

John Withee oral history
Recorded in 1976
Transcribed in 2016 by Cynthia Lopez

I: Your name, sir?

JW: John Withee, I think! [laughs]

I: When were you born?

JW: September the 20th of '27.

I: And you're related to?

JW: My dad was George Looney who lived up here on Willamette, whatever the next street down is.

Unidentified man: Sister's cafe, do you know where that's at? Looney's Market?

JW: Looney's market is down on the Tualatin.

Unidentified man: Yeah.

JW: Yeah, the Tualatin cutoff on 99W. That was before they made two highways out of it. It was a single. And he started that, he rented that from J.D. Hill, who now his ground is long gone to the rock quarry back there, [??]. Sold it barrel by barrel, I think. It's an old house. It's still there, by the way. It used to have massive oregon grape brush in front of it. So when dad went in there, he had to pull that all out. He started with a little fruit stand. Dad used to farm all the time but he got tired of it. Fact is, doctor said no more farming. He had a broken arm that never healed right, so up in his old age, why, it began to bother him. So he started Looney's Market for 20 years. It was just supposed to be a little - until his pension come in, you know. And it lasted 20 years in three different positions. This side of the street would be on the Tualatin side, then it went across the street when the highways come in, they naturally moved him across the street. They bought his property.

Unidentified man: He was there before the highway, then.

JW: Oh yeah, we were there for about 15 years before the highway. It was just two lanes, is all.

Unidentified man: Oh yeah, he was there when the two-lane highway went through.

JW: Yeah, he was there. We started the store there I think just about a year after the Tualatin River Bridge became a cement bridge instead of a covered bridge.

I: What year?

JW: I'm gonna safely say '46. No? Yeah, safely say '46 I think.

I: Right after the second world war.

JW: Yeah.

Unidentified man: There was a covered bridge across there.

JW: Oh yeah, we have good photos of the covered bridge across there.

I: That's what we need.

JW: [??] Aunt Bertha - sorry about that - has a picture of that and that's what I'm going to try to get for you.

I: How about your dad, was he born and raised here?

JW: Oh no, my dad was a fighting Irishman.

I: Where'd he immigrate from?

JW: I'm not sure. Can't tell you the honest truth about where he ever did show up from. Because I could remember him, when I was less than 2 years old he was the head chef for the Portland Hotel chain at that time.

I: What year?

JW: Oh, well that would be about '28? Something like that.

Unidentified man: Portland Hotel?

JW: Yeah. The old Portland Hotel. And he was a chef at the Benson Hotel and the Multnomah Hotel.

Unidentified man: [??] said he went down there, my dad ordered smelt and they said "Oh, you don't want smelt". He said "Yeah, I like smelt". So they gave him, they brought smelt out but they never cut the heads off. And they were used to that. That wasn't in Portland, though. That was before '20-whenever. That was probably about 1915 or something.

JW: But then you know, that's where my mother met my dad.

I: What was your mother's maiden name?

JW: Roake. That's a massive name in Oregon City. My grandfather was the mayor and my aunts and uncles built the foundry and my uncle, one uncle was a chemist and at one time or another I guess they held every seat in the city council and the mayor and this and that in there. But that's another story.

[cross talk and laughter]

JW: No, I could never get by that bookwork, you know? I can't even write my own checks, let alone...

I: Now let's see, you married. What was your wife's name?

JW: Joan Cumrell [sp?]. Not up there as the second to the last girl. Of course Herb, which is her father, when he married Laura and she'll kill me for this too if you publish this, she asked him how many kids he'd like and he says "Oh, a dozen would probably be all right." But they stopped at seven because he was getting old he said [laughs]. But Joanie is, there's Orilla, and then Joan, and then Emma who plays, she was until this year I guess, second chair in the Oregon symphony, here in Portland.

I: This is your wife's side?

JW: Yeah, side of the family. And then there's four boys. Three boys, I take that back.

I: What's your wife's first name?

JW: Joan.

I: Joan.

JW: Yeah. Her name is Joan Roberta and mine's John Richard, see, so whenever we sign checks it's just JR. [laughs] It's easier to get at that way, you know!

I: What are the names of your children?

JW: Carl is our youngest boy, he's ten and ornery. And Linda is, Linda Anne is 13. She's the only 5-year honor roll student. She's been on the honor roll every semester for five years. Since 5th grade. And Sam is starting in just like it. He's been far superior - well that's the x's they come out with the report cards for less than the 6th grade. But he's been, from the 5th grade on, so he's going to be another smart one. They aren't going to take after their dad, that's for sure!

