

**Sam Johnson - Interviewer: Charles James - 3/10/76**

**My name is Charles James. I'm here with Sam Johnson. He is the owner of the ARCO Station in Middletown, Connecticut. I'm going to discuss certain aspects of his business with him, as well as certain parts of his life in Middletown.**

**Q: O.K. Mr. Johnson, when exactly did you come to Middletown?**

A: I came to Middletown in November, 1955, with my brother. He was already here. I didn't have a good job in Virginia so I decided to come to Connecticut. He told me there was a better opportunity here.

**Q: What part of Virginia was this?**

A: Avalon. It's a small town on the eastern shore of Virginia.

**Q: Just your brother?**

A: Well, at that time my brother was the only relative living here.

**Q: And this, I guess, was your reason for choosing Middletown. You never considered, maybe, moving to another part of Connecticut?**

A: No.

**Q: What were your first impressions when you got here?**

A: Well, I had been in the Army for two years and had done a little traveling and the only thing I liked about Middletown, it is a small town and not a big city and, being from the country, I liked the country atmosphere and the small town convenience.

**Q: That's the reason for the decision that a lot of people have given me. You never considered New Haven or Hartford?**

A: No.

**Q: Do you like being close to them? Does that offer any convenience for you?**

A: No, I'd say New Haven or Hartford or any of the others, those cities are all right to shop or whatever, but I like the pace of Middletown more. It's more slower. It's just my type of town, I guess.

**Q: And how would you compare it to, like, towns like Wallingford, Meriden? It's a little bit larger, I believe, than those towns.**

A: Well, I guess if I had come to Wallingford, Meriden or any of those towns, yeah, I would have accepted it as I did Middletown; but I just liked Middletown and stayed here.

**Q: O.K. I'd like to start now asking some questions about your business. You have a service station, right?**

A: Yes, that's correct.

**Q: What type of services do you have other than gasoline?**

A: It's a general service. We have two mechanics eight hours a day, my brother and myself.

**Q: Your brother is your partner?**

A: Right.

**Q: And you have wrecking service, like, wrecking and commercial service?**

A: Wrecking, yes; twenty-four hours for all types of services.

**Q: Approximately how many cars, you know, come to you? Is your business thriving? We're in the middle of the recession.**

A: Well, we started in '66 and each year has been better, even though the economy has changed. But I guess people still have to have their cars fixed, so--

**Q: Yeah.**

A: It keeps getting better.

**Q: That's one thing about cars. You gotta have that in order to eat. In terms of the amount of cars you do, did you really suffer from the gasoline companies' (limiting quotas)?**

A: We didn't suffer as far as customers--losing customers, but we suffered because of the communication between the station and the customers. We wanted to serve them better. We wanted to give them the gas that they needed but we didn't have it and, you know, there was no way that we could convey that message to all the customers.

**Q: O.K. About how much money did you begin with when you started, say, in the '50's?**

A: Well, my brother is half-partner with myself and I think between the two of us we got up roughly about \$7-8,000.00 to start.

**Q: It has grown significantly. You put a lot of capital--**

A: Yes.

**Q: Did you have all services when you began, or did you--**

A: We were capable of doing all the services, but as the customers' needs changed--

**Q: You needed more equipment**

A: Yeah. More equipment went into--

**Q: And your station has always been at this location?**

A: Right. 159 Main Street Extension.

**Q: O.K. Is your clientele--let me ask you this first: How about, I mean, this is a service station. You have Gilletti's up the street. You have the row of gasoline stations that open late on Route 66. You have stations on [Route] 72 open all night. Like it's, are you surviving the competition? Is it a good town for competition in the sense that there aren't that many other people nearby for customers, or do you feel that there are too many other people?**

A: I think the town is big enough. I think there are enough automobiles here for all of

the stations in Middletown. It depends definitely on the service that you give--the most service that we give, we don't have to worry about our customers leaving. But some other gas stations, just even although their gas may be a couple cents less at different times, you know, their prices can drop and ours would remain the same, or vice versa.

**Q: O.K. And most of the service station people get along pretty well? I mean, is there any other hostility, without naming names?**

A: Well, there are some. There are some, but it's not directly from the garages and service stations itself. It's from, I guess, misunderstanding on the customer's part, and then that is carried from one station to the other and after being around a little while, you sort of wait it all out.

**Q: O.K. Mr. Johnson, you're talking about competition among businessmen and you say it's not that bad. You're a black businessman in a more-or-less white town. Has that been a problem at all to you ?**

A: Not at all, no.

