Interview Transcript: Bob Johnson's First Life Story Interview
Interview date: August 15, 2011
Prepared for the Sonoma State University Field Stations and Nature Preserves

Introduction

This is the first of a series of three interviews with Bob Johnson. The purpose was to record the highlights of Bob's life story. Questions used for the interviews were partially based on selected questions from the StoryCorps list for life story interviews (storycorps.org). Questions were developed by Matt Thompson, and additional questions were provided by Terri Yost (Bob's daughter).

The interview occurred at Bob Johnson's house in Pacific Grove, CA on August 15, 2011. Matt Thompson conducted the interview and prepared the transcript from the audio recording. Informal off-topic conversation was not included in this transcript.

Bob Johnson – August, 2011 Photo by Matt Thompson

Interview Transcript

Matt Thompson: I know you were born in Salinas, December 15, 1930. Where did you grow up?

Bob Johnson: Actually, on a farm about ten miles south of Salinas, about one and a half miles east of the 101 highway – towards the hills on that side of the valley. My family had a huge cattle and grain operation up there at the time I was born.

MT: How long did you live in that area?

BJ: Until I went away to college.

MT: What was it like growing up in Salinas Valley?

BJ: It was pretty good. Obviously I was born in the middle of the depression, but I didn't know it. I never knew anything different than what was there. Of course we had plenty to eat because we lived on a farm. We grew all kinds of stuff. My father had a small orchard and we had a variety of different fruit, berries. We grew vegetables. They had cattle, pigs, and sheep that we could butcher so we were never hungry. There seemed to be a shortage of money at times which I think was normal in those days. We lived in an old, old house which was called a Jacks house because it was built by David Jacks. I don't know if know any of the history of Monterey County. David Jacks once owned 90,000 acres in this county. 30,000 of it was where Fort Ord was, and has now morphed into a university, housing, shopping, and all sorts of things. He, in my opinion, just from what I've heard about him and the development of agriculture in the valley, he was one of the first guys, a very controversial figure because of the way he acquired the land. They said he was a ruthless business man, and he was dishonest. I don't like to get into that. In fact when he got hold of land he did something with it. He didn't just let the cattle graze, and if it didn't rain the cattle died. Maybe that's why we don't have many Condors now because they don't have as many dead cattle to feed on. He imported mainly Danish dairy farmers and established some of the first dairies in the valley. That led him into growing alfalfa, which brought in irrigation, which was kind of the first step towards the irrigated business we have here now. To me he was one of the forerunners who had the foresight to see the potential in the land and the valley. He acquired most of it from the original grant holders who had grants from the king of Spain, so that goes way, way back. My family knew him because they did business with him. My father knew him. My father was only a child at the time. My grandfather certainly knew him because there was a grant called Rancho Chualar which surrounded what is now the town of Chualar. Over the years my family acquired most of the eastern half of that grant. It included all the way to the top of the Gabilan Mountains and then down into the valley floor. Primarily at that time there was no irrigation. They grew grain and raised cattle up on the range in the hills. The first well was drilled by my family in 1929, the year before I was born, on the farm that I grew up on. My father got interested in growing vegetables and row crops, and that type of thing. We had land that was suitable for it. At the time it was just being used to graze animals or grow grain. That was the first well. An interesting thing, they struck water at 90 feet, and we're now pulling water from about 230 to 250 feet in the same area. So, the aquifer has dropped by that much. The good thing is that the elevation above sea level of the ranch we had was about 250 feet above sea level, so there was enough pressure coming from upstream to keep any seawater intrusion out. Down over here in the Castroville area, close to the water, they've had a tremendous problem with seawater intrusion. They had to shut down all the wells and had to find alternate sources of water. Even though we have to go deeper, we're still getting good water, good quality and good quantity. That's jumping from 1930 to now.

MT: You say the quality of water is good in the Salinas Valley?

BJ: Generally speaking. The last well I drilled when I still owned the farm, what you do now is you take water samples as you go down and send them to a lab and test them.

