

Joan “Johnnie” Coe

A personal account of Tulsa’s history & the life of a woman who lived there for 98 1/2 years.

Chapter 01 - 1:27

Introduction

Anouncer: Joan Agnes “Johnnie” Coe lived her whole life in Tulsa, Oklahoma, graduating from Central High School and the University of Tulsa. Her parents lived in the downtown area, and she would ride the streetcar to TU. While at TU she joined the Phi Mu Sorority and was active in the local alumni group until her death. Upon graduation Johnnie began her career with Stanolind Oil and Gas Company. This company was sold many times during her 30 years there, eventually being bought by Amoco, then British Petroleum. She retired in 1972 to care for her mother, and by then had been promoted to the position of Senior Clerk in the Controllers Department. Johnnie worked part time an additional six years for a private, local company and then retired for good. Upon retirement she became very active in her beloved First Presbyterian Church, holding the honored position of the longest living member, serving as a Deacon, on the History and Archives Committee, Christian Fellowship Sunday School Class, and the Presbyterian Women’s Circle of Lydia.

Johnnie was born March 10, 1915 and was 98 1/2 years old on October 28, 2013 when she recorded this interview. She died just over two months later, on December 19, 2013. In Johnnie’s oral history interview she talks about the Civil War, the 1921 Race Massacre, cars, the Great Depression and Penny’s Basement.

Johnnie’s friend Mary Ann Hille joins us for this oral history interview on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 11:55

Civil War

John Erling: Today’s date is October 28th, 2013. Johnnie, would you state your full name, please?

Johnnie Coe: Joan Agnes Coe.

JE: And I got to ask you, why does everybody call you “Johnnie”?

JC: Well, my grandfather was a rancher down at Mounds. And the day I was born he came up to see his first grandchild. After looking me over he said to my mother, “Well, Bess, I don’t care what you christen this child, but I want her called ‘Johnnie.’” His name was John McAllister, so I have been Johnnie ever since. And when it came time to get my diploma at TU, Dean Langenheim asked me, “What name do you want on your diploma?” and I said, “Well, I better have Joan on there.” I sign my checks “Joan,” but otherwise I’m Johnnie.

JE: Joining us here is Mary Ann Hille. Mary Ann, you’re here because how is it you’re associated with Johnnie?

Mary Ann Hille: Johnnie and I got to know each other through First Presbyterian Church. We became friends just a couple of years ago, but very good friends. Johnnie had had a spell in the hospital and I went by to visit with her and we just had so much fun talking that we’ve stayed friends. That’s how I got to know her.

JE: Great. Johnnie, your date of birth?

JC: March 10, 1915.

JE: That makes your present age?

JC: Ninety-eight and a half.

JE: Ninety-eight and a half. Where are we recording this interview?

JC: At the Villages of Southern Hills rest home.

JE: Here in Tulsa?

JC: Yes.

JE: You were born in 1915. What was going on? World War I had just begun in July of 1914.

JC: What was going on? Yes.

JE: That lasted until 1918.

JC: Yes.

JE: A lot of things were happening in the year of your birth. In 1915, the United States House of Representatives rejected a proposal to give women the right to vote.

JC: My women folks were not interested in getting to vote. (laughter)

JE: In Washington DC, the first stone of the Lincoln Memorial was put into place in the year that you were born.

JC: I didn’t know that.

JE: Babe Ruth hit his first career home run off Jack Worhop.

JC: There were several interesting things besides me.

JE: Let me ask you at the outset. You’re ninety-eight and a half. Why do you think you’ve been able to live so long?

- JC:** Well, I think I explain that sort of the fact that I spent my summers at a place called Gypsy Camp. A camp for girls that belonged to my grandfather and his wife. It was right on the bank of the Illinois River, where I lived every day in the river, in the boats, on the tennis court, or riding horseback, and eating good meals. I think that kind of gave me a good start.
- JE:** Where were you born?
- JC:** I was born at 905 South Denver, Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- JE:** Right here in Tulsa. In a house?
- JC:** The thing about it was, when my parents decided to get married they bought that little house before they were married, and they had the wedding. They were married there in that little house. We lived there until I was about seven years old. And the outstanding thing that I remember about that place was that my father took 4x4 timbers and built me a swing in the backyard. When mother bought her new house, well I, I was so sorry to go off and leave that nice swing in the backyard for the new family that bought that house.
- JE:** What are your remembrances of that house? Did you have an outhouse outdoor?
- JC:** Oh no, this is 905 South Denver in Tulsa, Oklahoma. No, it would have full plumbing. But I do remember one fact: I enjoyed playing with building blocks. I would play with those blocks and I would go off and not put them away after playing with them. My dad would get up at night to go to the bathroom and he'd step on those blocks. Well he didn't do anything but open the back window and throw them all out in the yard. That wasn't fun—
- JE:** No, I'm sure.
- JC:** ... to step on children's blocks with your bare feet, you know?
- JE:** Your mother's name, her maiden name?
- JC:** Her name was Elizabeth J. McAllister. M-C-A-double L-I-S-T-E-R. They were an old Georgia family that came up here after the Civil War. Some of them settled here in Tulsa and some of them settled in Sapulpa.
- JE:** Did your mother or any of your family talk about Civil War?
- JC:** Well, my grandfather, after I was a little bigger, he told me a few little things.
- JE:** What was his name?
- JC:** John McAllister. For whom I was named. They lived in North Georgia. When the war was going on, Federal troops were rampant in that part of the country. They came into the house and went upstairs and tore up all of the bedding looking for money or silver or jewelry. He was about five years old at the time. They had one mule left from the stock that they had had on the farm. And it was his duty to take that mule down to a canebrake and keep a watch on it all day long so that they would have something to plow the garden when the spring came. His father was a Methodist preacher, so after the war and he was out of prison...

JE: Out of prison?

JC: My great-grandfather was out of prison.

JE: Why was he in prison?

JC: Because he was a Confederate Soldier!

JE: Confederate? Okay.

JC: I forget the battle from which he was taken prisoner. But he said that they were on starvation rations. And a great treat to them was to catch rats and eat them. Said it was really something to eat. So, after he got home from the army, he had one of the hands kill a rat and cook it. He said naturally it was nauseating. He couldn't possibly eat it. He organized a wagon train of thirteen families and brought it out from North Georgia to Southwest Missouri. They settled around Springfield and Republic, Missouri.

JE: It was your great-grandfather?

JC: The man that led the wagon train.

JE: Right.

JC: His name was Wesley Mastin McAllister. He was born and reared there in North Georgia. They came from the old country before the Revolutionary War. Anyway, after they came out here, my grandfather grew up. As a young man, they go out to seek their fortune and he went to Colorado. He got into a freighting business. I've seen some pictures out at Gilcrease of the men got in those coaches and wagons at night. But anyway, other things were in the making.

Over in Buckie, Banffshire, Scotland, a young lady had been raised as a very skilled musician. And as a graduation gift from her family, they sent her to America to visit some of her relatives out in Colorado. So, grandma came on the sailing ship and it landed somewhere on the Great Lakes. There was a port that her boat came to. She then came out to this town in southern Colorado.

I will never forgive myself for not finding out from my grandfather the circumstances of their meeting and courtship, but anyway, they were married at Leadville, Colorado. When we took a trip out there when I was a child, we went to Leadville and saw all the remains of this little building where they were married.

He thought, since he was going to be a family man, that he would get into something more substantial. His parents, and brothers and sisters, lived down in this part of the world, so they came down here and he went into business in Springfield, Missouri. Well, the Panic of 1893 came along and it wiped him out.

JE: Tell us what that was, the Panic of 1893.

JC: Well, it was just where businesses went broke. They had lost their businesses and just out of luck, you know, for a job. He had a couple of children by then. He got acquainted with Mr. Dickerson of the Dickerson Goodman Company. Mr. Dickerson sent him to

Tulsa and opened their business here. Which he ran very successfully for them until in the late 1890's when he became postmaster of Tulsa.

JE: Your grandfather?

JC: Mhm.

JE: John McAllister?

JC: Mhm.

JE: He came here to Tulsa?

JC: Yes.

JE: And then he became the postmaster?

JC: Yes. But it was just a political appointment. Didn't last very long. I remember the man that was postmaster at the time calling mother and ask if she had a portrait of grand-daddy. Said they were having a group of pictures of all their postmasters down there in the post office. So, mother found a good photograph we had. So, he is down at the post office. And, of course, he's around our house too.

JE: Your father then. Your father's name?

