

Walter and Harriet Johnson Oral History Interview
Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories & Memories Oral History Project
January 3, 2019



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Abstract

This joint interview with Walter “Cork” Johnson and Harriet Johnson documents their experience and roles as longtime residents of the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood in Minneapolis. Born in 1928, Walter grew up in the University District (present-day Marcy-Holmes), graduated from Marshall-University High School in 1946, and subsequently attended the University of Minnesota where he eventually became a professor of physics. Harriet was born in 1931 in Lynchburg, Virginia, lived in various places, and attended college in Virginia before moving to Minneapolis in 1954 to take a job working with students at the University Baptist Church. She lived in Prospect Park before marrying Walter in June 1958 and moving with him to Southeast Como. Then, in 1960, the Johnsons bought a house in Marcy-Holmes where they raised their kids and lived for 57 years. Shortly after moving in, they became involved in the Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Organization and stayed actively involved in various aspects of the neighborhood for many decades.

Interview topics include among others: the history of Walter’s family in the neighborhood; Harriet’s early years living in Prospect Park and Southeast Como; 90 years of changes to the neighborhood; the role of University of Minnesota; Harriet and Walter’s involvement and leadership in the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood organization; the role of urban renewal and gentrification, construction of Interstate 35 and its impact on the neighborhood; construction of the 5th Street Greenway; collaboration among the different University district neighborhoods; Walter and Harriet’s involvement and investment in the First and Second Southeast Corporation and Walter’s involvement in Southeast Seniors.

Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories Oral History Project

Interview with Walter and Harriet Johnson

January 3, 2019

Erica Seltzer-Schultz, Interviewer

Erica Seltzer-Schultz: **ESS**

Walter Johnson: **WJ**

Harriet Johnson: **HJ**

Track 1

00:00

ESS: Today is January 3, 2019. Erica Seltzer-Schultz is interviewing Walter and Harriet Johnson, and we are interviewing for the Southeast Seniors Neighborhood Stories and Memories Oral History Project. And we are in Minneapolis.

So I'd love to start with you Walter. So you were born in 1928 in Minneapolis at Deaconess Hospital.

WJ: Yes.

ESS: And then you lived in Southeast Minneapolis in what is now Marcy-Holmes in a house on 9th Avenue and 5th Street that got torn down with the freeway, I-35.

WJ: Yes.

ESS: So can you tell me a little bit about what the neighborhood was like while you were growing up?

WJ: The neighborhood was very different than it is now. Our block was mostly professional people—a few students, but I think there was maybe one fraternity on it and one house that had a lot of room—space. But most of the people were—whether it was a judge on east side of the house that I grew up in which was a duplex. My family lived on the second floor and my aunt and uncle lived on the first floor. The house was a big old three-story single-family house built on 5th Street among a number of other big houses. On one side of us was a man in the engineering school who was later dean of the engineering school. And on the other side was a man in the medical school down at the corner. After that one was a judge—Judge Abbott—and his daughter lived in that house and she was a fairly famous artist in oils and other things about art, but mostly oil painting. And then it went on around. The next house was the O'Hearn house.

He worked for the University [of Minnesota]. He was the man that bought the houses for University expansion and did a lot of purchasing of housing because the University was expanding. And, over the period that I lived in that house, it expanded across the river into the West Bank and got a lot more real estate. And then we're up to 10th. And around the block on 10th there were a couple of people that I didn't really know. And then on the corner was a big red mansion-type that was the McMillan's who were in milling. And then it went around. The next one was our neighbor and then we were at the other corner.

ESS: Okay, great.

WJ: So it was a nice neighborhood to be in. There was only one other child my age in the block, and that was Mary-Kay O'Hearn who's still a friend. We would ride our bicycles around the block—our tricycles.

ESS: Oh, nice.

WJ: So I've known her a good deal longer than Harriet.

HJ: Yeah (laughter).

ESS: So how did your family end up in that neighborhood?

WJ: Well that's another interesting story. My grandmother and grandfather met here. Both of them were immigrants from Sweden. She had an uncle that had come over here earlier and had settled in—

HJ: [Unintelligible].

WJ: Well, no—it was—this one was I think in a farm South of [unintelligible].

HJ: Otter Tail County.

WJ: Otter Tail County. And when he came, he came to Fargo and he had an older brother that owned a string of bars in Fargo and was quite successful, and he blended into that community for a while. By that time, I think he had a brother and a sister here. He left to avoid the draft in Sweden. And she left because her mother had died and she was the oldest child and the family expected her to take care of the younger children and she didn't want to. And so she came to the U.S. How they met I don't know, but she was involved in a hotel. Her family ran a hotel and kind of rooming establishment in Fargo.

ESS: Do you know what year this would have been?

WJ: 1880s—I think we could—

HJ: 1880s—1880s.

WJ: —we could look it up, but I don't remember it.

ESS: Yeah—okay.

HJ: 1880s.

ESS: When would your family have moved into Southeast do you know?

WJ: Well, they grew up in these various places, and they were—the two grandparents that were up there were—they came—I think it was later than the 80s—I think it was maybe the 90s.

HJ: But your grandmother bought the house in Minneapolis.

WJ: Yeah. She, in 1917, her—she had two daughters and a son. My father was the son—the youngest child. And he was still in high school. She decided that she needed to be here down in Minneapolis so her daughters could go to school at the University.

HJ: So she must have come about 1914—1913.

WJ: Yeah—I think the house was bought in the early teens.

HJ: And bought a house.

ESS: So that her kids could go to the University of Minnesota.

HJ: Yes.

WJ: Bought this big house and had her kids. The oldest daughter went through education and ended up being a principle in a town in Northern Minnesota for a while. The younger daughter went through and graduated as a pharmacist, and she practiced around the state in various small towns. And my father graduated in 1917 from East High—

HJ: High School.

WJ: —and that was the high school down at—well, it's now a Lund's store down at University and Central.

ESS: Oh, okay. Yeah, I know exactly where that is.

HJ: It's still there.

WJ: At one time, you could see the old high school back and kind of behind the newer building.

ESS: Oh, really?