You can seal off the areas of the well where there is too much chloride in the water, or nitrates, or anything that might be in it. So we actually went down 930 feet and sealed off parts of that. We found plenty of good aquifer we could draw from. One reason we drilled such a huge well, it was about 2001, about ten years ago, we were having all the energy outages. It was about ten years ago I think. All of our water was pumped with electricity and they were so short of electricity, PG&E was shutting off power on a rotating basis. They shut down the power in the daytime and the fellows that were farming my farm couldn't irrigate. They were using drip irrigation and when you get behind on drip you never catch up. You have to haul in sprinkler pipe or something to build the moisture level back up because drip will never catch up. They were really concerned about it. When we found out that we had to drill a new well, we sat down and put our heads together and said we would like the well to be in a central location so we can get water from that well to any point on the farm and we would like it to be big enough so we can supply the whole farm if we have to. So we designed a well with 28 inch casing and put a 300-hp diesel engine on it, so no electricity. It was capable of putting out 5000 gallons a minute, which they've never had to do. That was the whole reason for doing that because if the electrical outages continued, they wanted to have a secure source of water that will not disrupt the operations. That's one reason the well is so big and so deep is because we wanted a huge source of water in one location. Normally we wouldn't draw a well like that. It gave us a good profile of what we had underneath us anyway. That was for sure. We abandoned a well a quarter of a mile from the new one we drilled because it had high chlorides and we couldn't grow decent lettuce with it. The lettuce would be like baseballs. The head size would never develop. We finally got people from the farm advisor's office and the laboratories that tested water and they finally pinned down what the problem was. So that was one of the things we were looking for, to avoid chlorides, when we drilled the new well. So essentially we replaced it with a well that was putting out 1500 gallons a minute, and it's still putting out 1500 gallons a minute except in times of emergency when they rev it up to whatever they need. I've been out there when they had that thing running, and I have to stop and roll down the window to tell whether the motor is running at the pump because it's just idling! It's idling, but it's putting out all the water they need. They can adjust it to whatever their need is, which is kind of neat. We're totally independent of PG&E. We even have a big 5000 gallon diesel tank right next to it so if we keep that topped off, we're in business.

MT: Back to 1930. I read that your parents were Harry and Jane Johnson. When did they arrive in Salinas?

BJ: My grandfather arrived here in Monterey County in 1873. In fact, an interesting thing I found out about that, I took a trip to Sweden and did a little genealogy research and I finally found his family and the records there said he left Sweden in 1871. I was talking to one of the people that worked at the place where they have all the records. I said I'm confused; it didn't take him two years to get to the United States. These ships were slow, but they weren't that slow. He started looking and he said he left here and went to Germany. So we surmised that they were so poor in Sweden he had to go to Germany to earn enough for his passage to the US. It took him two years. I had never heard this down through the family but only after talking to the people back there. So he

finally arrived here in 1873 and established himself. He farmed quite a few areas but ended up in Chualar Canyon which is the east part of the Chualar Ranch. He started buying land there. He had ten children – four girls and six boys. One girl died. She was a twin. She died in infancy. Then there was a twin brother that died of typhoid fever in 1915. I knew all the rest of my aunts and uncles. All of the remaining boys stayed on the ranch or came back to it at some point. My father was the youngest of the ten and he served in World War I in France and then he came back to the farm after that. That would have been 1918 sometime, or 1919. I kind of think having seen more of the world than his brothers had, he had a little more vision, a broader view of what was possible, and that's why he got interested in developing the land for irrigated crops. He finally drilled the first well, as I said, in 1929. So essentially, my whole lifetime saw the development from dry land farming. Right now the farm is fully under drip irrigation. The farm has progressed through all the various stages and methods of practice. I've seen it all, from the beginning to where it is right now.

MT: Do you still own a farm in the Salinas Valley?