JC: My father's name is Claude Coe. Emmett Claude Coe, which a name none of us liked. He was from a town called Parker's Landing, Pennsylvania. There was a good-sized family of them. I think Grandfather Coe, his name was Sammie Wallis Coe, came out here for the same reasons that Grand-daddy McAllister came to Tulsa. He lost his business in Parker, so he moved his family out here. The oil boom had just started here in Tulsa about that time. My dad had worked on the drilling wells as a young man, so when he came out here, he and his brother Ross went to work for some of the oil companies around town. Had a little company that they owned but they didn't get along very well so that was dissolved early on.

JE: You said earlier you weren't sure how your mother and father met?

JC: Well, I think there's only one answer to that, really: at the Presbyterian Church. Because that was the social meeting place for the young people of Tulsa. I'm positive that is where they met. Mother never said as much, but I feel sure that was it.

JE: So that was First Presbyterian?

JC: Oh, absolutely.

JE: Downtown?

JC: Absolutely. My grandmother from Scotland was a very devout member of the Presbyterian Church.

JE: Any other Civil War stories or anything beyond what you just said?

JC: Well, I just know that they came in wagon trains. To get out, they traveled on the military roads, and they were corduroy roads. The military in getting from place to place would cut down trees and lay them next to each other to get through the mud.

- JE:** And then they'd drive across it.
- JC:** And then they'd drive across them with their mules.
- JE:** It took a long time, didn't it?
- JC:** Well, that was a long time, that was a long time.
- JE:** Did we mention your grandmother's name? You talked about your grandfather.
- JC:** Her name was Lizzie, that's all I ever heard it spoken of as, Lizzie Gettis McAllister. She was from Buckie, Banffshire, Scotland. She was born and reared, and she had an excellent education in music. That's why she came to America, because they gave her the trip to America as a graduation gift, her family. Her father came over for the marriage. He went back home and there were three Gettis brothers. They built fishing sloughs and they had a place where they salted down the cod. And another one, his business was making the casts for the cod. So David Gettis, that's my great-grandfather, went back home after Lizzie was married and sold his interest in the businesses and brought his family back to America, which consisted of a wife and son. They settled in Springfield, Missouri, where they lived the rest of their lives.
- JE:** Did you have brothers and sisters?
- JC:** Yes, I have one brother. He was born in '21. He's a widower. He now lives on the family property there at the camp near Siloam Springs, Arkansas.
- JE:** So, he's like ninety...
- JC:** He's ninety-two. August I think he was ninety-two.
- JE:** So does this long living gene exist then in parents and grandparents?
- JC:** Well...
- JE:** You all lived to be a ripe old age as they say.
- JC:** Well, Grandpa McAllister, he lived in Sapulpa, he was the retired minister, and I think he was in his nineties when he died. And my aunt lived to be in her nineties; mother's only sister. Well, all McAllisters were fairly long-lived.

Chapter 03 - 7:55

Education

- John Erling:** Let's talk about your education. The first school you attended?
- Johnnie Coe:** The first school I attended was Horace Mann Junior High School at 10th and Boston. And I couldn't have a bicycle because it was too dangerous for me to get from where we lived over to school on a bicycle. We lived on South Main by that time, across from J.E. Crosby's mansion. They said, "You can't have a bicycle. It's just too dangerous."

JE: Because you were crossing a busy...?

JC: Crossing 15th and crossing Boston to get to school. My mother just thought that was too much traffic and they knew how to nail me down. She said, "Now, Johnnie, if you want to spend your bank account for a bicycle, you may do so." They knew Johnnie was not going to spend her money down in the bank for a bicycle. Consequently, I didn't have a bicycle till I was grown.

JE: How old were you then?

JC: Oh, I was probably ten or twelve.

JE: And where did you get that money for that bank account?

JC: Oh, my, well, I hesitate to tell this one. Of course, all the men in our family were in the oil field. We had a great big basement under our house and a washing machine with a wringer on it. So, naturally all those clothes were shed, were brought to Tulsa on the weekends when they were home and were washed. Well, that long underwear was fastened with buttons, and many of those buttons came off in the washing machine.

JE: In the wringer?

JC: In the wringer, yeah. So, I was paid one cent for every button that I sewed on that long underwear. That was how I made my first million. (laughter)

Mary Ann Hille: Tell him about the Lilah Lindsey School, where you went to grammar school.

JC: Oh, yeah. Well, Tulsa changed its school system around and then it started having junior high schools when I was in about the fourth or fifth grade. So, I didn't go to Horace Mann School anymore, I went to Riverview, which was over on Frisco. Lilah D. Lindsey was a Indian lady that had plenty of money. She gave the land for that school over there. Big area. They built that school there, and then she also gave the land in the park over there. Owen Park, where they moved the first house that was built in Tulsa, which I know nothing about. It's just an old log house in Owen Park that's up north near the Tulsa Country Club.

MH: Near Denver and Edison.

JC: And also, Kennedys, they had a farm and they would have a pioneer picnic every year and invite all the old citizens to come to this picnic where they would reminisce and take pictures, you know. Just have a general good time. There's a memorial stone there in the park, and it has on it the names of some of the heiresses, and John H. McAllister is one of the names on that stone.

JE: So, this school...?

JC: Oh, the school. Well, some of these bigwigs around town here decided that they'd rather have a, oh, I don't even know how to classify, a fancier name for the school, anyway. So, they changed the name from Lindsey School to Riverview. That's all torn down now. It was over there on Facebook.

MH: Oh, okay, yeah.

JC: That was Riverview School, and they've torn that all down now.

JE: There is a Riverview School in town. I don't know if that's the same.

JC: It's not the same one, because they've torn that area all down. And Mrs. Lindsey died on the charity of the Presbyterian Church.

MH: She had a lot of money, but she'd lost it all? What happened?

JC: Mhm. People just conned old ladies, you know, (laughter) out of money. I remember when she died. Mother took me out of school to attend the funeral, of course, at the First Presbyterian Church. She thought that was an important thing in Tulsa history was the demise of Lilah D. Lindsey. Isn't that charitable place over there?

JE: Lilah.

MH: Lindsey House.

JC: They've got an old apartment house over there across from where the coliseum used to be. The Presbyterian Church has taken that as a haven for mommas when husbands leave them with little kids and they're generally in a bad fix. Called the Lindsey House, after Mrs. Lindsey.

JE: Elementary, then in junior high school?

JC: I went to Horace Mann School for junior high school, and then to Tulsa High School and I graduated in '32. One episode there was I was not a child that stayed around in the house and learned to cook and do all that good stuff. So, when I went to high school, mother went to the lady who was the head of the home economics department and said, "I want Johnnie to take cooking." In those days, you spent one semester in cooking and one semester in sewing. Mother said, "Johnnie can learn to sew at home, but I want her to learn to cook at school." So, Ms. Firth would've let us, but I never did take sewing at school I took the cooking. But my brother always said, "If Johnnie'd get married, mother would have to go with her to do the cooking."

JE: So, even though you were taught how to cook, that was something you weren't interested in.

JC: That just wasn't my thing. I'd rather have a tennis racket in my hand.

JE: Okay, and what year did you graduate again, for us?

JC: '32.

JE: 1932.

JC: Mhm.

JE: Let's talk about in Tulsa. Stores in downtown Tulsa.

JC: Oh, yes.

JE: Where would the kids go?

JC: Well, along Main Street there were lots of small shops that had reasonable prices. There

was shoe stores where you could get a flashy looking little pair of shoes for \$3.95, you know. Places like that.

JE: You remember the names of any of those stores?

JC: That was Chandler's. They were right there along on Main Street. Then right nearby was, um, Leslie Seidenbach's store. My mother was a great customer of Seidenbach. In fact, that's where she bought my riding clothes.

JE: Your riding clothes?

JC: Horseback riding. They kept a horse at one of the riding stables here in town for me.

JE: Your parents did?

JC: Mhm. I had black and white checked jodhpur trousers, and a white linen jodhpur trousers. They're the kind of pants that button on the legs. And I had knee-high boots, and the jodhpur boots. A red felt jacket and a little red jockey cap. That was my outfit.

JE: Now, you looked pretty classy there didn't you?

JC: I looked pretty good. I gave that outfit to a museum, I think, and they put it on a figure out there for a while.

JE: Was it competitive riding?

JC: No, a lot of the families enjoyed riding.

JE: And where was the horse kept? Do you remember the location?