**Q: Not at all? In terms of your clientele, your clientele is, like, just like anybody coming in here?**

A: Right, you get--

**Q: You get people from different walks of life. People from different racial backgrounds come into your station regularly?**

A: You get it from the college, local people, people transient, just going through, and they're all basically the same.

**Q: In terms of, you know, the community and the college, do you find that you get along pretty well with the Wesleyan students and they appreciate your being here? And do you get a lot of Wesleyan business?**

A: Yes, we do. I think they're a very good advertisement for us. One tells the other and we get the business from them.

**Q: In terms of the advertisement, which ways do you use? Do you advertise in the yellow pages?**

A: Our advertising is very limited. We do have an ad in the yellow pages and in the school press and books that come up that have our ads in also.

**Q: Books in the high school?**

A: Right. Right. But we limit it mostly to the yellow pages and word-of-mouth, I guess.

**Q: Is that out of preference? I mean, do you feel like your business is in a good position right now and that you might not want to really push forward to try to get more advertising and draw more people into you right now?**

A: We try to keep everything on a sort of even keel. I think, not over ads--you can't over-advertise--but you can spend a lot of money advertising, and we can accomplish the same thing with the yellow pages.

**Q: Right. Right. Mr. Johnson, to what extent is the city, you know, involved in your business? I mean, did your business require a lot of city service, sanitation, that type of thing? Is your tax, do you pay a lot of taxes to the city, you know, I mean, is it advantageous to the city to have you here?**

A: Well, that end of it is my brother's duties, not mine. I couldn't really go into depth in the tax part of it but the city as far as their own business, or doing business with garages, I think they have their own pumps and their own maintenance crew so they take care of their own.

**Q: Do they work on police cars or out-of-town cars? Do they do that kind of work? In terms, in relation to other black businessmen, I mean, is there a black businessmen's collective or league in Middletown, or do you have a reciprocal arrangement; you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back type of thing with the black businessmen in town?**

A: There is no alliance. I guess there should be because I think all of the businesses can learn something from another business but, so we just have to use a reciprocal agreement. If they have a service that we need, we go there and if we can help them out, they come here.

**Q: And is there, like, a concerted effort among, like, the members of the black community that patronize black businesses in the city?**

A: Not as much as I would like to see. I think that could be part our fault as much as theirs. We don't have the time or don't take the time to go out and meet with the black people in town and explain to them our businesses, so I guess they assume that they are not really needed; but they are.

**Q: And, O.K., do your black customers really go out--you say your business is transmitted by word of mouth. Do your black customers really go out and bring in new businesses--I mean, new customers for you? Are they a major source of your customers, you know?**

A: Yes. Well, the black clientele do tell other black members of Middletown but not as much, like I say, as we would like to see. I think that the percentage of blacks that come here is a lot less than the amount of people there are in Middletown, black people, in Middletown and we would like to know why.

**Q: O.K. There's a number of black barbershops in Middletown that coiffure one's hair. There used to be a store, (Stacey's), the fish market. Do you feel that--O.K., we have black businessmen but we don't really have black businessmen in the city who can really, you know, push; bring more, you know, types of services into the city. Would you like to see the black businessmen in Middletown taking a stronger hold in terms of, you know, securing more businesses that involve more capital, that deal with more money, larger business enterprises?**

A: I think you're going to see in time to come that this is going to come into being, mainly because of the young black businessmen in town. The upcoming black businessmen in town have great ideals. They have new ideas and they know how to

acquire more money to get into bigger businesses. I think you're gonna see it to come, say, in two or three years, even.

**Q: Do you feel that the black businessmen will stay in Middletown; the ones that are here will stay, the people who get started and, maybe, branch out? I know, like, a lot of types of businesses, you know, foreign people who come into a city, they'll establish one shop, they'll establish another shop in the city. They'll establish a couple of shops someplace else and they'll move their businesses elsewhere. I mean, are black businessmen confident that their businesses can survive and grow in Middletown?**

A: I think so. I think, it seems like the services that the black men, businessmen, give in Middletown is needed, are needed, and as long as the service is needed, I think they're going to be in Middletown.

**Q: Do you find, I know in my home town everybody is struggling to get out. Do you find that that's true of people who are not in business, don't have that much of a vested interest in the city. Do you see people, you know, moving out constantly, you, know, and new people coming in?**

A: You say moving out, you mean out of town or out of the city?