I: Tell us some more about the buildings here in Sherwood.

JW: Well, when I was in high school, we had a volunteer fire department. That's when - I'm not familiar with the block, this is the trouble - the first fire burnt from what is now Ted's place. We'll make Ted's bar as a center point. It burnt this side of the street clear down to the church, which is about 3 blocks. Burnt everything right down to a -

I: What year?

JW: This I think was probably - oh, I'd just gotten into the service, I'm sure. So it was right around '48. I'm not too good on the date parts of it. And then while I was still overseas, which was a matter of 3 or 4 years later, my mother wrote and said that from the bank on this side of the street to the drug store - oh wait a minute, no, it was a block from the new bank, up the street, down to the drug store. They stopped it at the alley, in other words. It burned to the ground. So in other words, Sherwood actually burnt down twice to the ground, because the other part of the buildings -

I: Where [??] Insurance is now didn't burn down, just the top half of it did.

JW: They stopped it right in there somewhere. Like I say, again I was overseas so I don't know. It's just what my mother told me and my mother can't really remember too much. Because I asked her. Then, of course we were here when the old red and white store was here. And it was Country Cousin's - who was our country cousin on radio? Jess Mason was on -

Unidentified man: Oh yeah. [??] old barn door, something like that?

JW: Uh huh. Well he had his radio station in this store over here. And I referred to the brick building across from the bar.

Unidentified man: Oh the white brick?

JW: Yeah, that used to be a red-and-white groceries.

I: Where the real estate's at?

JW: Yeah, and the laundromat and all that upstairs. And I think there was a hotel upstairs at the time too, but I'm not sure.

Unidentified man: So he broadcasted out of there?

JW: Oh yes. And that's where I bought my first rifle, I think. Or the ammunition for it, I remember that.

I: Was it a general store?

JW: Yeah, Jess Mason's general country store!

I: What year was that?

JW: This must have been, again between '48 and '54. Because like I say, there's a period of time in there I wasn't here.

Unidentified man: Remember Reiser's store?

JW: Oh yes. Mr. Burke had a store right across the street from Reiser's too. I spent many, many dimes worth of - go in there and try -

Unidentified man: This where you had to ask for your [??]

JW: Oh yeah. But if you went into Mr. Burke's store, you could always wait until he got a little busy, see, and then you could sneak around behind and get the Bull Durham down off the [laughs]. Yeah. Oh yeah.

I: Are you confessing to us?

JW: No no no. You'd get the Bull Durham in your hand, see. And then you'd hold it up and throw your money down on the counter and Mr. Burke rather than go chase you [??]. And then you could go on down the - this is when we lived down on the end of Edy road at that time. I used to ride my bicycle but we could stop in there [??] or go down to the creek you know and get back in there with our pipe, light up and smoke away. That is, until my mother caught me [laughs]. And that was the end of that!

Unidentified man: I'm sure a lot of adventure took place down here in those creek bottoms [??]

JW: On Edy road down at the bridge used to be the best crawfish hunting there was. You could get down underneath the bridge and just sit there and wait. Because there wasn't too many snags there, it was mostly rock. And they'd crawl by and we'd reach down there and grab 'em.

Unidentified man: You'd grab 'em with your hand?

JW: Yeah. Oh yeah, catch 'em with your hands, you know.

Unidentified man: I always used bacon on a strand. I never did catch one.

JW: Oh no, we used to go down there, and the Stareks [sp?] like crawfish real well. So we used to go down and Ray, I think is the boy that I knew. I can't remember his first name. Starek? Ok

we'll call him Ray because I'm sure that's what his name was. My brother and I used to go down there and help him catch crawfish.

Unidentified man: Did you ever eat those things?

JW: I did, but I'm not particularly a crawfish fan. Because I don't even like lobster.

Unidentified man: Oh?

JW: No, huh-uh. They're alright, I guess. But anyhow, let's see. That was really early in life, so that'd have to be before '48 when Burke, Mr. Burke had his store. I think that he retired. Jim Burke.

Unidentified man: Well now there was Jarvis [??] service station. [??] and Reiser's across the street.

JW: Right. It used to be Drips' too.

Unidentified man: Yeah, he was always there.

JW: But I don't think he was there when Burke's used to have - what am I saying. Berge! Berge! I'm sorry. Jim *Berge*. That's what I was trying to say. Burkes lived right next to us, Gordon and Nadine all of them. They lived right down next to us when we lived on Hall Place. They were right across the hill that we used to go up and cut celery and they'd come and help us pick tomatoes. It was just one of those things, it was kind of a shared crop thing. But to my memory, that's just about that building-wise.

