. And I've got a gold mine on my property because across the highway just east of my, across 101 is a, the old Madden Butte gold mine. And that was in the probably the 1870s and it has long ago been washed, they washed all the gold... well they only got 50, probably got 50 percent of it because it was, it's a real fine gold. It'll almost float. And so my little stream that is up on my property is the outflow of this, when they were mining with the hydraulic mining, so I, someday I hope to have a, a sample that I can use to get the price of my property up. I don't go gold mining because the water is cold and I got arthritis and I've got problems.

C: Yeah, sure, sure. You talked about fishing being one of the few jobs that young people can get here. Do you think that that has changed over time or do you think young people have always worked down there?

R: Well, I don't think, I think that...undoubtedly the few boats that do and will continue to do the crabbing, they are not going to support a bigger, the industry won't grow. The thing that grows is retirement in support of ... people come in here, come out of Los Angeles with a few dollars, invest in some property and then, this is a 55...by 75 they have to move away to get closer to a

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doctor. And, uh, I have been very fortunate to be able to survive at my age without moving to, away. I got a, I happen to have a...I have three sons. Two live in Eugene and one ...I got one that lives with me and he is 62 or something like that now. And he will continue to live. He just, his thing is his garden club here in Port Orford and he never... He's a real artist. He knows how to work me. And it's, but if I didn't have him there then I would have to think of moving away to an assisted living because I got my short term memory problems and I don't think I, I don't think I have Alzheimer's but, short term memory is a major problem. And it's, it's just, and of course there are...the good doctors on the...don't go to the southern coast unless they have a hobby that they want to enjoy. Because it's just, there's so few people, it can't support very many doctors. We have one and he's here in the community. People seem, some people like him but most of 'em, most of the community goes to Coos Bay, go to Coos Bay for their doctoring or someplace else. If you have a heart attack it's, uh, 170 miles up to Eugene at least and that's the only place that I would even think about going to, you know. Up to the cardiologist in Eugene because I've had experience with the ones in, locally and my wife died of a heart attack. And it was a, we were, at those days I didn't know enough to insist that she be taken to Eugene. And that was just a part of it.

C: Yeah. What do you think would happen in Port Orford if for whatever reason the fishing industry, either those family-based fishing businesses were sold or the fishing industry left for whatever reason, what do you think would happen to the community? Do you have any...

R: Well, there...the people, it would still be Port Orford but there, there would be... it would depend on tourism. And retired people and the retired people after awhile they need to get closer to the doctor, so... It's just the way the cookie crumbles. We learn to live with it. It's start... Port Orford's started many, many years ago as a, basically a gold mining area. And then it went to lumbering and it was logged off and been logged off right now it's gone from that to the...after the gold mining then it was some fishing but it was the, they had a lot of sawmills here, you know. There was, must've been 15 sawmills or so and they had a plywood plant and they had this that and the other thing and those, it is so far away from trying to...for a market and so all the product either has to go out, it used to be that they could bring boats in 'cause this used to be a deep water port and it is still a port of last, of refuge along the Oregon Coast. So they, when there's a storm they can pretty well avoid that but the sandbar, once they put the breakwater in then that clobbered it up and the sand and so the port silts up with sand now and no, no big, no ships of any size can even get, the crabbers have to, they have to dredge a little bit to get enough where they're keel on the crab boats, so... Major problem of the bureau of, the Army Engineers when they, they made a mistake when they put the, put in, didn't finish or do what they should've done in, for the breakwater and the breakwater...So it silts up now. But it used to be a deep water port.

C: Wow.

R: And when it was deep water port then they could bring boats in to take the, uh, logs out and the lumber out down to San Francisco area and stuff like that. It was, after, when they had the quake in San Francisco in the, a lot of the lumber that was used to rebuild it came from this area.

C: Hmm. Wow, I didn't know that.

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R: Well, it was a, so it's cyclically gone it... right now one of the bigger things is helping keep the place alive is the cranberries are still, are working fine. And there's, the, some people have, they raise sheep. There's not many, not many ranches that depend on the sheep anymore, but, uh...The grass does grow. We do end up with water, significant amount of moisture to get the grass to grow so that we have some, the ranchers that used to have sheep and something like that, they now have, tend to go to the cattle. So...

C: Yeah.