WJ: But he graduated from that and it was—

HJ: 1917

WJ: —and it was—the war was over very shortly after he graduated. I guess it was in the fall. He graduated in the spring and the war was over in the fall. And he was 18 the end of September. So he didn't ever get much involved in the war. He was a little too young. But he, in the Fall of 1917—I guess probably it was—I think he went directly into the University and was in the architectural school. And, well, that's another story now, but let's leave him there is that. So the whole family was at one time or another a student on the campus.

ESS: Okay. And is that why you lived so close?

HJ: Yeah.

WJ: That's why we live close, and it was very convenient for me because I ended up being a student for ten years and then—

ESS: And then a professor there and dean—

WJ: —and then got onto the faculty after a year away.

ESS: Wow.

WJ: So what shall we say about—

ESS: So University of Minnesota was really important to your family it sounds like

HJ: Yes.

WJ: It was. It was a much more dominant factor in the neighborhood than because of the people that lived there—

ESS: Because people mainly were—

10:00

WJ: —a lot of faculty lived in that area at that time.

ESS: That makes sense. So when you talked about your grandmother buying the house in 1917—

HJ: I think it was earlier.

ESS: —was it the same house that you grew up in?

WJ: Yes.

ESS: Okay.

WJ: My father was a builder. My grandfather was a builder in Fargo. Maybe I ought to get into that story.

HJ: His father was a—

WJ: He ran a construction company that built schools and post offices and government buildings throughout that area of Western Minnesota and North Dakota and maybe a little into South Dakota, but mostly North Dakota. He was building a big department store in downtown Fargo when he got on the elevator and fell off and fell down the elevator shaft. This was a temporary elevator for the construction. There was not much safety stuff in it—fractured his skull and was really impaired the rest of his life. And that happened after they moved down to Minneapolis. He was still in Fargo I think. It's not clear how it worked out always, but in 1917

my grandfather and grandmother along with my father went and bought some lots on a lake in Otter Tail County and started a cottage there for their summers. And—

HJ: But now this is a long way from Southeast Minneapolis.

WJ: That dominated the family for actually up to the present. It's a hundred years old now.

ESS: The cottage.

HJ: Mm-hm.

WJ: Yeah—and everyone has been there.

HJ: It's important.

ESS: That's great. So we unfortunately can't focus on it too much, but it's nice to hear about just your family's kind of—sounds like—

WJ: But that was sort of the base in between the original Fargo location and Minneapolis.

ESS: Okay.

WJ: So they had cars very early, and they drove back and forth on the dirt roads and they had watched the transportation system from Minneapolis up in that direction grow until it was a throughway.

ESS: That's great.

WJ: We spent many of our summer up there, or at least parts of the summer. When my mother, my father and I—my mother was—needed some help with her living, we would spend the summer with her up there, and we would go up in the end of June when I quit at the University, and I would be—when I was retired, I guess.

HJ: But now we need to concentrate on the city.

WJ: But that—you really ought to—that was a big part of the family—it was that lake place.

ESS: Yeah. Thank you.

WJ: And I grew up—I spent my summers there through my senior year at the University. Then I got a research assistantship and I worked in the summer. But I still spent August up there and parts of September until school started.

ESS: That's really great. So I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the neighborhood growing up.

WJ: Okay.

ESS: So you talked about it being a lot more University faculty and a lot of professionals. What was it like in terms of community activities or involvement?

WJ: Well I know my mother was on things at Marshall[-University] High School. She was on various athletic committees that would plan events for students. So she worked with a teacher from—at Marshall on things like that. She was in the University District Improvement Association.

ESS: Oh, she was.

WJ: And I think—I'm pretty sure she was.

HJ: Yes, she was on the board for the University District Improvement Association.

ESS: What year would that have been? Any guess?

WJ: Well it was in the 40s. It was long before I had any interest in the neighborhood that way.

ESS: What kind of—do you have any type of idea what type of things she was doing on the board?

WJ: No, but I'm pretty sure she was on the board.

HJ: I think it might be the oldest neighborhood association. But you'd have to ask Chris Lautenschlager.

ESS: It makes sense.

WJ: The woman that was involved and got her involved was a family member's wife—her name Gruner—was it Gertrude or Opal?

HJ: Opal Gruner was very active and got people involved.

ESS: Okay. So it sounds like there was pretty active community involvement even then.

WJ: I think there was, but I was involved in a lot of other stuff. I was going to school and a student at that time.

ESS: Tell me what your different schools were. Where did you go to elementary school?

WJ: Marcy.

ESS: Marcy—okay.

WJ: But the old Marcy.

HJ: Eleventh Avenue.

WJ: It's a park now. There was a school. It was built I think before 1900 probably. It certainly looked old to me when I was going there, but between 7th and 8th Street on 11th Avenue—

HJ: Where there's a park.

WJ: —faced on 11th Avenue.

HJ: So that was your elementary school. Then you went to—

WJ: Yeah, I started in the kindergarten in 1934, I think, and graduated from there in the 6th grade in 1940. And then I went to Marshall—was in junior high—and was in Marshall when I graduated in 1946. And then, in the fall of '46, I moved over to the University and was in various majors: mostly science, mathematics, engineering and finally graduated from the University with a B.A. in Physics. I was one of the only ones that had a B.A. —I graduated from the Arts College. But, at that time, you could choose which one you did. You'd get a Bachelors of Science in Engineering in the Engineering School or a Bachelor of Arts in CLA or what is now CLA—it was SLA then.

ESS: Which stands for?

WJ: Science, Literature and the Arts.

ESS: Oh, okay.

WJ: And the departments, kind of one at a time, moved over into engineering. I moved the other way because the mathematics faculty was I thought better in CLA than it was in IT [Institute of Technology].

ESS: I want to ask you about—did you have any involvement with churches growing up?

WJ: Yes.

ESS: Did you go to a church?

WJ: Yes.

ESS: Which church did you go to?

WJ: We went across the campus to Grace—

HJ: Lutheran.

WJ: Which was that little isolated island, now, which is being pushed around by the medical school.

ESS: Gotcha.

WJ: But it's at Harvard and Delaware.

ESS: Did that church or any of the churches—were they involved with the community or part of the community, would you say?

WJ: You know, I don't know. It may well have been, but I wasn't really fully aware of it, or I don't remember it now. We were involved with a lot of families in the church. There was a very tight group of about a half a dozen families that would meet every now and then to have a dinner at someone's home, play Ping-Pong. Many of them came to the lake.