Unidentified man: You were saying something about a building across there where that, across from where Looney's used to be. There was a building that didn't have any nails in it or something?

JW: Yes, that's Effie Duncan's place. You ask anybody about Effie Duncan, the fact is if you want to hear about the Eastern Star here in Sherwood, she's a lifetime member.

Unidentified man: Is she still here?

JW: No, she's long passed on now. Probably the best authority on Effie Duncan would be one of the past masters from the Eastern Star here in Sherwood. She's the only girl that used to drive a 1921 Model T. When everyone else was driving whatever they were. I think dad had a '54 by that time. But she had one in the garage that she was going to give me one time. She says I can't damage the violets. And I looked and the car had been in the garage for so long that the violets had grown underneath the car in front of the garage. It was just, we had to crawl - we finally got the car out without damaging her violets. But we had to crawl through the corner and jack it up

and put blocks underneath the wheels on top of boards so that we could roll the car out above the violets.

Unidentified man: You had to do all of this?

JW: Oh, she supervised every inch of it, her and her cow Bessie! [laughs] She's the only person, she was a botanist in the finest way I think, although she said she just liked to have a garden. But she was the only person I ever seen that grew black skunk cabbage.

Unidentified man: Well I'll be darned, really?

JW: They're very rare. And she grew them like they was just wild.

Unidentified man: Black, you mean the flower was black?

JW: The flower was black. It was a black skunk cabbage.

Unidentified man: Did they smell the same way?

JW: Same way, just the same way. But she had trees and bushes in there. I'm sure - no I won't say for sure, but I'm kind of positive that she had an African fly eater?

Unidentified man: Venus flytrap?

JW: I'm not sure whether it was that, but she grew it outside. It grew outside. And the only time she ever dug it out was in the dead of winter. She figured it would get a little too cold and then she'd take it in the house.

Unidentified man: That sort of tropical plant -

JW: Yeah. But how she ever made it grow outside, I'll never know. But oh, it was a beautiful place. And the guy who bought her place, there was some - he talked real fast to her and got things going too fast for her. And it came and he got possession of all her properties at a certain time. And she didn't want it that way because she wanted someplace to live. And so she took him to court. And I think that she's the only one that the judge said - she had told the judge that she didn't want to move until she died because she wanted to watch her roses bloom. And the way the story goes I think there were many other words uttered at the time, but the way it boiled out was when the roses died, why then she'd have to move.

Unidentified man: Oh, that was the ruling?

JW: Yeah, that was the ruling. The contractor could do anything around the lot or so much, but he couldn't move onto that lot or onto the house or anything else until Effie passed on.

Unidentified man: You said that that was probably one of the first houses around here, wasn't it?

JW: Yeah. But again, it got so condemned, you know deteriorated, that the Eastern Star and probably some of the churches put the little blue house, which is there now, that was hers. Mr. Rider who had the well and the pumps repair shop right down the street about 100 feet. Just this side of - it's still there. He was one of the main instigators. They brought that house, was out of a subdivision or someplace where a highway had gone through, and they moved that house out for her and put it together. They cut it in four pieces and hauled it out thataway.

Unidentified man: Oh is that right?

JW: Yeah. And believe it or not, all the parts match.

Unidentified man: Is this the original house now?

JW: This is that little blue house. See, she only got to live in that a couple years.

Unidentified man: The original house, they brought the lumber up from Portland?

JW: Yeah. Hauled it out on wagons. They were logs!

Unidentified man: Oh they were logs.

JW: No lumber to it!

Unidentified man: Why would they bring it all the way from Portland?

JW: I don't know, at that particular time.

Unidentified man: This place was pretty well grown up with timber then.

JW: Yeah. But, restrictions or something? Now, this is just the way the story that my dad passed on. That they pulled it out of town, to be exact. To build that house.

Unidentified man: When did your dad pass away?

JW: '63.

Unidentified man: '63.

JW: Remember Looney's market when it was down in Tigard at south next to the old -

Unidentified man: No, [??]

JW: Well, dad couldn't make it. He was getting sicker and sicker all the time where he was out on a highway because actually business was dropping off. So rather than to lose everything, they moved to downtown next to the old bank in Tigard, and that's where he passed away. When they moved him across the highway is actually when he died. Because you know he said, you can't sell a thing to somebody coming out of town, it's going home when somebody wants to buy. And this was the thing. He had 'em coming from the coast and everything and they were ready to buy by the time they get home. And he made a good, oh fabulous business. Kept me in-

Unidentified man: Yeah [???