BJ: No, I sold it in 2003, I think, to the fellows that were leasing it from me. They owned the farm adjacent to mine and I knew they wanted mine and they said so and so I came to the point where I realized there was nobody in the family that was wanting to farm, there was no point in owning it because you get a lot of liability exposure from owning property like that. You get sued regularly because people think, oh he owns that property and must have money. You get sued for pesticide poisoning, even though I had nothing to do with the day to day operation, I was just the landlord I always got included on the suit when there was an alleged pesticide poisoning. We had the Chualar Creek which runs down to the Salinas River, through the middle of that farm. If anything happened on the Chualar Creek I got named in a lawsuit because, I had done some work on the creek, or because all of us landowners tried to manage that creek to keep it within its channel during extremely wet times. So every time we tinker with that creek, if somebody got flooded or something, they could decide it was our fault because it couldn't have been an act of nature. I wouldn't want to put that on my kids. I'm used to dealing with that because I've been there all my life. My kids don't live here so it's time to sell. These guys went to school with my kids and they all knew each other. They said any time you want to come down and visit the farm feel free. I've done that several times. I'm thrilled to death to see what they're doing with it because they're just top-quality growers. So it was difficult to sell it because it had been in the family for about 100 years.

MT: Your parents were also born in the area?

BJ: My father and all his brothers and sisters were born somewhere in Monterey County. My father was born on the farm that belongs to the fellows that bought my farm. They were leasing that farm at the time and there was a house, my father was born in that house, which is only a quarter mile from the East border of the farm I had. I don't know where the rest of them were born I just knew about my father.

MT: What about your mother?

BJ: She was born in France, down in the high Pyrenees. Her family immigrated to Chualar in 1908, I think. I don't know if they got to Chualar in 1908 but they settled there some time after that. My mother had an older brother, she was two years old and he was four. They [their parents] left them there [in France] at a convent so she was basically raised by Catholic nuns until she was 13. At first my grandparents said, okay as soon as we get established and get enough money we will send for the children, then the first world war started. They kept blaming the war for not doing it. So somebody who knew them or knew the children, somebody finally shamed them into doing it in 1919. The war is over now it's time to get those children over here. It was a relative or somebody. So they finally sent for them and she came over here in 1919. So she was only 13 years old. In fact, we have an oral history of hers which tells a lot of that story. It just boggles my mind that 13-year-old girl and her 15-year-old brother came all the way from the South of France, and getting on a ship, going through Ellis Island and getting on a train and coming all the way out here. I guess it was some scary times that went with it. Anyway, she finally got here. She had no idea she had brothers and sisters. She discovered she had a whole family here. She had one brother and two sisters.

MT: How did you get along with your parents?

BJ: I used to think they were hard on us but now that I look back I think I can't believe they let us do those things. I guess that kind of puts it right down the middle.

MT: What kind of things did they let you do?

BJ: They let us drive cars and tractors when we were 10 and 11 years old. We all had our own cars and we could drive any place we wanted on the ranch. Of course there were 7000 acres so we were everywhere. We would go out to see who could get up on the highest hill in the mountains. I have one uncle who had been a machinist by trade and came back to the farm. He loved working on cars and he would come over and help me keep my car running so it was kind of neat. I got a lot of support throughout the family.

MT: Did your parents have you put in a lot of work when you were young?

BJ: Kids nowadays would probably think so. We had chores to do and if we didn't get them done we didn't get our dinner until we got it done; that kind of stuff. That was just normal in those days. My father did establish a chicken operation there, about 300 egg laying hens which he turned over to my brothers and me to take care of and manage, to feed the chickens and gather the eggs, to clean the eggs, and sell the eggs, and we could bank that money. We also raised some rabbits, I think, but that didn't seem to work out as well as the chicken deal. We had chores to do on the ranch. It was just expected of us.

MT: Did you ever get into any really big trouble?