ESS: Okay. So there was tight community it sounds like.

WJ: Yeah. It was—that was—sort of dominated that interaction there at the church. It was that group. I was in a bunch of—among a bunch of girls my age. There were not very many boys in the group, but there were lots of girls.

20:00

HJ: His mother was head of the Girl Scouts for the community, which meant that he was—he went to the Girl Scout meeting. So he was used to it.

WJ: Yeah. She was den mother for a couple of years, and I was an honorary member. She had to keep an eye on me.

HJ: So he went along to the Girl Scout meetings when he was a little boy.

ESS: That's great. Was there a story of a church burning down? Harriet mentioned—

WJ: Yeah.

ESS: What's that story?

WJ: Across the street from us was a church. And, at that time, it was a Greek Orthodox, but I think earlier it had been some other sect. I don't remember what it was, but it was the church that—it was a holiday church where they would have their services there on important days on their calendar—not every Sunday. So a lot of the time it was empty at that time.

HJ: I didn't know that.

WJ: And it was about—it's the Greek Orthodox church that's now on the east side of—

HJ: Lake Harriet?

WJ: Lake Calhoun.

ESS: Yeah. I know that church.

HJ: It's a beautiful—

WJ: It's the one with the gold dome. But their Easter was a big deal. They would have a late service at midnight, and then they would come out of there and all go around blowing their horns (laughter).

HJ: (Laughter). And you lived across the street.

WJ: And wake everyone up. But anyway, it caught fire sometime. I don't know what it was, whether it was people breaking in or—I don't think they ever knew.

HJ: How old were you when it—

WJ: But I think it was about 1948—'47 maybe.

HJ: Okay. So you were at the University by then.

WJ: I developed an interest in photography at that time and I sat up in the third-floor windows and took pictures in the burning church.

ESS: Oh, wow. What impact did that have on the neighborhood?

WJ: Well, it was a ruin. It didn't burn all—it was brick, so it didn't all burn down. And parts of it may have been used after the fire, but it was mostly an empty structure and eventually it was wrecked and—

HJ: Was it Elwell Park?

WJ: It may have been going on the throughway with the rest of the—I don't know. I don't think there was every anything else there. There was always this sort of unused church.

ESS: Gotcha. Alright, well, anything else you want to add about the neighborhood from your time growing up?

WJ: Yeah—and I had one other thing that I think would be of interest. And that is, where were the stores when I was growing up? And there was always a business district—a local business district. Various service things on 4th Street between 9th Avenue and 8th Avenue. And it's still there. And the stores are still there.

ESS: What are some of the stores today?

WJ: Some of them—well, there's a rental office for some of the housing around that area. Well, let me say what it was originally. When I was growing up, there was a drug store at the corner of 4th Street and 8th Avenue. Next was I think a restaurant. Next was something that had been a bookstore for some while. I don't remember whether it was a bookstore when I was growing up, but it turned into a bookstore about that time. Then there was a cleaners and, finally, a grocery. And the grocery store was right where the throughway entrance or exit is there. And I think it went in the throughway development also. But there was always a little store there. There was also a store in the basement of the Birchwood Apartments which were across the street on the south side of 4th Street. There was a little store in there, and that turned into a barber shop while I was growing up. So a lot of things that you need every day you could probably purchase along there.

But, when we needed something a little more special, we'd go either direction, up 5th Street or down 5th Street. Up 5th Street to 14th Avenue which, we called at that time 14th, which is now in Dinkytown, or the other way which is down to Central Avenue which is even a larger arrangement. And that ended up being where we would buy—go to a food store and buy food. Or there was also another little cluster of stores at Como and 15th which is still there. And there was this food store where there is one now in the corner of 16th and Como. And we used that one quite a bit, but we'd drive there. But the others, my mother and my aunt would walk either to Dinkytown which was six blocks, or down to East Hennepin which was eight, nine blocks maybe.

ESS: Thank you for sharing that. Harriet, I think we'll switch to you for a little bit and then we'll come back to you as well Walter.

HJ: Okay.

ESS: So Harriet, where were you born and what year?

HJ: I was born in 1931 in Lynchburg, Virginia.

ESS: Great. And I know that you said you lived in different places in St. Louis, West Virginia, Washington D.C. You went to college in Virginia, and then you ended up in 1954 in Southeast Minneapolis for a job. What job was that?

HJ: I worked at the University Baptist Church with students. I did work for the church with students who were Baptist students.

ESS: Great. So what was it like? How did you end up in Minneapolis after the East Coast?

HJ: Well, I took the job. I was working in Dayton, Ohio for the YWCA, and then I thought about I'd like to work with college students and this job was open. So I came and lived up in Prospect Park in an apartment with another woman who worked at the University YWCA. There were a number of people who worked at various denominational churches in the neighborhoods with students. There was a Lutheran student worker who was a woman. And there was a Methodist student worker who was a woman. There was the man pastor and then there was the woman who did a lot of other things. So there was a community of us that worked with the various denominations and got together every now and then—most of us young.

ESS: What was Prospect Park like?

HJ: Prospect Park was—we were lucky that we could find an apartment. There weren't many apartments in Prospect Park, but the person that I shared the apartment with knew the neighborhood, and she said, if you're willing to live with me, let's live up there. So it was a nice neighborhood, lots of faculty—lots of faculty lived in Prospect Park then. It was a fun community to live in.

ESS: Were you aware of any community involvement or neighborhood organizations at that point?

29:52

HJ: I got involved a little bit politically with my apartment mate who took me to meet a possible candidate who was Don Fraser, just running for office for the first time. So I did a little bit politically for the Democrats, but not very much. And I really wasn't part of all the community of Prospect Park. You know, they had a lot of issues that I never knew about. You know, I was working.

ESS: And then you moved to Como from 1958 to 1960, right?

HJ: Uh-huh. Cork [Walter] and I got married in 1958 and moved into an apartment that was brand new on Van Cleve Park. And it was—we lived there for two years and our first child was born while we lived there. And then we started looking for a house. And there was this little ad in the Sunday paper of a house that was being sold by owner. So we drove by and we liked the little house. And we went to see it that night, asked them if we could come. And we told them we wanted it. And they had had a buyer and the buyer dropped out. So they had someplace they wanted to live and you know, they were pressured. And we were ready to move. So we moved in the summer of 1960 and lived there watching the neighborhood change.