**Q: Yes, out of the city. Pick up their belongings and go.**

A: Well, with the economy being what it is, I think you're gonna find restless people and wherever they can find work I think that's where they're gonna go. But if and when the economy becomes more stable, I think you're going to find the people that are moving are going to be replaced by people who are coming BACK to Middletown.

**Q: O.K. You have, Middletown is a city whose black population is not that affluent, is it? Do you feel that if there were more black businesses that that would be a real step toward solving the unemployment problem? Do people who are looking into going into business, could they look to Middletown as a place where they could come and just get employees very readily and go into business?**

A: I think so. We haven't had any problem with finding good help and I think that if the businessman can find a need in Middletown and fulfill it, he can find the workers that he needs to carry the business.

**Q: Like in your business particularly, you have, I mean you just can't let anybody walk up and just start taking apart somebody's car. I mean, you have to find people who have, you know, some kind of training, you know, and really be very proficient in what they do. I mean, you've always been able to find people right here in town who could come in and fill spaces when you need them?**

A: So far, in ten years, we haven't had any problem.

**Q: O.K. Mr. Johnson, you said that you live right here in Middletown. Do you have a family?**

A: Yes, I have a wife, Rosa, that lives on Brooks Road, and my son, 17, (Shelby).

**Q: Shelby, he's in high school? Middletown High?**

A: Wilson, Woodrow Wilson High.

**Q: And does your family enjoy living in Middletown?**

A: I think so.

**Q: They found that they get everything that they need here?**

A: Yes.

**Q: How about the schools? Do you find that the schools are adequate? Has there been, like, a big change? Did you go to school in Middletown?**

A: No.

**Q: Do you find that the schools are improving generally and that the programs they are offering are wider or has, like, the economic crunch changed things?**

A: I think the programs are all right if--maybe some of the teachers have a problem, more competent teachers, teachers that are more interested in teaching, if that's the correct term. I think they seem to be very lax as far as having the child learn or not and half of them [the children] don't want to learn.

**Q: O.K. Your kid is, you said your son is seventeen years old. While I was in school there were always problems in terms of getting--Is there a big segregation problem in Middletown? As long as you have had experience with the schools, have they been reasonably well integrated?**

A: I think so; to my knowledge. I didn't go myself, but to my knowledge I would think so.

**Q O.K. Your son, your son is in high school?**

A: He's in 11th grade.

**Q: Do you know what his plans are after he gets out?**

A: Well, he may change his mind, but right now he's thinking of going into drafting or history

**Q: And those programs, is there a drafting program or industrial arts program in the schools?**

A: I think it's very limited.

**Q: I know they had auto working classes when I went to school and have you been able to get people out of those programs from the high school? Do they train them well enough to come down here, to this station here, and go to work?**

A: I think technical schools are training the kids and they are trained well. The only problem was when we started, we couldn't afford mechanics of that caliber so we had to hire other mechanics with the same knowledge but that we could get by with.

**Q: I see. I imagine that you take a real interest in civic affairs in Middletown?**

A: With the spare time that I have. I work seven days a week and I'm off every other Sunday. It's what--that's only two Sundays a month. It's the only time I have.

**Q: To your knowledge, are the members of the black community well represented in city government? Do the people in the community really take an active interest in the city government, you know, in using the government to supply his needs?**

A: I don't think the black population is represented as well as it should be. A councilman and maybe a black on the Board of Education in a town of this size I don't think is adequate representation.

**Q: Mr. Johnson, your immediate plans are to stay in Middletown?**

A: At least--well, now we are, yes. I don't have any reason or idea of leaving Middletown.

**Q: Do you think you'll be retiring in Middletown?**

A: Probably. Of course, I'm not (going to work) for the rest of my life.

**Q: That's where it's at. O.K. I've been interviewing Mr. Samuel Johnson. We've taped this interview on March 10, 1976, the Bicentennial Year, at his ARCO Station on Main Street Extension. Thank you very much. Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?**

A: No, I think everything has been said that needed to be said.

**Q: Thank you very much.**

A: Thank you.

t: 3/1/96

/Mk

**P.S. The following remarks were recorded at the end of this tape, apparently from another dictation:**

.....that's the experience where I live, also.

**Q: Is there, like, an ethnic group that is more or less in control of the city government, do you think?**

A: From what I see, I don't see the inner workings of the city government, but from what I see that seems to be the case. I don't know whether there are more Italians in the town or more Italians are elected by Italians in the town, say, Polish, or whatever the group may be, but I think from what I see that's the way it seems to be.