BJ: I don't remember any big trouble. The only times I remember, I asked for it. I deserved it. It must've been right after the war, I had this 1915 Dodge that I bought and my brother, my younger brother wasn't interested in cars, but my older brother, and two

of my cousins and I would scour all the junk yards around here looking for parts for these cars. The stores wouldn't have the parts because they're too old. We were just keeping these things running with bailing wire and junk parts. I had this old Dodge and the gear shift on it was backwards. I don't know if you are familiar with stick shift, normally reverse is over to the left and up towards the dashboard, at least for most of the cars that were being built at that time. This Dodge, reverse was down here somewhere, either on the left or the right, but upside down. If you jump out of a regular car, a modern car, then jump into that thing and don't stop and think, you could put it in the wrong gear very easily. This time my father wanted to build a new house because he grew up in this 80 year old Jacks house.

MT: Was it 80 years old back in the 1930s?

BJ: No, I think it was an 1880's house. It might've been older than that. Anyway, he was building this new house with a three car garage with an attached bedroom on the garage and a remote-controlled garage door opener. Boy, this was 1947 or something like that, this was state-of-the-art stuff, a remote control. Well I had my Dodge parked right outside one of the three garage doors. I jumped out of another car and jumped into the Dodge, I thought I'd put it into reverse, and I went right through his brand-new door. I thought, oh shit! He didn't even make me pay for the door. He said, well I could see how that happened. Actually it wasn't damaged as badly as I thought at first, but it was just the idea that he was so proud of it but I thought, oh my God, I'd committed the worst sin I could possibly think of. I don't think they made me stop driving the car. There were occasions where the keys were taken away for the cars that you could take on the road but for the ones we drove on the ranch, they were just kind of like a horse to us. They were our transportation around the ranch.

MT: During Carl's interview, you said you had a brother named Harry Jr who was 2 1/2 years older, and Richard who was 2 1/2 years younger, so you were the middle boy. What were your brothers like when you were growing up?

BJ: I thought my older brother was a genius because I heard stories about when he was about five years old, in those days most people did not have wrist watches, they had pocket watches. He took my father's pocket watch and he decided he wanted to find out how it worked so he took it completely apart. He took every part out of it. Here it was on the table and my parents looked at that and said I guess we should go and buy a new watch because that one is never going to run again, and darn if that kid did not put that back together and it worked as good as ever. And he started tinkering with radios at a very early age. I could never understand what he was doing. It seemed like he was always 10 steps ahead of me. He ended up in television, at a television business. That came along at about the time he grew up and got married. My younger brother, I don't get along with him right now. We probably didn't get along that well when we were living together. I think I felt like he got away with a lot more.

MT: Even as boys you got along with your older brother?

BJ: Very well. He and I just loved working on our cars together.

MT: How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you a happy child?

BJ: I think so. I wasn't unhappy so I guess I was happy. We had a good life growing up there on the farm. We worked a lot. World War II started. I turned 11 three days after the war started so I ended up spending all my summers doing a man's work. I was driving a tractor that was at least 6 feet high.

MT: Did your father go into the military at that time?

BJ: No, but a lot of the hired help was gone and so it was up to my cousins and I. At that time we still had a lot of grain that was normally harvested during the summer vacation. I think that's one of the reasons summer vacations are when they are so the kids can work on the farm. Our job was to bring in that grain harvest because all the men that were doing it had gone into the service. So my older brother, my cousin and myself, and an uncle basically took care of that during the summer.

MT: What is your best memory?

BJ: I don't know if I have one that stands out; getting my first bicycle? I was older than kids are now because they didn't have training wheels in those days. I was probably about six. There was no asphalt anywhere on the farm. We had dirt roads. We had level places to ride bikes. I got scraped up a lot figuring out how to stay on.

MT: Who taught you how to ride a bike?

BJ: Nobody. I think I did. They just gave it to me and said go out there and get on it. My older brother probably helped me. He already had a bike. He would yell at me and tell me what to do, if you call that help. He and I always got along really well.

MT: Did you have any nicknames while you were a boy?

BJ: Bobby. Once I started school I got rid of that.

MT: Did you know what you wanted to do when you grew up?