ESS: Yeah, you lived there for 57 years, right?

HJ: 57 years, yep.

ESS: So how did the two of you know you wanted to live in that neighborhood?

HJ: He was working at the University. He wanted to live close to the University. He did a lot of work in his lab, and he'd have to check things, you know, I don't know what, but he'd have to check them—sometimes late at night he'd have to go check on something or, if the power went off, he'd have to check. And I had lived in Prospect Park and knew some people in that neighborhood, so it was a logical place for us. And Como, you know—it was a logical place for us to live.

ESS: And so how would you describe the neighborhood when you first moved into your house?

HJ: It had a lot of families with little kids. Our kids had people around the block that they could play with. A family moved in with nine kids two doors down. There were children around all over the place.

ESS: And you had kids too, right?

HJ: We had one little boy—one little toddler. And then we got a second, so it was nice for our kids growing up that there were kids in the neighborhood, much more than there are now. Some were the children of graduate students who lived in the apartments on the corner. The neighborhood was always some graduate students and some people who weren't University-connected. It wasn't all University, but a lot of it was.

ESS: So lets talk now about the University District Improvement Association or the Marcy-Holmes Neighborhood Association. So why and how did the two of you get involved and when was it initially?

HJ: Well we—

WJ: Mrs. Gruner got me involved.

HJ: I think Ruth Meyer got me involved. There were people that knew us or knew Cork really. And they said, "You really need to become a member, so we joined.

ESS: How soon was this after you moved in do you think?

HJ: Right away (laughter)—right away.

ESS: So there is some peer pressure?

HJ: Yeah, there was.

WJ: Mrs. Gruner was an active recruiter.

HJ: Yes, she was.

WJ: And I think that she felt that she had done her share.

HJ: Yeah, she was ready to turn—.

WJ: She really started—I think she started the organization.

HJ: I don't know about that, but—

WJ: In the original group of people that started it.

HJ: She was looking for a young couple to move in and take some leadership.

WJ: Well, at that time, there were not as many University people that were still living in the neighborhood. That concentration that existed when I was growing up had—by that time, people had started to really commute and lived all over the Twin Cities.

ESS: So, when you were growing up, it really was like a university community.

WJ: It seemed to me it was much more concentrated.

HJ: Yeah, I think that's true.

WJ: Maybe just the fact that there were—around us there were people.

HJ: I think that's true. From what his mother has said.

WJ: I don't know how accurate that observation was, but that was my observation.

ESS: Yeah—no, that's helpful.

WJ: But I was 12 years old or something.

ESS: So, when you first got involved, what was the issue, do you know? What was the main topics or—?

HJ: I think they wanted to be very representative, so they wanted every block to have somebody on the council or most every block on the council to deal with issues. But now, what were the issues? Traffic—lots of traffic going through the neighborhood. Trucks going through the neighborhood.

WJ: Well, it soon became redevelopment.

HJ: Yes. Urban renewal was an issue.

WJ: I think already there was the issue of the two-and-a-half story walk-up apartment.

ESS: What's that?

HJ: Well, the apartments that are there in Marcy-Holmes are called two-and-a-half story walk-ups. You don't need an elevator. So developers wanted to build those apartments instead of a taller one that they build now. They were only three stories, counting the basement as a story. And they really would move into the middle of the block and put a two-and-a-half story walk-up. And the neighborhood wanted to stay single-family somewhat—not go all apartments. I think that's fair. And absentee landlord was another question.

ESS: So landlords who just weren't in the picture?

WJ: But it was this change from family living to apartment living.

HJ: Yeah, that's right.

ESS: What years would this have started, do you think?

HJ: '62—

WJ: Our involvement started in—

HJ: In '60

WJ: In 1960 when we bought the house.

ESS: Yeah, so then pretty early in the 60s or—yeah.

WJ: It didn't take very long for her to recruit us.

HJ: Yeah, and I think it was in the early 60s that that was happening.

WJ: I was still an assistant professor and I was supposed to be working at the University and I resisted this involvement in the community because it interfered with what I was doing. And I really limited it even so because I eventually was the president of the group for a while.

ESS: Yeah, how did you end up being president?

WJ: Mrs. Gruner recruited me.

HJ: (Laughter).

WJ: I think she had been president and she saw that she was getting older—was not as effective. She wanted someone younger to be president and I—that was how I felt about the situation.

ESS: What time frame were you president?

WJ: It must have been—it was when I was still an assistant professor, so it was 1959-60 maybe

HJ: We didn't move in until '60, so it had to be—

WJ: Yeah, so it would have to be '60.

HJ: Maybe '62, '63.

ESS: Okay, so pretty early.

HJ: Pretty early.

ESS: So you got involved right away and pretty soon you were president.

HJ: Yeah—right.

WJ: Oh yes.

HJ: Yeah, but just for a year or maybe two years—not more.

WJ: I think it was only a year because it really interfered with what I was doing at school. I couldn't have that.

ESS: What was your major goal or activity as president, do you remember?

WJ: I think the question was how to get this renewal project—

40:02

HJ: The urban renewal.

WJ: —approved by the people.

ESS: So say a little bit more about what the specifics of that was.

WJ: Well, I think there was a general feeling that the housing—some of the housing needed to be rearranged, and the houses were close. They—

HJ: The absentee landlords had—

WJ: —they were old.

HJ: —had taken advantage.

WJ: There was an interesting difference between the housing on 5th Street, let's say, and the housing off 5th Street. But the milling families and the lumber families and the rich people lived on 5th Street. And the workers were off 5th Street on the side streets in smaller houses.

HJ: That are falling down now.

WJ: Less fancy, and those houses didn't last as long.

HJ: Yeah. And the 5th Street Greenway that he was involved with is the other thing he was involved with.

ESS: While you were president or a different time?

WJ: I think that was maybe later.

ESS: Yeah, that was probably later. Yeah, that's what I thought.

HJ: Yeah, I think it was later.

WJ: I think the greenway was later.

ESS: But were you going to say something about it?