JC: That was called Burgess Stables. It was way down there on Riverside Drive. Must have been around 51st or 61st. Some place way down there.

JE: Way out in the country.

JC: Oh, yeah. When my dad would take me down there for me to go riding, there was a colored man who was in charge of the place. He would get old Billy saddled up and bring him out, and he'd get on him and he'd make him kind of stand up on his back legs, you know, try to scare me, (laughter) so I think. Anyway, then he would get off he would get off, and I would go - I'd just wandered around over the country roads. One of my main routes was 41st street past Bolewood. Mr. Boles was interested in horses. They had a farm and a riding ring down there. I just wandered in there one day without permission. So the man in charge there came out and asked me what was going on. And I told him I was just having a little horseback ride. For some reason he was particularly kind, so ever after that that was part of my route. I would ride around the Bolewood riding ring. Of course they carried that course to the country and I rode it at will.

JE: You played tennis too?

JC: I love tennis! Helen Wills Moody was one of my star players, and then there was a man. I forgot what his name was. But I never have gotten over loving tennis.

JE: Did you play for the school, for Tulsa Central?

JC: No, I never did. I just played in the summer time. Just at the camp. We had tournaments.

JE: Do you remember people in high school around that era, in 1932, of anybody that you were friends with?

JC: No, not particularly. I still have my tom-tom. That was the name of our yearbook, "The Tom-tom". If I look through it, why, I'd recall some of these people.

Chapter 04 - 6:25

1921 Race Riot

John Erling: The 1921 Race Riot. You would have been, like, six years old.

Johnnie Coe: Oh, but I do remember it well. My grandfather had a ranch down at Mounds. He had a colored couple that lived on it, took care of it. My aunt had a little hospital called the PNS over on South Carson. She had a colored couple that worked there. My parents had a colored couple that lived at our house. So, mother had all six of those people in her basement for the entire, however many days...

JE: Three days, or so.

JC: Three or four days that it lasted, but the main item of interest about that was—a colored man that ran to the back door of Mr. C.W. Kerr's house. C.W. Kerr was our pastor at that time, and they lived at 1738 South Boston. One morning, while the riot was still in progress, a colored man ran up on the back porch and banged on the doors, said, "Let me in, let me in!" Aunt Annie was working there in the kitchen. It scared her to death, but she didn't want to see the fellow killed. He said, "They're going to kill me!" So she let him in. He says, "Hide me, hide me!" She says, "Well, I don't know where to hide you." Finally, in desperation, she says, "Could you get in under the sink?" He said, "Let's try it." So, she took the trashcan from under the sink, and he crammed himself in there.

Just about that time, two roughnecks ran up on the back porch, and said, "We're looking for a you-know-what, and we thought he came this way." They said, "We would like to come in and search the house." Well, she was afraid not to let them. So they came in and they gave the house a good search. They commenced with the main floor, and they went to the basement, then they went upstairs, and to the attic, and out to the garage, and then through the quarters, and then they left. She then opened the door to under the sink and the man got out. He was soaking wet, and she said, "I didn't know my sink was leaking." He says, "Your sink ain't leaking, ma'am. That's sweat." She said, "Well, we can take care of that." So she took him upstairs to her son's room and gave him a dry outfit of clothing. She showed him the bathroom and said, "You can get you a bath and put these clothes on and come downstairs." Which he did. Ever after that, at least as

long as he lived in Tulsa, he came and did their yard, and was their general handyman. But Annie Kerr was famous for that remark. She didn't know her sink was leaking. (laughter) It was the man's perspiration.

JE: And, you knew about that story because your mother and father knew her?

JC: Annie Kerr was Annie Coe Kerr. She was one of my daddy's sisters.

JE: Okay.

JC: There were quite a few of them. Four or five of them. You know, there was a young man that was said to be the one who annoyed this white girl, and they had him in jail. In fact, there was a bunch of them who, uh, wanted to get him out and kill him. So, the colored ministers and Mr. Kerr had a very good relationship. I think it was because the part of the country where he was raised, which was Northeast Pennsylvania, and a lot of these colored preachers were abolitionists. Political affiliation there. Anyway, they called on Uncle Charlie, and said, would he come down and stop the riot at the courthouse? He said he would.

So, Hawley, his son, took him down to the courthouse and he stopped them from getting the man out of jail and killing him. But instead of going home, the rioters gathered themselves together and went up to Greenwood and started tearing down the town up there. Demolished the storefronts and burned the houses and burned their new church and I don't know what all they did. As a result of that, it left a lot of them without any place to sleep. So Uncle Charlie told the ministers, "We can take in a number of these and give them shelter in the basement of the Presbyterian Church." They did, and then they fed them. Well, there was some of the people in the church that didn't think much of that idea, so they called him to task and said, "How come you took those blacks in and fed them on our money without asking our permission?" He said, "I didn't know permission was needed."

JE: And he was the pastor?

JC: He was the pastor for forty-one years.

JE: Kerr?

JC: C.W. Kerr. Good 'ole Yankee boy. When they told him all that, why, he says, "Well, my wife and I have a savings account. We can recompense the church for all the money they spent, or on second thought," he said, "we've been here twenty-one years now, maybe it's time we found a new pastor." He says, "I'm sorry, I have to leave. I've got a funeral to preach." So he left the meeting. Well, the minute he got out the door they decided they didn't want him to leave. Because the church was just bursting at the seams, there had been a lot of talk about a new church. So they said, "Let's tell him we'll build a new church." They advised him of that, and of course he was delighted. They needed a new church. The brick building was getting beyond taking care of everything. Besides getting

a new church out of the deal, they promised the family a trip to the Holy Land, which they took. While there, Annie Kerr got bottle of water from the River Jordan, which I have been told, that she pasteurized on her traveling iron. Then they used that for the baptism the next Sunday, Easter Sunday. And my brother and I were lucky enough to be among those who were baptized with the River Jordan water.

JE: Mmm.

JC: That was the information from their grandson, Stephen Kerr. That story.

JE: When the riot was on, you weren't witnessed to see anything? You were kept in the house?

JC: No, always stayed in the house, yeah. Stayed at home.

Mary Ann Hille: Johnnie, tell him about being on the porch with your mother when...

JC: Oh, yeah, well, we had a huge front porch on our house. Mother had it full of plants and everything. So, she was out there watering it one morning while the riot was in process. A man came running down Main Street and ran across our yard between our house and our neighbors', and there was somebody coming down the street. Some men in a car and they were shooting at this fella. And the shots passed between the porch pillar and the main part of our house with mother and me out there on the porch. So, we went in the house. He got across our yard and into the Taylor's and there was a retaining wall. All those old properties down there had alleys in that part of town, and he jumped over that alley wall and got away.

JE: You could have easily been killed.

JC: Oh, we could have easily been shot. Yes, very easily.

Chapter 05 - 4:25

Bottle of Vino

John Erling: Out of high school. When you graduated from high school in 1932, then what do you do?

Johnnie Coe: Well, of course I went to camp in the summer. When I came home, my dad had gone out and made arrangements for me to be a student at the University of Tulsa. So, that's what I did. I went there for four years. I think they all thought I was going to be a History teacher because I was so interested in history, but somehow, I got interested in business. They imported a man from western Pennsylvania named Paxson. They had him start at TU School of Business Administration. So, I got a little job in his student assistant. I graded papers for Dr. Paxson. Of course I mentioned Northwest Arkansas. It

was famous for its vino. So a lot of the teachers liked vino and they commissioned me to bring them a bottle of vino every once in a while.

JE: And vino was what?

JC: Grape jack.

JE: Grape jack?

JC: Grape wine. To get to TU there was just one way if you didn't walk, and that was to ride the streetcar. One morning I had a sack full of papers from grading. I'd been to Arkansas and bought the wine for Ms. Goldwell and one of the other ladies. Got out to school and went to her classroom and Dr. Packson to give him these papers from the economics kids. They were all stained with wine. The jolting of the streetcar had caused the bottles to seep. So, I was notorious there for a day or two. (laughter) I graduated from there in '36 in business administration.

JE: Were there very many women going to TU then at that time?

JC: Well, no, there weren't. The number of women graduates was especially low when you line them up side by side. There weren't nearly as many girls as there were boys. Of course, the big thing out there at that time was petroleum engineering.

JE: Well, the second oil boom actually hit in Tulsa from 1915 to 1930, we were into that.

JC: Well, that would have been about the time.

JE: You were...right.

JC: Waite Phillips built a building out there.

JE: For TU?