R: And the other thing that, if people come here and want to be artists, the artistic community is going to continue and ... what we need to do is get the, some good internet down here. The high speed, the...my internet that I have at my place, we have to depend on satellite because, and the satellite is not that fast, but we can get all over the world. It's pretty hard to isolate except for the fact, we've got another, of course there is another problem with Port Orford. We're in the Cascadia subduction zone. So I'm sure that people consider that when they are trying to set up a bus, start a business 'cause it's pretty well known as to how many years, every so many years that that quake is gonna happen. And it is overdue now, of course. So...

C: Yeah.

R: I can't blame people for avoiding here.

C: Yeah. Well do you have another other memories of maybe big days here in Port Orford or days that you remember for any type of reason? Any stories that come to mind about living here?

R: Well, there's lot of stories that, you know, you, we've got people who have lived here for oh, two or three generations, or four, something like that, you know. And they, they've got...you can dredge up stories about, that they were, had made up and they were in the cattle business, there was a rustling, there was a lot of...all you have to do is go to the library, come here to the library and you can find places of things that are buried in the, stories that are there.

C: Yeah.

R: You know, it's... you know, there's just so many. The, we have had, I've been only, I'm a short-timer here because, well, you know how long it has been of course, but, there was...the people that had the newspaper would have people that would be reporters in that newspaper. And they would have to dredge up something that fill up the newspaper and you can go back and find a whole lot of, uh, things that were probably better forgotten.

C: Haha, sure. Yeah, well that's the end of my questions unless you have anything you want to talk about, about what it's like to live here in Port Orford.

R: Well, I find that, you know, um, I have my routines. I'm a part of this group. Rotary Club, have been since probably about 1980 and, uh, nowadays I, my routine is that on Tuesday I go into the senior center at 10 o'clock in the morning and I get my blood pressure taken and there's a

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group of people that come in there and so I can listen and, and try to make my... get a, remember what I'm gonna say, you know. I've got significant problems that way, but, it is just... a group of people that I think are, it's rather phenomenal, you know, when I was a part of the Sixes Fire District and we were... early day, earlier, before, you know, 10 years ago or something like that I was a volunteer to work at the county. And we had 911 was one of the things that the fire department depended on the 911. So I became the person from my district, my fire district, to meet with somebody down in, these other fire districts. In each place, every 20, every 15 miles or so, becomes another fire district. And, because we didn't, have had and will have wildland fires and we can't, with a few people it means that you have to be, have a volunteer operation in order to make it work. In order to make it work we needed to find a way of being alerted when we had problems and if we have a, if people had a fire they could call in 911 and the 911 people down in Gold Beach would dispatch us to know which fire district had a fire and where they were having a fire. And so, and they weren't all wildland fires, there was house, primarily house fire. Because we haven't had a big wildland fire for probably 20 years or 30 years. And, but they've had many of those things happen along the coast here. We end up with, but we, in dealing with that I learned how the 911 system worked. And how, uh, we were piggy backed onto the Sheriff had to talk, had at that time probably 15 deputies. He has now got one road deputy out there. But they, the Sheriff needed to talk so he had his radio system and we piggy backed on using that same system and it has worked and it is still working and I'm going to probably find a way to, 'cause they've got their, 911 is having their, really significant problems and so I got to find out and talk to, see if we can get, rejuvenate that, uh, way that the fire districts would coordinate with the 911 and through the Sheriff's office. Rejuvenate this, uh, community operation to keep things together. You know, it's like, one of the things I found was that my, we had the five digit numbers for all of the... and they start in measuring in California going north along 101. And so the lower number would be someplace in California but they ended up coming up through Curry County. By the time they got to the Sixes, you know, Curry County was there first and then lo and behold Coos County decides they want to get their 911 system up and their five digit number system. Lo and behold they ended up making the sa...using the same numbers in Coos County as they've got in Curry County. Starting at, Curry County goes up for 50 miles north and they get to, up to the Sixes River and I live north of there and so, those same numbers from the Sixes River to the county line which is another, oh, 15 miles, are repeated in Coos County. So, when I, I tell people if you're gonna call on 91, call on the cell phone to report your 911 problems manage to tell them what county you live in otherwise they...the, at the dispatch centers for where the calls are advanced onto the next, to the ambulance or something like that, they just push a button and it connects them to whichever ambulance service is gonna be doing it. Well, not very good to have a heart attack and have the ambulance coming from the wrong county 'cause they don't know.

C: Yeah. That would not be good.

R: So, we all got our problems.

C: Yeah.

R: Well, I've, I think I've more than talked my services on that.

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C: Yeah, absolutely.