HJ: Well, I was just going to say to develop a way of linking this long neighborhood—yes, it was later because it was about the freeway.

ESS: Yeah, that makes sense.

WJ: That was when—

HJ: To make a link.

ESS: Right.

WJ: —when the Southeast organization developed their organization was SEMPACC [Southeast Minneapolis Planning and Coordinating Committee].

ESS: So just to go back to the urban renewal, what was the main issue on the table for organization?

HJ: The neighborhood had to vote to be part of the urban renewal.

ESS: Okay, and to accept the funding to get redevelopment of these houses. Is that the idea?

HJ: Yes. And you had to convince everybody that it wasn't to try to wipe out their house necessarily, but to benefit.

ESS: So there were a lot of people who were pretty afraid of what it would mean is my guess.

HJ: Yeah—for them.

ESS: But you both were in support of it, it sounds like.

HJ: Yeah.

WJ: Yes.

HJ: But our house wasn't in the neighborhood—in the boundaries.

WJ: Our house wasn't—it was the western section.

HJ: It was 6th Avenue that it started. And we were on 8th Avenue. So, in a way, we were saying, vote for this because it's going to help the whole neighborhood, but it's not going to affect our house. Do you know what I mean?

ESS: Yeah. And so what did it actually mean for the neighborhood?

WJ: What finally happened was that it—sort of every other house was earmarked to be—

HJ: To go.

WJ: —taken down.

ESS: And what does that mean for the people living in them?

HJ: Then the lots are bigger. It's not as crowded or as dense, and the people who remained got good loans to fix up—repair their houses. So the neighborhood really improved in its look because—

WJ: A number of new houses were built in that—

HJ: Yes.

WJ: —in that area.

HJ: Some new houses were built on the lots that they cleared out totally. See, that was a very old neighborhood down there close to the river and the dam.

WJ: That was the first neighborhood—the first town development in Minneapolis.

ESS: Right. St. Anthony.

WJ: St. Anthony.

HJ: Yeah.

WJ: And those houses were by that time old.

HJ: If you look—there was a committee of people who lived in the neighborhood who mapped out what was going to happen with staff from the city. So they were in control of—not us—but they were in control of who stayed and who went—who had to move and all.

ESS: And some people were just forced to move.

HJ: Yep.

WJ: And there was some help for the people that were displaced in moving—

HJ: Yeah.

WJ: I think there was a structure that helped locate—

HJ: And then some people stayed in the neighborhood, but had a brand-new house. There's some—

WJ: And some people had a lot next to them that they could purchase that would allow them to build a garage, for instance, or develop it as an open space.

HJ: If you drive around down in there, you can see.

WJ: You can see it.

HJ: You can see the new ones. And there, at that location, there used to be two decrepit, falling down, old places.

ESS: Oh, interesting.

HJ: It was gentrification.

ESS: Yep.

HJ: But it was gentrification that was democratic, I think.

WJ: It was a pretty far-sighted arrangement for the people that lived there.

HJ: Yeah, their property values went up.

WJ: Displaced themselves to benefit the neighborhood.

HJ: Well, there were some people that were hurt and some people that were helped, you know? But it was an anchor for the neighborhood as a whole because it was just sinking down there, really, beyond repair unless you had some program that came in and helped.

ESS: So was the decision under just the neighborhood organization or the city—how did the relationship between the city and the neighborhood organization work?

WJ: Well, I think the city really was—

HJ: But the neighborhood had to vote to do it.

WJ: Yeah.

HJ: We—I remember speaking in favor of it at that meeting where we voted to do it.

ESS: And are you secretary around this time [unintelligible]?

HJ: Might have been—I don't know.

ESS: But you were for some period, right?

HJ: I think I was on the UDIA then. Yeah, I was on it for quite a while.

ESS: On the board?

HJ: Yeah, I was because he was busy, and so then I was on—

ESS: So then you were on the board for a while. Okay. Well, that's really interesting. Anything else you want to share about that topic?

HJ: I don't think so.

WJ: It's a long time ago.

End of Track 1

47:41

Track 2

00:00

ESS: Alright. So I'd love to talk about Interstate 35 coming into the neighborhood. When were either both of you first aware of this as something that might happen?

WJ: Well, it was kind of a rumor or not a specific plan for some time, several years at least. The particular route was not established, and it could have been on 8th Avenue; it could have been on 9th Avenue. Maybe it could have been—

HJ: 10th?

WJ: —even further away than that. But there were some choices. So it wasn't clear where it was going yet, and after a few years of that uncertainty—maybe it wasn't a few. It was at least a couple—the highway departments chose a route. They rejected the route on 8th Avenue and I had the feeling that it was the churches that were on that street that influenced that—that they had the first congregational church in Minnesota was on 8th Avenue.

HJ: And the Presbyterian Church was on 8th Avenue.

WJ: And so there were a lot of historic buildings—those two churches among—maybe among others, but certainly those two churches had some influence on where it was going. And they chose to put it in—on 9th Avenue rather than 8th Avenue, along the section where we—through the university district.

HJ: There was a lot of community meetings and people distressed about this coming through, and one of the things that the community said loud and clear was, we want it depressed so there won't be as much noise. And the highway department did depress it because of the community pressure. That's one pressure that we got through.

ESS: What was the general feeling about it coming in?

HJ: Negative

WJ: (Laughter). Yes. I guess.

HJ: Well, I mean it was splitting the neighborhood.

WJ: Well, the route they chose, at least initially went through every park and every school ground in the city or in our section of the city. And it removed those features of the neighborhood that were helpful features. And that didn't improve their status with the people that lived there.

HJ: But it came. We tried to follow through on an idea of one of the members of our neighborhood to make a platform over the freeway and put a new Marcy School and a playground on top of the freeway as they had done in Seattle, apparently. And we pushed for that to go 8th Street and 7th Street to be a link and—

ESS: With the school just right on top of the freeway?

WJ: Yeah.

HJ: And it turned out it really isn't a good idea anyway because of the air for the kids.

WJ: You can't ventilate the—

HJ: Yeah—but we didn't know that when they were pushing for it.

WJ: —to make it a long tunnel, you can't ventilate it very well.