JC: For TU, mhm. You wouldn't know TU now. At least, I could get my way around.

JE: So, Waite Phillips, any other remembrances?

JC: I forget who gave the music building. And then there was the library. I don't remember who gave that either.

Mary Ann Hille: McFarlin?

JC: McFarlin Library.

MH: McFarlin?

JC: That beautiful campus, you know, that library was back there and that's where they held the commencement. They built a stage out there in front of the library and that's where they had the commencement exercises. The year I graduated anyway.

JE: Can you talk about music you might have listened to then, or places you listened to music in Tulsa?

JC: I was not very active socially at that time. I mean I didn't go around to lots of parties and things like that. My people were very reserved. So, they didn't really go in for all that kind of stuff, and as a young lady, I didn't either. But, there was one place that was famous here that everybody went and enjoyed and that was called Cain's, up on the north side up there. The man that was the star there was Wills. I think that was his name.

- JE:** Yes, yes, it was.
- JC:** Yeah. Well, of course, the young people, we all went up there on Saturday nights and had a lot of fun.
- JE:** Western swing?
- JC:** Western swing. So I had an occasion to go east and visit some people. Mrs. Dorothy Carnegie was a relative of ours and I went up to visit Dorothy. She was writing some biographies of well-known men and one of them was a Wills. One of her interviews was with him and she took me. We went up to his studio or dressing room or something and we saw just racks of beautiful clothing that he wore. I remember that very well.
- JE:** Back then in that oil boom, we had people like you've referred to, Waite Phillips, but Bill Skelly, William G. Skelly, and J. Paul Getty.
- JC:** I didn't know anything about Mr. Getty, but of course I knew the Skelly building down there at 4th and Boulder. He gave Skelly Stadium to the University of Tulsa. I think that was a shame to change the name of that away from Bill Skelly.
- JE:** Then because of the oil, you had a symphony, professional ballet.
- JC:** Yep.
- JE:** Opera companies.
- JC:** Oh, yes, we did. These old gals around Tulsa that had husbands that were very well to do, they spent it on stuff like that.
- JE:** Yeah.
- JC:** They saw that Tulsa society had that. They certainly did.
- JE:** It was in that era then that Waite Phillips donated his mansion, Philbrook, to the city to be used as an Art Museum.
- JC:** That's right. Yeah, that was quite a gift.

Chapter 06 - 5:15

Cars

- John Erling:** Women's right to vote was August 20, 1920. You were five years old. Do you recall the first election when you voted?
- Johnnie Coe:** Yes, I do recall the first election when I voted for President of the United States was the first year that Franklin Roosevelt was elected.
- JE:** Did you vote for him?
- JC:** Yes, I did.
- JE:** That had to have been a proud time for you to be able to...and he was...

JC: Well, I was proud to have gotten big enough to vote.

JE: Cars.

JC: Oh my goodness. Cars were a big thing in my family. My dad and my grandfather, mother's father, ran a little race on who could have the fanciest car. My dad liked Pierce-Arrows and my grandfather like Packards. Each one would see who could get a new one first.

JE: I would say then that your family was fairly well-to-do because Fords were driven generally.

JC: Well, my dad got tired of driving Fords in the field, of course he was always out on the well. So, he would take mother's car which would be a nice soft-top sedan car. He had the back of it cut off and a bit rack put on the back of that car so he didn't have to rattle his bones in a Model T. And he'd drive that big old car to the field. My mother's sister was a lady who enjoyed painting china. And there was a lady in Siloam Springs who was a teacher and Ms. Etta took painting from her. Well one day she was there for her lesson and a little group of women there, they took a little breather and were sitting out on the porch and a ratty looking car drove by. One of the ladies said, "My, there's a tough looking pair in that car." And Ms. Etta said, "Well, that's my brother-in-law and my brother." (laughter) They just left the field without getting cleaned up. It took about, at least, eight hours to drive from here to Siloam Springs in those days.

JE: And that's because the roads were not good?

JC: The roads were perfectly horrible. The Verdigris Bottom over there where Commerce is now. That was just a mudhole and in the Spring we always went right after school was out. My dad would drive mother's car through cause he could drive anything through the mud. Then he would come back and drive the field car with all our stuff on it. When we first went to Siloam Springs, that little town, this was just hillsides out there, the little town was very inadequate. They had a lumber yard, and they had a little hotel, and hardware store. But there wasn't a plumbing fixture in that town. Every bit of the plumbing fixtures from mother's house was carried up there on the back of the field car. Bathtubs, toilets, sink, whatever, and there was a little sidebar on the bathroom stuff.

A lady friend of my aunt's came up there to spend a day or two. She had to go out at night. In telling this, she said, "I just didn't want to go out on the hillside to that outhouse." So, she said, "I decided I'd just rather buy Bess a pan." So she reached in the darkness of the kitchen and got a pan out and used it. Well, she was quiet surprised to find out that she used a colander and it ran through all over the floor. (laughter)

JE: Do you remember the first car you drove?

JC: Oh, yeah, I sure do. My dad was terrible. When I was going to college and high school, he never let me drive the car. But my Grandfather McAllister, I guess I was his pet from the day one, over at the camp he had to go to town every day for the supplies for the

kitchen. I most often went with him, and he would let me drive the car home from Siloam Springs. It was six miles down to our place from town. One day he was letting me drive and I steered the car wrong and went in the ditch alongside of the little country road. Grand-daddy was not an excitable man. He said, "Get it back up on the road, Sis." So I steered it and we got back up on the road. And that was the end of that episode. "Get it back up on the road, Sis." He was just that kind of a guy.

Mary Ann Hille: Tell him about riding around with your cousin. When she'd take you for joy rides.

JC: Oh yeah! This girl was pretty much my age. She and I graduated from high school together. The first thing that we did after graduation, her mother had let her drive their car to the exercises at the Coliseum. Then they'd come in their other car. Well, Virginia and I went to her house and the first thing she did was go in the pantry and got this bottle of whiskey out and she poured each of us a little dollop of whiskey. That was how we celebrated graduation. Virginia also liked to smoke. Her daddy wouldd let her have the car on Sunday afternoon and we'd go for a drive. Virginia would smoke. Well, once in a while I would smoke. One afternoon I came home with a hole under my Sunday dress. My dear father saw that and that wasn't so good. (laughter)

JE: How would they punish you?

JC: Usually, my mother didn't believe in...

JE: Spanking or switching?

JC: Whooping, spanking or switching, no. It was just a good old talk, which I haven't ever forgotten.

MH: You didn't get to go riding with Virginia any more, did you?

JC: No, I didn't go with Virginia anymore. That was the end of that.

Chapter 07 - 4:55

The Depression

John Erling: 1929 the Stock Market crashed, the Great Depression, are there any memories?

Johnnie Coe: Oh yes, it was pretty hard. Mother had brothers. Two of them lost their jobs and they had a hard time. Mother helped them a great deal, and the drilling business wasn't so hot either. So, things were leaner.

JE: The depression ended in 1932.

JC: Well I was going to TU in 1932.

JE: Okay.

JC: I imagine that's kind of why that wine episode happened.

- JE:** Did people come to your door begging or anything?
- JC:** Oh, I think they had our house marked. Mother felt like it. In that old neighborhood there on South Main. All that little part in there had alleys in the back. Like this would be Baltimore up here and this would be Main Street up here, well right here in the middle then there was an alley. We had a concrete rock wall along our alley. Mother felt like that they kept a mark on that wall because they were constantly coming to our back porch looking for something to eat, or maybe something to do. She often kept straggly looking colored boys stay in the basement all night or something of that sort, you know.
- JE:** So she would help and she would give food or put them to work?
- JC:** Oh, she gave food or clothing to them lots of times.
- JE:** That was because of the Great Depression?
- JC:** Yes.
- JE:** In Tulsa, blacks in the fifties and sixties, when you went to go downtown shopping and all, did you recall seeing blacks only or whites only?
- JC:** No, I don't particularly remember that, but I knew that blacks didn't ride the streetcars in the front seat or anything like that.
- JE:** When Greenwood was really booming, it was a wonderful place in Tulsa: largest, wealthiest of Oklahoma's African American communities. It was a hotbed of jazz and blues in the twenties.
- JC:** Yes. Well, I wasn't old enough to participate in that.
- JE:** So you didn't get up - did your family go into the Greenwood area at all? Do you remember going there?
- JC:** Only except maybe to pick up or take home a domestic person, you know, that my mother had.
- JE:** Okay.
- JC:** Maybe she'd drive them home or something like that. That's all.
- JE:** Did you have, as you call them "domestics," ever since you could remember early on?
- JC:** Always, always.
- JE:** Become fond of them? I mean they were probably part of your family?
- JC:** Well, no, not really. Except that we got to know them very well. There was one colored boy that we got to know pretty well. His name was Jessie Oliver. He stayed in our quarters for a year or two. He wanted to make some extra money. So, he decided that he'd like to wait tables at the Tulsa Club, or something of that sort, so my aunt taught him how to serve at the table. After he had his first little job, little weekend job at the Tulsa Club, he reported. He said, "I served the table and I didn't drop nothing on nobody." In other words: he didn't spill a thing when he served the place. (laughter) "I didn't drop nothing on nobody."