BJ: Not really. My father wanted to go to college but his family could not afford it so he never went to college. He said he did not want to be a farmer but he became a farmer because it was in the family. So there was always this, you don't have to be a farmer, you can do anything you want. I got a lot of experience on the farm and I actually enjoyed it. Some of it was hard work but a lot of it was pretty rewarding too at times. So, I hadn't made up my mind. I got into Stanford University and I noticed some of my contemporaries from high school were going to UC Davis to study agriculture. After a couple years I thought, hmm, at home I always heard, you don't need an education to be a farmer. Well, maybe in the 19th century that was true. In the 20th century there are guys

with MBAs out there. After a couple of years I thought I really wanted to transfer to Davis. I was told I started there [Stanford] so I'm going to finish there. So I did. I said, well okay, when I do, I want to come back to the farm.

My father wanted to get me off the farm to get a taste of something else so he got me a job working at one of the local banks which is now a Wells Fargo, I think. It was interesting, but by the second year I hated it because I was so used to working outdoors. One of the customers would come in while I was working one of the teller windows and say what a beautiful day it was outside and I would say I wish I was out there. I knew I wanted something outside. I didn't want to be working inside a building. I got a lot of good experience in the bank. I'm not sorry I did it and I think it probably made me more determined to be a farmer. I learned a lot there at the bank. I just worked two summers there. In a way it was fun when I look back on it.

In 1948 and 49, after the war, in those days hardly anybody paid their payroll with checks. There were a few companies that did and they were just starting to convert. Even the County of Monterey paid their payroll in cash. One of the jobs I had, with one of the senior tellers there, was to deliver the payroll to the county courthouse which was about three blocks from the bank. I was just shaking my head after the first time we did that. Since they didn't pay by check, if your pay came to $154.32, you had to have exact change for every person whatever it was. So we had this big bag of money with all the right denominations so they could pay everybody down to the penny, exactly what they had coming. I thought wow this is really inefficient. We had this big bag of money which I think was about $25,000. Nowadays who knows what it is, but in those days that was one heck of a big bag of money. We would have a deputy sheriff car that would pull up outside the side door of the bank. There were two deputies in the car. They would come up and say we're ready for you and then my friend the teller, the older teller that was a full-time worker there, would bring his own car around and we would get in his car with the money. I said we could make a movie out of this! I said, what would happen if we take a right turn when they take a left turn. He said, well I wouldn't be working here much longer. So, we would follow the deputies and they would get out and escort us into the County building. That was one of the funniest parts of that job. It was a straight shot from the bank, about 2 1/2 to 3 blocks to the courthouse so if you took a turn you are in trouble because they knew it was straight to the courthouse.

I enjoyed working at the bank but I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing that. That's when I made up my mind when I was halfway through Stanford. I wanted to come back to the farm. I said that's enough indoor work for me. My father wouldn't let me transfer to UC Davis where I wanted to go. So, I came home and promptly took all the correspondence courses I could from Davis on plant science and all that kind of stuff. I started working again on the farm.

MT: Did Stanford have agricultural courses at that time?

BJ: Not really.

MT: Is there anything else you remember from your childhood that really stands out?

BJ: We had a good time growing up. I had two cousins, and a brother, myself, the four of us were into cars. We would buy these cars and keep them running and we'd run all over those hills. As far as I can recall, as long as we didn't damage anything, none of my uncles objected. In fact, one of my uncles helped me work on my car. We had great times doing that. When the war started we spent the whole summer, my cousins and myself, bringing in the grain harvest, about 3000 acres of grain. It took all summer to bring that in. We'd work 10 hours per day and come home and go swimming. We get up early in the morning and go back to work and not think anything of it.

MT: Did you swim in a pond there?