HJ: So really, the link for the neighborhood was the idea of the Greenway. That came from the city planning department as another option to this block. I mean, we were concerned that the neighborhood be unified. And it really happened instead that the side toward the University became absentee landlord and student and completely changed. So now I understand that if you're a partier, you try to live on that side of the freeway.

ESS: On the close side.

HJ: If you're on a student—and you're a graduate student and you really want to have quiet, then you live on the—

WJ: The west side.

HJ: The Marcy side, yeah.

ESS: So it had a huge impact, it sounds like.

HJ: Oh, it had a big impact. There used to be families with children on the other side. And kids would go back and forth, play with their friends—you know—on the bridges.

WJ: And eventually, all of those families left.

HJ: Yeah, well there still is the Pillsbury Court that the University built on—where the—

WJ: Where the—

HJ: —the president's house—

WJ: president's house was.

HJ: —had been on 5th Street and 10th. All of that development was the University's attempt to keep families in the neighborhood. That was where they tried to help us out. So the freeway came.

ESS: So let's talk a little bit more about the 5th Street Greenway then. So this was an effort to link the neighborhood. Tell me a little bit more about that and why you got involved with it.

WJ: I don't think we were involved as much with that.

HJ: You were.

WJ: I wasn't very much. That was a SEMPACC—

HJ: No—shouldn't have been. Well, maybe it was.

WJ: I think it was.

HJ: Okay.

WJ: By that time the organization was not so much individual neighborhood organizations. It was a Southeast organization.

HJ: Do you have SEMPACC on your list? Southeast Minneapolis—. All three neighborhoods worked together—Como, Prospect Park and Marcy-Holmes. And they formed an organization called SEMPACC. And politically it was very active. It represented things that all three neighborhoods wanted. I think that's what you really feel now is the lack of all three neighborhoods working together.

ESS: So is there not really one of those—is there not that organization?

HJ: There's no SEMPACC anymore. The library still represents all three neighborhoods. The library is one of the few things left. It's a real change because politically the city changed. So now you have different representatives from each neighborhood association. But, at one time, we were all one neighborhood and we had a lot of political power in city hall.

WJ: In fact, it was so powerful that I think the—when the city had a chance to redistribute the voting in the wards—

HJ: The districts.

WJ: —they split them up.

HJ: They split us up.

WJ: They split up.

ESS: Oh wow.

WJ: Southeast so it was no longer together in the ward. It was no longer the second ward.

ESS: So you used to all the same ward, okay.

HJ: Yeah, right.

WJ: Yeah. And that was a lot of power in the city.

HJ: And we had a lot of power.

WJ: Mostly because of Prospect Park, I think.

HJ: Yeah, they had a lot more leadership than we did. But we got on the coattails and we all were active together.

ESS: What years did SEMPACC exist, any idea?

HJ: You'd have to look that up. I can't tell you.

WJ: We were really not very involved with SEMPACC.

HJ: No, but we thought they did a good job.

WJ: But the people that were did a good job.

ESS: Okay. And then, going back to the 5th Street Greenway, that was a collaborative project it sounds like.

WJ: I think that was, but maybe I'm wrong.

ESS: And you said that was the neighborhood working with—

HJ: The city.

ESS: —the city planner, specifically planner Wei Ming Lu.

HJ: Lu just L—U.

ESS: Okay, and can you tell me a little bit more about the vision for the project?

WJ: He was a wonderful artist, and he could draw these sketches of how it was going to look. And they were really nice—it was nice art.

10:01

HJ: They narrowed 5th Street. They made it one way.

WJ: They built the bridge—the pedestrian bridge.

HJ: They made parking bays for people.

WJ: They narrowed the street.

HJ: And now the community has a volunteer who makes a garden at every corner so that it's visually nice.

WJ: And that—

HJ: And it was for bicycles. That's one of the early bicycle—

WJ: —that held up that section of the housing. The housing's on 5th Street which were good houses anyway—really have—that has thrived. And there are some nice development in those houses.

HJ: Yeah, and some new things that have gone in a little bit.

WJ: And some of the old things have been maintained. There's a house that is the house of an officer in the Civil War that is now in a—now I guess it's a duplex that is really well maintained. But the whole string from East Hennepin up to Dinkytown—

HJ: Yeah, that was the idea.

WJ: —it's a nice residential street now.

HJ: And it was an early bikeway.

WJ: Yeah, it was one of the early bikeways, and I got a bike pretty early—

HJ: He rode a bike.

WJ: —when we moved over there and biked back and forth during warm weather all the time that I was at the University. So I claimed that I did a 100,000 miles on that street.

HJ: (Laughter).

WJ: Which is a little exaggerated, but not by a factor of ten at least.

ESS: So what do you think the impact of the Greenway was for the neighborhood.

HJ: It was a plus, a positive.

WJ: Oh, it was certainly a plus.

HJ: When the freeway was coming and things were discouraging, it was a positive psychologically and it was beautiful and practical.

WJ: And now I don't remember what—I have questioned what the order was. I think the throughway was there before the Greenway.

HJ: Yeah, I think it was. And we needed things that would blink.

WJ: I think that was kind of a—

HJ: So it would have been maybe the 70s.

WJ: —a project that the neighborhood could get behind after this kind of splitting.

HJ: Now it's a historic district. They went ahead and asked to be a historic district. They realized that it really was, so now you can't mar the houses with—you know, I mean there's some—you can't decorate certain ways. You have to keep it—. So it was a preservation tactic, okay?

ESS: So Harriet, you had also talked about collaboration not only among the different neighborhoods, but also among churches. And you also have this background working with churches. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

HJ: One of the things we did was to have a day camp in the summer for the kids from all the churches. And every church in Southeast donated money—Catholics, Protestants—there wasn't any Jewish money in it but—and we hired a staff person and then we had volunteers from the churches who also went along. And they went—used the Salvation Army Camp in Columbia Heights and hired a bus that would take them out in the morning and bring them back at night. And that was an activity for the kids in the summer. I think we did it three—maybe four summers, but that was it because—can't remember why we couldn't continue, but we couldn't. But that was a collaborative activity.

WJ: But then there was that music arrangement.

HJ: That was specifically our church.

WJ: That was UBC.