- JE:** What's your earliest recollection of radio, listening to the radio?
- JC:** Well, we had a good friend named Frederick Boilson and he was the purchasing agent for the Public Service Company of Oklahoma. He had the first radio that I ever listened to. It was a little box. Mr. Boilson knew it was a treat for me to come and put the headphones on and listen to his radio.
- JE:** Did you eventually get a radio in your own house?
- JC:** Oh yeah, we finally got a radio and it was in a cabinet with legs that were about as high as this table. In fact, I still have that cabinet. I cut it down and I keep stuff in it in the part where the radio once was. I later got interested in hi-fi and that kind of stuff. A good friend of mine could build that kind of stuff. So, Charles Wesley would build me an awful nice set that I had for years and years. It played records and radio as well.
- JE:** Do you remember hearing Franklin Roosevelt, the President, on the radio?
- JC:** Oh, oh yes, that was quite an event. We all listened to Mr. Roosevelt. That was my first vote, when he was inaugurated the first time.
- JE:** Yeah, he had fireside chats.
- JC:** Oh yes, we'd always listen. He did a great deal for Northwest Arkansas.
- JE:** What was that?
- JC:** Built schools, cleared timber, and rebuilt the town of Siloam Springs. Just blossomed under Roosevelt. The improvements that they made in that little town.
- JE:** He was responsible too for the dam that was built at Grand Lake.
- JC:** Yes.
- JE:** They arranged for him to have a stop there at Disney in the late thirties. So they had it in his attention and when they went back, told them that because of that, they authorized the building...
- JC:** Of Grand River Dam.
- JE:** Right.
- JC:** He did a lot for us.
- JE:** Did you remain a Democrat, then, the rest of your life?
- JC:** Well sure, I hope it isn't over yet.
- JE:** It is not, truly, but the part the part that you have lived?
- JC:** (laughter) Well, I've stayed pretty much a Democrat.

Chapter 08 - 8:10**December 7, 1941**

John Erling: Where were you and how did you hear about Pearl Harbor, December 7th, 1941?

Johnnie Coe: Oh, I was in Siloam Springs, Arkansas fixing to come home. We usually would leave on Sunday afternoon about two or three o'clock because it took three or four hours to drive over here in those days. So, we were just fixing to come home when we got the word. The barber there in Siloam Springs, my grandfather was a customer of his, and his son had been killed. And that was the big news around Siloam Springs that day.

JE: That he was in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese, and his son...yeah.

JC: Mhm, when this young man was killed. Mhm.

JE: Did that impact your family in any way?

JC: My cousins, practically all of them on both sides of the family, and my brother all went to the service. My brother was in the Air Corps. Two or three of them were in the Air Corps. The others were just soldiers.

JE: You would have been twenty-five or twenty-six in 1941.

JC: Mhm, yeah.

JE: There was rationing, do you remember?

JC: Oh yeah, I remember the ration. My aunt was a nurse. She was able to get coupons for gasoline.

JE: Rationing stamps I guess you we called that.

JC: Rationing stamps for gasoline and for tires because of her work. So, that didn't keep me from driving to and from Siloam Springs practically every week. (laughter)

JE: Do you remember the first car that you bought?

JC: Yeah, I surely do. One of my cousins, Bruce McAllister, was just born to be a mechanic. All of his life he mechaniced on cars. Even when he was going to high school, he worked at a garage across the street there. So he got from them a Model A Ford sedan. Boy, he suped that booger up until it was quite a car! So when he got ready to go to the army, he sold me that car for a hundred dollars, and that was the first car I ever had to drive. My dad was not good about letting me drive the family car. I don't know whether it was because money being kind of short, he maybe didn't have insurance, or whatever it was, but anyway, he always took me wherever I had to go. When I got Bruce's car, boy, I really put it through the works during the war. I drove that thing.

That was another thing, you know, the bridge on the Grand River washed out and you had to go on a ferry to get across. It didn't bother me to drive on at night. So I would sometimes get to that ferry after dark. I was waiting there in line one night and a man come up to the car, gave me a sad story about his car was broke down, his family was

sitting up there, he needed to get to Tulsa. Could I give him a ride? Well, I wasn't very smart so I told him to get in and I drove him to his kinfolks here in town. Well, when I told that the next week, my Uncle Dave, he said, "Don't you ever let anybody get into that car with you. Not ever." So I never did after that.

JE: Would you have been wearing nylons then? That was difficult to find.

JC: Oh yeah, sure I did, but every now and then there were ways of getting hosiery.

JE: What do you mean "ways"?

JC: Well just tradeoff. I don't remember any particular way. Just that never did go without them. We'd iron them up sometimes. We'd sewed up around our, at least at our house, we did.

JE: If there were runs in those nylons, you fixed them?

JC: We sewed them up with needle and thread, very often.

JE: How about clothes that you wore? Women wore skirts in public. Is that true, and maybe did not wear pants in public?

JC: I really don't know anything about that.

JE: Because wearing pants or skirt was not an issue to you?

JC: No, uh-uh. I always had worn trousers in the country riding horseback and doing that kind of thing.

JE: Back then, forties and fifties, when you went downtown, did people dress up?

JC: Oh yes, absolutely. You didn't go to town unless you had a suit, and your pocketbook, and your gloves, and your hat went with it.

JE: It was...

JC: ...kept you completely outfitted. That was just the thing you did.

JE: Yeah. It was your Sunday go-to-meetin' clothes.

JC: Well, anytime you went downtown. That was important.

JE: During World War II, did you hear anything about the German concentration camps or things like that?

JC: Not particularly. That kind of information just didn't get down to our level, I guess.

JE: Did you play tennis at TU?

JC: Oh yes.

JE: Did you play for the school?

JC: No. I never did play on their tennis team, but I sure played a lot out there. I should say so.

JE: You graduated from TU when?

JC: '36.

JE: And a degree in?

JC: Business Administration.

JE: Then what did you do?

JC: Well I loafed around for about a year. Did little odd jobs. A lady friend whom I knew worked for the Oklahoma State Employment Service. Her name was Pauline Wood. She was a good Presbyterian. Every now and then she'd get me a little part time job. I'd work a month or maybe two months, or something like that. But finally one day she called and said, "We're losing so many young men to the service, I'm an employment person at Stanolin Oil & Gas, and if you want a job down here come on down." So I was down there the next day and she got me a job.

I kept track of machine tools and we typed up what we called "property record cards." The field would send in a sheet of paper listing so many thousand feet of six-inch pipe or whatever. Then we'd take those sheets and type a property record card. Business machines were just commencing to get popular about that time. So then they'd take those or make a run off of those and make vouchers. You were supposed to do five or six hundred of those cards in a day. I did that for quite a while. Then I got promoted from \$3.25 an hour to about \$4.00 an hour, after I'd done that for six months.

JE: How long did you work there?

JC: Thirty years.

JE: So you moved up the ranks then and...?

JC: Oh, pretty well. I got to be a senior clerk. That was about as good as they ever let a woman get. There was very much discrimination between the men and the women in pay. I trained many an ole boy.

JE: And he ended up making more money than you?

JC: And he ended up making a lot more than I did, that's right.

JE: Did you just accept that that's the way it was?

JC: Well now, that's just the way it was, yes. But Stanolin changed hands two or three times. They were bought by bigger companies, and then they divided up. The company had really grown, it was really fast moving. They had a field office in Oklahoma City, another one in Denver, and another one up in Montana somewhere. So every so often they would send a half a dozen people from this town, say to Oklahoma City, and two or three more over to Houston, or wherever they had these other offices. But every time it got around to where it looked like I might be decentralized I called on an old school friend named Jim Kendal. He was the assistant comptroller. We had gone to school together. So, I'd tell him my sad story of I had my dear mother to look after. I didn't want to go up there and blah blah blah. So I never did have to go. (laughter)

JE: Thirty years.