BJ: My father built a swimming pool in 1940. It wasn't like the pools we have nowadays because it had no filter and there was no heater. The water comes up from the ground at about 64° so by the time the water warmed up above 70° the algae was starting to form. We would have to drain it and scrub the algae out and fill it back up again. That was our job to do that. I swore then that if I ever had a pool it would have a filter and heater so I could enjoy it. In 1940 nobody had a pool. We had good times. We had pool parties and stuff when we were not working. When I worked those summers out there in the fields I think that's where I really got attached to the land. I could see what was coming, the development. You bring on irrigation, all these new crops; it was all becoming a full-blown business. Probably those summers I worked out in the field did more for me. Maybe it was my father's idea that if I worked out in the fields I would decide to do something else for a living, but that didn't work on me.

MT: Where did you go to elementary school?

BJ: Chualar. For high school I went to Salinas. Eight years of elementary school and four years of high school.

MT: Did you like going to school?

BJ: Oh, yeah. There are parts of it you don't like. Certain classes you like better than others. Generally speaking I enjoyed going through school. It was a good experience. We had a large Japanese contingent living in the area and most of my friends were Japanese. I was in the fifth grade or sixth grade in 1941 when Pearl Harbor hit and they took all the Japanese and put them in internment camps. So I lost all my best friends, just like that. I was really ticked off, big-time. I said, those guys are Americans, you can't do that. But they did it.

MT: Did you know where they went?

BJ: No, I lost track of them completely.

MT: Did they come back after the war?

BJ: No. I tried to make contact with three of them. Even with the Internet I thought well now I'll be able to find some of these guys. We found some with the same name and the right age but it was a different guy. So that made a profound impression on me when that happened. People say they did it for their own safety and at that time that was a somewhat valid argument because there were people that thought it was fair game on people who looked like they were Japanese and some did get shot. I had an uncle on my mother's side who got into a gun battle with some guy. There was a Japanese family living in Chualar and this guy was out to hunt them down. My uncle finally ran the guy off. I think his wife called the Sheriff so there would have been a serious problem I guess. It's just the idea that everything they owned they lost. There were some good stories that came out of that. Some of those Japanese did own property through their children. At that time if you weren't an American citizen you couldn't own property; at least that applied to Asian people, Chinese and Japanese. Some owned property and had friends or partners to maintain the property for them. It was there when they came back. I don't know if you're familiar with Tanimura & Antle, a big lettuce company. Tanimura is a big Japanese family. The Antles came out from Oklahoma during the dust bowl. They formed a lettuce shipping company; a big success story. After the war, the Tanimuras became the biggest grower of the lettuce they shipped. The company became so big that Dole bought the company and they had a 'no compete' agreement for five years. They couldn't go back into the business and compete against Dole. So in five years, the Tanimuras and Antles got together and said let's form a new company and we'll all be owners. So here you had Japanese families and families from Oklahoma that merged into one of the biggest lettuce shipping companies in the valley over here now. They financed most of the library over at the University [CSU Monterey Bay]. It's a good story.

MT: A very interesting story.

BJ: Growing up in this area, I've seen a lot of prejudice but I've also seen a lot of people being judged for their ability. This is what happened with this Tanimura & Antle thing. The Antles recognized, these are the best growers we have. We don't want to lose them. And so they formed a partnership or corporation actually with the two families. It's now run by both families. You see a lot of that in this area. They call the U.S. a melting pot, but if you read the history of this county we've had everything here. The one thing we never had when I was growing up was black people. They were almost nonexistent except for the family that owned a ranch just above my family's ranch. They had immigrated here from the South. They brought this couple which, when I was a kid I never did the math. Later I figured out it was a very old couple they brought with them. When I figured out how old they were I realized they must have been slaves of this family when they were back there and they brought them out with them. Those people still worked for them. They were the only black people I knew of when I was a young kid. There was one black family in the town of Salinas and one was a violin teacher. I met him through my piano instructor because I was taking piano lessons. That was the only other black person that I saw. There were none in school when I was there. There

were not that many black people in California until the war. The shipyards, the work, brought them here.

[It was time for Bob to take his eye drops so we decided to stop here and schedule the next interview.]

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