HJ: Yeah, that was not collaborative. We offered piano lessons and organ lessons free for children from Southeast, but that was at our university church; that wasn't collaborative. Can't think what else—

WJ: And that was a contribution [of Mears of St. Paul who funded the program].

ESS: What do you think the impact was of—

WJ: The day camp?

ESS: Yeah, or having that type of programming collaboratively?

HJ: Oh, I think it was our feeling of cooperation within the neighborhood, within the neighborhood churches. I'm not sure what the lasting contributions was. Those kids that went had something to do in the summer that was fun, but that's about it.

ESS: So let's move to talking about the First and Second Southeast Corporation. So the first and second Southeast Corporation you said would have been back in the 60s when that got going. Can either of you tell me about how that first started to happen and how you got involved?

HJ: There was a man who was going around buying houses—some of the big old houses that were really quality houses and turning them into rooming houses for students and this was—they had been rooming houses before, but there had been an owner who had lived in it—somebody who had kept track of what was happening in the house. And there was a strong feeling that the

neighborhood was getting turned over to this one person. So we formed a corporation. Everybody bought stock for \$100.

WJ: Well, it was one house.

HJ: We had the chance to buy one house, and so we all kicked in \$100.

WJ: He was looking at this house, and the family that was selling it didn't want to sell to him and tried to get the neighborhood to kick in and buy it, I think. So it really involved that one house at first.

HJ: Yeah, so we all kicked in. We had a lawyer. We registered at the state as a corporation—a for-profit corporation, and we bought, not only that house and then sold it to a family with kids usually, or an owner-occupant that was going to live there. This is family in the widest sense of family. Then we did a few more houses, and then we opened it up to Prospect Park and Como, and they came in too, so it became another three-neighborhood-based—so it was all Southeast—it wasn't—but it started in Marcy-Holmes because the problem started in Marcy-Holmes. And we must have done 20 houses over the years, some in each neighborhood.

ESS: How did you manage the budget and the time and the administration for this type of thing?

WJ: Well we had—

HJ: Volunteers.

WJ: —people like Howard [West, a Minneapolis businessman who lived in the neighborhood]—

HJ: It was volunteer. It really was.

WJ: Initially it was—I think it was always all volunteers.

HJ: We had two people who lived in the neighborhood who were real estate agents, and they gave their time free.

ESS: So they understood how it worked.

WJ: And there were people that would go in and paint—

HJ: And a lawyer.

WJ: —and do some basic remodeling or we'd hire it.

HJ: The lawyer who formed it did it—you know—he got all the legal work done. It became obvious that there was money under the neighborhood block grant under Johnson, but that had to go to an agency that was non-profit. So we formed Second Southeast, which was non-profit, and we went through all the process of registering over with the state. And we received funds from the federal government and were part of a number of affordable housing projects in the

neighborhood. If you look at the one over at Johnson and Como, big project there for affordable housing.

20:02

WJ: That was at the—what was left of the Marshall Football Field.

HJ: Yeah, and we did that one and then we did the one down on 5th Street and 3rd. There's something at the corner there across from the park. And that's affordable housing. It was Section 8. So those two we did build. But then the money ran out from the federal government, so we couldn't do anymore of those. And we were back at First Southeast which was for-profit. We really suffered because we were building a house, we were renewing a house in Como, and there was a—we didn't realize there was an arsonist in the neighborhood. And the arsonist came around with fire and burned the house. And it was just after we had put in expensive renovation and we hadn't lifted the insurance value to go with the renovation. You know, that's a tricky part in there. You put in a whole new heating system and you should raise the value right away, and we missed by a day or two, and the arsonist burned and we really were wiped out by the arsonist.

The other factor was that houses became much more expensive in the neighborhood, so we couldn't buy them like we were buying. We were buying and selling and making a small profit every time, but we couldn't do it anymore. We didn't—the cost of houses just jump-knifed. And then the people ran out of energy. So we dissolved, everybody got their money back from this adventure, not with interest, but pretty much got your money back that you had put in originally. And, in the mean time, we would try to do a house in a critical place on a corner. And, once that got renovated, then the other people would renovate their own houses. It would act as a psychological, we hoped, and it usually did. There's one at Franklin Avenue across from St. Francis Cabrini that was right on the corner of River Terrace and Franklin that was just going down. And we bought it and fixed it up, and then everybody else on River Terrace said, well I guess the neighborhood is going to stay, so it helped hold it up.

ESS: Was there a model for this elsewhere?

HJ: I don't think so.

ESS: So this is something that was pretty innovative.

HJ: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

WJ: I think it really developed—the First Southeast developed because—

HJ: The need.

WJ: —yeah, this one house was clearly going to go unless we did something about it. The meeting that was—really started all of this was in our living room.

HJ: Yeah, right.

WJ: And it was local—people that lived around that area that got involved. And three or four families kicked in to buy the house, and I don't think it was initially more than that.

HJ: I don't remember. Well, we were very legal. We had a lawyer and we got registered over—you know it was registered. First Southeast—

WJ: Yeah, a lot of people were involved in it, and I don't think anyone charged anything.

HJ: No.

WJ: It was all done for free—and then contributed some money—not very much because the house was—the price was not very high. But that got it started.

HJ: I don't know. I don't think we had a model of anybody else. I think we just learned in the process.

ESS: How would you describe the motivation to do something like that?

HJ: To save the neighborhood (laughter).

WJ: The woman that owned the house didn't want to sell to this developer.

ESS: Yeah, so there's just this—

WJ: And I think she was the strong motivation at first.

ESS: Great. Well, let's move to talking about Walter, your involvement in Southeast Seniors which you said occurred a couple years after you retired in 1993 due to a friend named Roger Page who was courting you to get involved and you finally did. Is that correct?

WJ: I think Roger was involved in the beginning of the—it was a Prospect Park project. But when it got expanded to Marcy-Holmes and Como, then they needed board members from those areas, and he was on me to become a board member, and I eventually succumbed to that pressure.

ESS: What made you want to be involved besides the pressure?

WJ: It's a good idea, I think. And it was a good model. I mean, it would have been nice to have that kind of an operation in Marcy-Holmes and I think that's probably what finally got me involved or tipped the balance, but it was a lot of good people that were interesting people and fun to work with. And as you get older, you begin to see the need for that sort of thing. You may not see it when you're 20 years old but, when you're retired, then it's pretty clear that you're going to eventually need some help in one way. And I thought, although we didn't do it, living out your life in your own home has a lot of advantages.