JC: Finally there at the last, they were going to close this office. So, it was either go to Chicago, where they were going to send everybody, or take what we called the "golden handshake," early retirement. I told the early retirement. I told the golden handshake.

Then I went to work for a lady, called Billie Dollhite. She was a most unusual woman, business wise. She had what was called Tulsa Tank Cleaning. She had a business all over the country. She had a field office in Detroit, one down in Louisiana, and the one here, and one somewhere else. But they cleaned those fifty-thousand-barrel oil tanks, like over here at West Tulsa. They cleaned those oil tanks. Her partner in that business lived down the street from me and we caught the bus on the same corner. She knew I was taking a golden handshake, so she said, "We need somebody over at West Tulsa at the office if you want to come." So, I went over there and I did everything over there. I made the coffee and put the toilet paper in the rolls and I did everything over there for about eight years. Then mother's brother died and she said, "It's time you retired for good." So I quit. But I enjoyed working for those old girls.

JE: Yeah?

JC: They were nice to me.

Chapter 09 - 6:48

Modern Conveniences

John Erling: Washing machines became widespread in the forties.

Johnnie Coe: Oh yeah.

JE: Do you remember getting one?

JC: Oh yeah, well first we had a colored girl did it on a washboard. My mother always had a colored couple that lived in the basement. They did that kind of work and then I sewed the buttons on the long underwear. Then later we got a kind that had a wringer and agitator, like everybody has.

JE: That was pretty modern then, wasn't it?

JC: That was pretty modern. I think it was a Sears washing machine.

JE: Eventually you graduated to a regular washing machine without?

JC: Yeah, I have one now. (laughter) I have one now.

JE: What about the first dishwasher?

JC: My brother and I did a lot of that, but the colored help that she had usually took care of the kitchen. We lived a long time where that old building where Oral Roberts is, down there on 1700 block of South Boulder?

JE: Yes.

JC: There was a beautiful big stucco house there that belonged to the Rabinowitz family. They were a wealthy Jewish family who changed their name from Rabinowitz to Travis,

and they're the ones that built those two beautiful houses out there at the Garden Center. And this house that mother bought was their parents' house. When they settled their parents' estate, she bought that house. So we lived there for quite a long while.

JE: That was a pretty big house then?

JC: Oh, that was a big house. It was two stories. It had two bathrooms upstairs and one downstairs. There were four bedrooms and a sleeping porch and a maid's room downstairs.

JE: Where was that located?

JC: It was located at 1711 South Boulder. There's a big building there now. Oral Roberts started buying everything around there. They'd waylay me after work out on the front porch. Be waiting for me. I remember one man pulled a check out of his billfold and said, "This is yours if you'll agree to sell this property by next week." Well, of course my mother didn't want to sell to them, so we put them off for as long as we could and finally mother's brother was kind of her business advisor and he said, "Well, Bess, we'll wait until we get a certain price and then we'll sell it." This insurance company gave her the price, so we gave it up. So, we were looking for a house and a little friend of mine was selling real-estate and she had a house down there on South Boulder that she was an agent for. She thought maybe we'd like it. So we went down there to see it. I think the modern kitchen was what sold her that house. She looked this house over, and she said, "I'll tell my brother to come down and talk to you about it."

Uncle John went down there the next day and talked to Mr. Michaelson. He said, "My sister kind of liked this house and she'd like to make a deal." So we made a deal. He was the nicest old gentleman. He was in his nineties then. He didn't have anybody. He was a widower. He had a niece or two in the east and they were him to get rid of the house and go to a retirement home. So that's what he was doing. Uncle John came back to the house and he told mother, he said, "Well, if you're looking for a house, Bess, you got it." Mr. Michaelson carried the paper and everything and he didn't ask for any references at all. He was a very sociable gentleman. He had a lot of lady friends around town. An eligible widower, you know? The only thing he ever asked me, he says, "Are you a niece of C.W. Kerr's?" And I said, "Yes, I am." Well, that was the only reference that he asked for. So, he carried the paper and I paid him about every six months, some nominal sum. So I've lived there since '69.

JE: What was summer like? No air conditioning?

JC: Oh, we had a thing on Boulder. It was called a watercooler. It was a big doodad that sat in the front room window. And it had excelsior or stuff in the inside. A thing from the hose went in there and a fan blew on that and that kept the front room reasonably cool. Of course, we were never at home in the summertime. My poor, old father slept out in the backyard in a cot.

- JE:** What about music? In 1941, Chattanooga Choo Choo, Glenn Miller...
- JC:** Well I loved all the good dance bands.
- JE:** A String of Pearls.
- JC:** Oh yes, I liked all those beautiful, old songs. Today they had a program out at the rest home. They had a man that sang out there, and he sang a lot of those old songs.
- JE:** There! I've Said It Again. Starlight Serenade.
- JC:** I loved all those. I loved the good dance bands and the beautiful songs that they had.
- JE:** Did you dance to some of that music at Cains?
- JC:** Oh, yes, all the time.
- JE:** At Cains Ballroom?
- JC:** Not very often at Cains.
- JE:** Where would you go for that?
- JC:** In those days, the young people had private dances.
- JE:** In their homes?
- JC:** No, we would rent a hall. We had one for the young people at the Presbyterian Church and I belonged to it.
- JE:** You had a dance...?
- JC:** We had a dance club.
- JE:** At First Presbyterian?
- JC:** We had a dance club there. It wasn't called First Presbyterian Dance Club. It was just a group of the Sunday school young people.
- JE:** Mhm.
- JC:** We did it.
- JE:** What about your food? Way back when in earlier times, you remember eating for breakfast? Any favorite food?
- JC:** Yeah, one of the great things that we had for breakfast was fried mush and I love it to this day. (laughter)
- JE:** It's hard to get that these days, isn't it?
- JC:** Boy, you got to make that yourself, yes. My folks were good cooks.
- JE:** Fried Mush.
- JC:** Fried Mush.
- JE:** What was that made out of?
- JC:** Cornmeal! Where have you been all your life?! (laughter)
- JE:** Out at this place where I am now, that's one thing I cannot criticize is the food. But when they gave me my choice from the breakfast menu, I noticed they don't have grits.
- JE:** You were raised on grits weren't you?
- JC:** Oh, I ate tons of grits. (laughter) Yeah.

- JE:** What type of stove did you family use? Woodburning or coal?
- JC:** No. Well, in Arkansas we used a woodburning stove, but here in town we had natural gas.
- JE:** Furnace?
- JC:** No, we didn't have a furnace until we moved to South Boulder. They just had open flame gas stoves in the house. And that was one of my adventures as a youngster. I had long curls and my mother usually combed it every morning. Our house on South Main didn't have a furnace, it was just gas stoves in every room. She would do my hair before I went to school. One morning, I backed up too close to this gas-burning stove and caught fire. The sash on my dress caught fire. Of course she grabbed me up and just threw me on the bed and put the fire out. But it really burned my curls off. (laughter) Burned the back of my dress and my curls off.
- JE:** What about television? Do you remember your first time to see T.V.?
- JC:** Yes. Let's see. This cousin of mine, he was an electronic nut. He did all that kind of thing. He built stuff like that. He finally got us a tabletop T.V. That was our first one. And we often went to his house and watched some of the good programs, like Bonanza. Programs like that. We'd go out to Charles Wesley's and watch T.V.

Chapter 10 - 9:13

Oldest Presbyterian

- John Erling:** Let's look back when you were in your twenties, your thirties, forties, what was a good time for you?
- Johnnie Coe:** Well, all that time, twenties, thirties, forties, I always had a good social life and I traveled a great deal.
- JE:** Where would you travel?
- JC:** Oh, everywhere.
- JE:** Outside the United States?
- JC:** Oh, yes.
- JE:** Where?
- JC:** I went to Germany. I went to Scotland twice; South America; Canada. We got wonderful vacations at Stanolin Oil & Gas. After ten years, of course, you got two weeks vacation and then then by fifteen years you got three weeks and then by twenty years you got a month. So we always made some kind of a nice automobile trip when those vacations got to be so nice and long; Florida, California, name it. I enjoyed all of it.
- JE:** You financially must have been considered fairly well off by working there at the oil company.