JW: Used to be one of the - my goodness, he sold turkeys there! But other than that, I don't know what to tell you.

Unidentified man: Well we were talking before about what you know of these old pioneers. Like A. Z. Hall and some of his living relatives. Do you have any anecdotes about that?

JW: I'm not sure of the relationships to A.Z. and Harry, but to my opinions, information I got when I was a kid, that Harry Hall owned and whether he was born on that piece of property, I don't know. But Mrs. Borchers, or one of the Borchers would be -

Unidentified man: This place, Harry Hall's place, was right next to Borchers's? Is that what you think?

JW: Harry Hall's place is right where the substation [?] is. There's no buildings there at all anymore. There used to be the onion barn and the cow barn and a house, or rather two houses -

Unidentified man: I'm trying to figure out the relationship between them and the Smocks.

JW: Well this I don't know but I do know that I'm sure Harry was there long before we came over here to farm. But like I say, the Borchers who live right across the street were the ones who had the barns and everything that's falling down now? Well you have to come back Sherwood one house, I think that's Gladys Borchers' there. I'm not sure. But she would be able, between Harry Hall and the Borchers, they would know. I'm sure you could get one of them to talk about that.

Unidentified man: Your memory goes back quite a ways. You remember probably people who lived here who didn't speak English very well. Had maybe German accents.

JW: Of course, that would be the [??] and I think the Hesses probably. Chet Fishbruck is not German, though.

Unidentified man: Of course you never know.

JW: Yeah. Of course they sounded like the gal [??] good Italian.

Unidentified man: Yeah? They had a real Italian [??].

JW: Yes, they always had very good...

Unidentified man: It used to be about that time back in the '20s it was a popular idea the Italian dialect story. Because people always had this interest in each other.

JW: Of course, now you gotta figure I started school here in '40, is when I started school here. Actually '41, because I went to my first grade school over at Hazeldell at Hillsboro. I flunked out too, by the way. Actually I went there two years I think, because I had the whooping cough and I was out 99% of the time you know so they just didn't graduate me.

Unidentified man: Do you know of many kids that died of things like whooping cough or dyptheria?

JW: It wasn't kosher to tell children about that when I was that small. So that part, my mother wouldn't even probably tell my brother. It was just -

Unidentified man: Oh is that right?

JW: Yeah. And my dad was Irish and it was strictly a taboo.

Unidentified man: Did he speak with an accent?

JW: No, I think he came from the Island of Man and they didn't have too much of that really drastic Irish.

Unidentified man: That was an unusual place to come from too.

JW: Well he was royalty at the island, according to one family of arms or something like that I sent back to when I was a kid. Cost me \$2 and my dad just laughed like a son of a gun because neither one of us understood what it meant by the time we got done with it. But anyhow we had a big crest and this and that. All this blue blood. And he said, like a passing comment, that his family had been mentioned or had mentioned something of that. But that's as far as it went. But anyhow -

Unidentified man: Was he first generation, or did he -?

JW: No, no, no. He's second. I'm trying to figure out where they're all buried at. His grandpa was the first one over. No. His father was the first one.

Unidentified man: Do you know who that was? Was his father - it would probably be about 1900 or something like that. Or earlier than that?

JW: Earlier than that. Because he died in '25 or something like that. I'm not sure. He's one of the old ones. I'm not sure where he's buried at. He's not buried at Crestwell. My dad is buried at Crestwell out here by Tigard. And that's where the family began their residence. And my father, my dad and my grandfather were buried in Albany. That's where he's buried. So what's before, before Albany I don't know. Because that's where my dad came from, is Albany. The [??] of Albany.

Unidentified man: Any other anecdotes of these people? Any stories that aren't particularly historical, but - I've often wondered, people out here did more to amuse themselves. They didn't have TV and radio then.

JW: Yes, I'd probably get myself in a lot of trouble with some of them.

Unidentified man: Sherwood was a pretty wild town before you, wasn't it?

JW: Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, I remember that. We used to have a gentleman that - our city law enforcing officer drove a pickup. And that's all the further I'll say.

Unidentified man: [???] tied the chain around his rear axel, isn't it?

JW: No, this is the time we jacked the back end of his pickup up and made big U-turns in front of Ted's place and took off and he ran out, he was having coffee at Art's, which was a restaurant across the street. Ran off and jumped into his pickup, never thinking about the tilt or anything. Slammed it into gear, sirens blazing to take off and never moved an inch! [laughs]

Unidentified man: [laughs]

JW: So yes, my dad did receive my - [laughs]

[Recording ends in mid-conversation]