ESS: So what were some of your activities or issues you were involved with during your tenure on the board?

WJ: The expansion, personnel, who was going to do it, because the people that started it out were by then getting a little older and were not as active. Fundraising. I don't know what else. I've forgotten the details—all that's disappeared.

ESS: Do you remember whether any part of it—there were any challenges that came up or any highlights?

WJ: I think it was always a challenge to have the right personnel. I think it's a very special kind of skill that you need to be successful in being the visiting nurse. And we had a good one. Keeping her happy was important.

ESS: Well, let's move into some reflection questions before we wrap up. Tell me a little bit about what the neighborhood was like in your last years, maybe 2010 to 2017 or so that you lived in your house.

WJ: Well, there was some moving out. The big family that was two doors down, finally all of their kids grew up and they remodeled the house to be a better house for them, made it into a duplex, and then finally moved away. The people across the street got older and—

29:59

HJ: Lots more students living around us.

ESS: As opposed to families?

HJ: Mm-hmm. It's a different feeling, Erica, to move into a neighborhood as the young Johnson couple and end up as the old Johnson couple

WJ: The oldest.

HJ: —that finally moved out (laughter). It's very different.

WJ: It requires some changes of thought.

HJ: (Laughter).

ESS: Can you say any more about that?

HJ: I don't think so.

WJ: That's enough (laughter). It happens.

HJ: (Laughter). We enjoyed the younger families—the younger people that moved in, we enjoyed a lot.

WJ: We still are.

HJ: Yes, we still see the people that are the younger people that moved in. And they are very good neighbors to us. We enjoy their children being like grandchildren to us, you know? Because we didn't have any grandchildren in town. So we've enjoyed everybody else's kids.

WJ: We're going to enjoy a two-year-old that was born when we were still over there.

HJ: And she's coming to visit this week.

WJ: She's coming to visit on Saturday.

HJ: With her mother, yeah.

ESS: So it sounds like there are still neighborly relations even though some transition in the neighborhood.

HJ: Yes, very much so. We felt really part of the neighborhood all the way along.

ESS: Well, there are neighbors that are still in contact with us that are good friends.

HJ: He had a pen pal through Southeast Seniors up at Pratt School when she was in third grade and now she's a junior at South, and she sent him this long letter for Christmas, and he just finished answering her long letter.

WJ: This is I'm sure the longest pen pal relationship.

HJ: (Laughter).

ESS: So you've been pen pals this whole time?

WJ: The whole time.

HJ: Yes, it's just amazing!

WJ: Not—

ESS: Do you hand-write your letters?

WJ: Sometimes it's only a letter a year.

HJ: Yeah, right. Or a postcard when she goes away in the summer.

WJ: For some reason, she likes to continue it.

ESS: That's great.

HJ: We had pen pals at Marcy in the last few years, but they didn't last like this one. I think this was just amazing.

WJ: They didn't last more than that year.

HJ: She lives up in Prospect Park and she just—. When she graduates from high school next year, I think he'll be invited to come to the party (laughter). I don't know—we'll see. So there are some links to the neighborhood still that are very nice for us.

ESS: Is the neighborhood organization still active?

HJ: Very. They have big problems now.

ESS: What are their big problems?

HJ: Their big problems are all the developers—you know, the 41-storey down there and the Pillsbury development.

WJ: And the development around Dinkytown.

HJ: And the developer around the library. There are just lots of problems. I hope that the neighborhood can survive the pressures. It has a lot of pressures now.

WJ: Well, it's going to change.

HJ: Yeah, it will change, but it's—. Did you see the picture of our house on the wall?

ESS: Oh, that's lovely.

HJ: The guy who was the art teacher at Marcy, at the Open School retired and went around the neighborhood painting houses, and he painted ours.

WJ: He got an angle that I never—

HJ: He painted it from the right perspective.

WJ: —never appreciated till I saw the picture.

HJ: We never saw it from there much. Okay.

ESS: What was it like moving out of your house after living there for 57 years?

WJ: Hard.

HJ: Hard.

WJ: Difficult.

HJ: Yeah, difficult.

WJ: I don't think we realized how hard it was, and how it influenced our kids.

HJ: Yes, that's—

ESS: How so?

WJ: Maybe more so than us.

HJ: Psychologically, the kids, to have the house go was very hard for these kids in their 50s who had never lived anywhere else. You know, we had lived somewhere else. Well, they now have places, but it was still—it was home base.

ESS: That makes sense.

HJ: And we didn't understand—I didn't understand how hard it was going to be on them. I thought they were well launched, but it was hard on them.

ESS: So I'm kind of curious, what kept you to continue to be in—you know, you told me how you got involved initially in the neighborhood, kind of got convinced by a friend, but what kept you involved in the neighborhood for so long?

WJ: I think it was clear that the projects were good projects to have in the neighborhood.

HJ: It was fun.

WJ: They were beneficial and they were fun. And I think we tend to be—work in cooperation with others, and that's what we're looking for. And these were interesting groups. I mean, that first Southeast group was—you look at the people that were in that and one of the men was a collector of African art so, every time we went to his house, you could spend an hour looking at the stuff that he has in his living room which represented good collection of African art. I mean, I don't think that happens in—I'd be surprised if there's another house in the city that was as well-endowed by that kind of regional art like that. It—

HJ: I think it was an interesting group of people to work with all the way along. Certainly, the Frasers were very much a part of the neighborhood after they came back from Washington, and we enjoyed the friendship with them. There are lots of interesting people—not necessarily politically active—as active as the Frasers, but still—for a variety of reasons.

ESS: Why would you maybe suggest that someone should get involved in their neighborhood? Do you have any opinion about that?

HJ: With any neighborhood, just getting to know the people that live around you and to share the experience of living on that particular plot of ground, making a difference—I think you have to feel you are making a difference—improving it somehow.

ESS: What about you Walter? Anything you want to add?

WJ: I think that sums it up pretty well.

ESS: Anything either of you want to add before we close? Alright, thank you.

[End of Recording]

Total Interview Time: 1:25:58