- JC:** Well.
- JE:** And you must have been a big saver, were you?
- JC:** I was careful of my money. I felt that sooner or later I'd get to where I am now.
- JE:** What does that mean?
- JC:** That means that I'm the last go 'round.
- JE:** So you knew you wanted to save for later on in life?
- JC:** I felt this way about it: Why save it for somebody else to spend when I would need it myself? So I kept it for myself.
- JE:** What bank did you bank with?
- JC:** I traded with First National till it went out of business. My brother said he saw me in line the day they closed it up. (laughter)
- JE:** Is that true you were in line the day...?
- JC:** Well, I did go to the tellers there to withdrawal my account when they were closing the First National.
- JE:** Yeah.
- JC:** He didn't see me in line though. (laughter) He was just jackin' me.
- JE:** What invention do you think had the greatest impact on your life? Anything stand out?
- JC:** Oh, I don't really know, except that I was just able to do anything that I wanted to do. There were no, "You can't do that," or "That isn't done." I was just aloud to live my life as I was tempted.
- JE:** Were you active at First Presbyterian Church?
- JC:** Oh yes, I have the oldest membership on record.
- JE:** Really?
- JC:** First Presbyterian Church, 1921.
- JE:** Huh. When you attended, is that the same location where it's located today?
- JC:** Well yes, it's the same block, but they started out down at 4th and Boston. And my folks lived right across from them, the McAllisters, lived right across the street from the church. Mother's youngest brother, when he was a tot, their mother had died when they were youngsters, and it was kind of up to my mother to look after Uncle Tom, but she'd be working around the house and Uncle Tom wouldn't be there. What he generally would do was slip out the door, go over to the school and go inside of the school and the teacher would put him in one of the seats, and then at recess she'd send one of the children home with Uncle Tom. He would be three or four years old.
- JE:** You commented earlier on why you think you lived so long. I might point out that you never married.
- JC:** No.
- JE:** And maybe that's one of the reason why you've lived so long? (laughter)

- JC:** No, no, that had nothing to do with it. Absolutely nothing.
- JE:** Did you ever come close to being married?
- JC:** Oh, indeed I did. I surely did.
- JE:** And that just was not what you wanted?
- JC:** Well, I just couldn't reconcile myself to factors that I would have to embrace. Certain ways in which I would live. I couldn't do it.
- JE:** So, obviously that's a sign of independence.
- JC:** Well, I'm afraid so.
- JE:** But that's a good quality. So, you considered perhaps that even as a child in growing up?
- JC:** Well, I presume that my raising had something to do with it.
- JE:** And then as you went on to work at the oil company and all, you grew into that independence. You could take care of yourself?
- JC:** Oh, definitely, very definitely. Very definitely.
- JE:** Didn't need some man around to help you?
- JC:** Mhm. No, I got to where I did all that kind of thing around the house. If there was a leaky faucet, I fixed it. That was part of what made me financially independent. This uncle who helped mother buy the house, that had been his life. After I had been working for the company and making a good salary, he said, "Johnnie, you need to be laying some of this aside." He said, "I would like to watch out for you a nice property for sale, and you buy it, and we would remake it into rentals." So, that's what I did. When my Uncle Tom died and mother told me it was time for me to retire, I had eight rental properties. Of course that's what I'm living on now.
- JE:** That was very lucrative for you than?
- JC:** Indeed, lucrative.
- Mary Ann Hille:** And you did much of the refurbishing.
- JC:** Oh, I did ninety-nine percent. The only people I would hire were plumbers. (laughter) I couldn't plumb.
- JE:** So you painted and wallpapered and did it all?
- JC:** No wallpaper, all paint.
- MH:** Climbed up on the roof.
- JC:** Oh yeah, went up on the roof and whatever, absolutely.
- JE:** What are you most proud of as you look back on your life?
- JC:** Well, I'm proud of the fact that I've lived a Christian life and that I have been able to take care of myself in my old age.
- JE:** Any regrets as you look back on life?
- JC:** No, none.
- JE:** None?

JC: Not now.

JE: High school students, college students listening to this, what kind of advice would you give them?

JC: I'd tell them to get their lessons instead of playing on computers all the time. (laughter) Do a little mental work, a little pencil and mental work. Kids can't add or subtract, I doubt it, with a pencil. I learned to do it the hard way. My teacher, when I was in the third grade, I'll always remember. We were learning the multiplication tables. She would draw a circle on the blackboard and put in twelve numbers around it. Then she'd take her pointer and she'd put a number in the middle of that circle. Then you'd stand up and say "One times three is three. Two times three is six." If you could make the full circle without making a mistake, you could sit on the front row. Well, I was never able to get to the front row. And my mother was discouraged because she'd drill me on that every night. So finally she decided to go up to the school. So, she went up to the school.

Our teacher's name was Mrs. Duffy. Mother went into the room there at Horace Mann's School and she told the woman I seemed to be having trouble with the multiplication tables and she wanted to hear me. Maybe I would do better if she were there. The teacher said, "Well, Mrs. Coe, I usually find that children do better without their parents." Well, my mother stayed. Well I went clear from one to twelve. I did them all without a mistake. So I got to sit on the front row.

JE: Through life did you have any major health issues? You sit here talking to us...

JC: Oh yes, I did. I was a sickly child. I had everything. I had typhoid fever, and pneumonia, smallpox, and just about everything you could have. When I had pneumonia, my Grandmother Coe had raised a large family. I think she had eight children. Of course, she was interested in how my health was doing, and she suggested that maybe an onion poultice would be good. So she told my dad about it. He brought the word home that grandmother thought an onion poultice would be good for me.

JE: And what would that be.

JC: Well, that was chopped up onions, and I guess they just put them in a cloth and put it on your chest. Well, mother was not too impressed with that at first. When Dr. Washington came to see me that day, she said, "Now, her grandmother wants us to put a onion poultice on her chest." He said, "If it'll make her grandmother happy, do it." (laughter) So, they put the onion poultice on my chest.

And then another thing, after I was well from pneumonia, mother said, "Johnnie, we need to have a little talk." She said, "While you were sick, you said some very bad words to Dr. Washington." I guess I was out of my head. So, I said, "Well, I know a lot more." And the way I had acquired that part of my vocabulary was our garage was a story and a half. The lower floor, above ground, was a half of a room. It had windows all around it. I

used to sit there in those windows and watch the men folks work on those old cars they had. My dad had a pit down on the floor where they could go underneath, you know, undo all that stuff and put it back together. So, I would sit in the window and watch them and I learned those cusswords watching them cuss the car out if they couldn't get their job done right. And I said, "Oh, I know a lot more of them." (laughter)

MH: Tell John what your grand-dad used to give you to improve your health. Your grandfather'd take you riding in the car.

JC: Yeah. Oh, and I didn't want to do it.

MH: Uh-uh.

JC: Well, my grand-dad, I used to go to town with him a great deal, and after he'd get through with his shopping he was tired. And he had two or three stores where he traded all the time and there was one bar that he went to. He stopped by the bar and have himself a beer and he always encouraged me to have a beer because I was a kind of a spindly child. But I just never did enjoy it. So, he drank his beer by himself. I just didn't like it that much. I never have learned to enjoy beer. I love root beer and ice cream, but that's about it.

Chapter 11 - 5:45

Penny's Basement

John Erling: Here you are ninety-eight and a half.

Johnnie Coe: Yeah.

JE: But who's counting?

JC: (laughter) I am almost every day.

JE: You said you were a sickly child. Are you surprised as anybody in your family that you're sitting here at this age?

JC: There ain't hardly any of my family left.

JE: Yeah, would they be surprised?

JC: Well, I rather think they would.

JE: You're slender. Have you always been careful with the type of food you eat?

JC: Well, there was a time at the camp when they served a very bounteous table, and I've been known to eat three or four ears of corn, and ice cream and cake, and all that good stuff that an active person would naturally have an appetite for. And I would gain weight at the camp. Finally my mother got tired of having to outfit me new school stuff every fall. Finally she said, "Now Johnnie, this summer, if you put on weight," she said, "I'm going

to start buying your school clothes at Penny's Basement." That wasn't like Vandever's or Brown-Duncan's or Renberg's or any place. So, to buy your clothes at Penny's Basement was a step down.

JE: Those were all names that you just mentioned that were stores? Stores in town?

JC: Stores here in town, mhm, yeah.

JE: And it was something to be proud of to be able to buy from Vanderver's?

JC: Well, all the middleclass families did that.

JE: Right. Clark's Good Clothes, you remember?

JC: Brown-Duncan's and Clark's, Renberg's, Seidenbach's, Halliburton's, and places like that.

JE: But to have to buy in Penny's Basement?

JC: You were going downhill. (laughter) You're going downhill when you bought in Penny's Basement. (laughter) I don't remember that she ever got me anything in Penny's Basement, but (laughter) that was a threat.

JE: What about the prospects of death? How do you think about that?

JC: Well, sometimes I get low on my mind, but I was raised in the Christian atmosphere. I believe in the Lord Jesus and that we will eventually arrive at the right place.

JE: So, there's a little...

JC: That's the way I myself going.

JE: So that gives you a great deal of hope, doesn't it?

JC: Yes.

JE: It becomes a positive.

JC: I just know that it happens to everybody and my turn will come sooner or later.

JE: But it can be a positive experience for you?

JC: Oh yes, quite so, quite so. I just have the faith in the Lord, that's all.

JE: Yeah, and many promises there. Mary Ann, is there anything else that you...?

JC: Can you think of anything else that I've missed?

Mary Ann Hille: Well, I thought the story about the snakebite was kind of interesting. About how you were medically treated at the camp.

JC: Oh, yeah. Well, of course, we usually had around a hundred children there at the camp in the summer time. The fourth of July was a big holiday and we made a lot out of it. It was full of parents from Dallas and Tulsa and Joplin and Fort Worth and all around. We always had a big fireworks display on the tennis court on fourth of July evening. Had a watermelon feast and all that good stuff to celebrate. But fourth of July morning, I was up under a stone bluff that's on the property. A couple of kids and myself were throwing these light up firecrackers over the hill. Fire is a thing you had to be so careful of over there. Of course there was no facilities for firefighting. We were just sitting up under the bluff there throwing those light up firecrackers down over the hillside. Well, I dropped

my fireworks and they went down over the hillside there. I clambered down there to get them. I reached over and picked up my firecrackers and when I did, I had a snake hanging on this finger and it was a Copperhead.

JE: Oh, wow.

JC: And he had me two bites. He around my forefinger on my right hand. So, I just naturally rolled to the bottom of the hill down there. My uncle was there. Uncle David was Scout Master, and he gathered me up and took me into a little office that they had there. Kind of a little infirmary room. He took me in there and he put a tourniquet around my wrist and he took his razor and split my finger right there twice and put Permanganate Potash in there. Grand-daddy was gone to town with the car. The hired man was there in an old Ford car that they had for a work car. Uncle David rounded up that hired man and told him to drive he and I to town.

Well, halfway up the hill we met my grandfather coming down the hill. So they flagged him down and Grand-daddy had the hired man drive his car on down to the camp and he got in and drove and Uncle David held me in his lap. I was nine years old. He would let that tourniquet in and out and in and out, you know, seeing that I didn't bleed too much. There was just one doctor in town and they went to his office. Of course, he wasn't there on fourth of July, so he just took me back out home and put me in my bed.

Well, that afternoon we had some company. Dr. Paul Grosart was our physician at the time. He had a cabin over at Bella Vista. So just for old time's sake, he drove by, stopped, and paid us a visit. Uncle Dave took him up to mother's house where I was in bed. He looked it over and said, "You've done all you can do, Dave." So it was just a matter of keeping me in bed.

Uncle David had killed the snake before the took me to town. It was laying there on the ground. He gave me a pronged stick. He said, "Now, why don't you take this down and throw it in the river." He got it on the stick for me and I carried it down to the river and threw it in.

All the children at the camp were very concerned about it and they brought me treats that their families brought them for the holiday. They crowded up there at mother's house and carried them in and laid them around. And there was a magazine in Dallas called Holland's Magazine, and there were two girls in that family and they were both there. So, one of the Holland girls brought the box of chocolates and laid it down on my bed, and she said, "Mr. Dave," that what they all called my uncle, "Mr. Dave, lead me to a snake." When she saw all these presents I had, she thought: boy, I need some of this stuff. (laughter)

JE: Well, he saved your life.

JC: Oh yeah, he saved my life. Yes, he did.

MH: Permanganate Potash?

JC: Mhm.

MH: That's what he, put on it?

JC: Oh, I think that's still available.

MH: Is it?

JE: Mhm.

JC: Yeah, I think it is.

Chapter 12 - 4:45

Favorite Sport

John Erling: You know, I marvel at your memory. Here at ninety-eight and a half and the details, you can give street addresses and all. That is amazing.

Johnnie Coe: Well, I lived there (laughter) a long time. I was never particularly good at figures, but one of my uncles was a soldier in the First War and he didn't go to the front lines. They sent him to Spain and he figured range for artillery with a pencil. He was a marvel at numbers.

JE: Any other World War I stories in your family?

JC: Well, well, Mother's baby brother, Tom, was in Kentucky when they declared war and he just signed up for the Army. Well, he was underage. So, my grandfather had to sign the papers letting Uncle Tom stay in the service. What he did was drive a ammunition truck to the front lines. He said they were big old Packard cars made into trucks. They carried this ammunition on these trucks and he drove to the front line.

JE: In Germany?

JC: Mhm. Yeah, that's about the only thing he every told about it. He enjoyed it. He was a playboy. After armistice, he sang. They had a quartet and they went all over. You know, they kept a lot of the troops over there, and he was in this group that went around to the various army camps and entertained and did that kind of thing. The first thing he did when he got home, Mother still lived on South Denver. He had taken his pay and bought him a Ford car when he got off the train. He drove up, stopped in front of the house, ran in the house to get mother to see his car, take her a ride, and somebody had hoped in it and driven it away. (laughter) It was a gonner. Never got it back. Oh, dear.

JE: What interests you today?

JC: Well, I don't have any particular thing that interests me, except staying alive.

Mary Ann Hille: How about Baseball?

JC: Oh, I love Baseball. We were always season ticket holders out there at the ballpark.

JE: Tulsa Drillers?

JC: Oh, yeah.

JE: And Oilers?

JC: Forever, forever.

JE: So, are you interested right now, we have the World Series?

JC: Oh yeah, I listen to the ballgames every night.

JE: Boston Red Sox and St. Louis Cardinals.

JC: Oh yes, absolutely. I'm naturally for St. Louis.

JE: I was going to ask you, here we are the 27th of October, so you're rooting for St. Louis.

JC: Absolutely.

JE: Did you see the Cardinals when you were younger.

JC: Oh yes, we would go to St. Louis every now and then. I loved that.

JE: But Tennis was your favorite sport?

JC: Oh yeah, that's what I really loved to play and I was pretty good.

JE: Yeah.

JC: And I swam well, but that's a sad story.

JE: Why?

JC: A friend of mine invited me to go swimming last summer, or I guess it was the summer before. She lives where they have a nice swimming pool in an apartment. We went up there and I changed into my bathing suit and I went down there and went down the little steps and by golly I couldn't swim. I could not swim. I told my brother that and he says, "I knew you couldn't." He says, "because I can't myself." And he was really good. (laughter)

JE: You took swimming lessons?

JC: Oh no, I learned to swim at the camp. This gentleman who looked after me when I had my snakebite, he had a lifesaving badge and all that kind of stuff. I was six years old when we went to Arkansas. The water around there was about twenty feet deep, the hole out in front of our house. Uncle Dave could swim anything. He would swim on his back and have me hold onto the straps of his swimming suit and I floated on top of him. That way I learned not to be afraid of the water and then I learned to swim on my own.

JE: What about tennis? Was there any tennis here?

JC: Well, In my day, Helen Wills Moody was the female tennis star and the gentleman was named Bill Tilden. I remember them very well when they were being champions.

JE: Later on Arthur Ashe would be another?

JC: Arthur Ashe. Just in the last few weeks I watched some of the best tennis I ever hope to see. Venus and...

- JE:** Williams? Mhm.
- JC:** And the other one. The speed those gals can get those returns over, just...
- JE:** Very powerful aren't they?
- JC:** Flat bamboozles me. And the men too far as that's concerned.
- JE:** Yeah. Well, I want to thank you so much for this. At the very beginning when I met you, you said, "I don't know. Would I be able to do a good job?" Well, you did better than a good job.
- JC:** Well, you're very kind to say that, because, you know, I'm not used to this kind of thing.
- JE:** You did it like a pro as if you've done it before, so Johnnie...
- JC:** Well, that's, that's very kind of you to say so, sir.
- JE:** And my pleasure to meet you.
- JC:** Well, thank you. I've known of you for many, many years.
- JE:** Well, thank you.
- JC:** Many, many years.
- JE:** Thank you.

Chapter 13 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research, and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesofOklahoma.com.