

**Pioneer Voices of Zion Canyon**  
Oral History Project

Interviewer: Victor C. Hall

Narrator: Oscar R. Johnson

Date: March 10, 2004

Location: N/A

Oscar was born in Springdale in 1932 and has been a resident of Springdale all his life except for sojourns in the Army etc. There were four children in the family, two older sisters and one younger brother. Oscar has been bishop of the Springdale LDS Ward and mayor of the city. His father had been employed building the Zion tunnel and continued to work on building projects in the park from time to time. The interviewer was under the mistaken impression that Oscar was born in the Park itself and it was because of this that the interview took place. Actually, the family never lived in the park nor was the park an important family activity venue. Oscar along with other boys who grew up adjacent to the park frequently went into the park for leisure time activities and it is these experiences that provide whatever relevancy Oscar's life has for the present study. He worked in the Park as a teenager but that would have been during the years 1948, 1949 and 1950, thus beyond the time constraints of the present study. Only information that appears to have relevance is included.

Date of interview: March 10, 2004

Interviewee: Oscar R. Johnson

Interviewer: Victor C. Hall

VH: This brings us to your actual involvement in the park.

OJ: I never

VH: And your family never did live in the park?

VH: Tell a little bit more about your personal experiences in the park.

OJ: My personal experiences?

VH: Yeah.

OJ: I worked pipeline company for two or three summers. My job was to pack horse with materials, cement and so forth up the trail to where the water is, the springs at the head of the system. So I spend three summers that way in the park itself. In Oak Creek Canyon.

VH: This would have been---

OJ: Oh, I was probably sixteen, seventeen eighteen years old.

VH: As a child, uh did you spend time in the park

OJ: We went up on a lot of occasions, picnics, outings; things like that; church outings. That's pretty much what took place: outings.

VH: So uh. You were well acquainted then as you were growing up with plants and the animals.

OJ: I probably took them for granted. Of course we noticed when we met a rattlesnake or something like that. It seems like there was more of them in those days than there are now.

VH: Speaking of animals, sort of reminisce about encounters with rattlesnakes

OJ: I've jumped over stuff like that; come that close.

VH: Did one ever strike at you?

OJ: No. They coiled. They were as scared of us as much as we were of them.

VH: Deer.

OJ: Lots of deer. I have a lot deer around my home, even today.

(skip)

OJ: Between when I was high school and in the army (early 1950's) I was Shunsburg. I used to ride a horse; cross the river five times to get to what they called \*\* Valley out there. I used to work for Mr. George Lewis.

VH: Actually uh, Shunsburg, it is part of Zion.

OJ: Some of its privately owned.

VH: But in fact, it's part of the Zion Canyons.

OJ: There used to be a town out there

VH: I suppose you've had some first-hand experience with floods.

OJ: Oh yes. I've seen it high. When I rode a horse to Shunsburg I used to swim it across that first crossing of the Virgin River in the spring when they had that runoff. You don't see too much of that now. You have a hard time getting your feet wet. Way back in the old days I used to swim a horse across it.

VH: Do you have a religious view of the land?

OJ: (unintelligible. He had no kind of affirmative answer)

VH: Do you think religion has influenced you about how you felt about the Zion area?

OJ: Certainly something that God put together, I think. Whether it's through nature, it's been created. The Lord created the earth.

VH: The very fact that we named it as we did indicates a religious connection?

OJ: I think so.

VH: Outside of your family, who influenced you as you were growing up?

OJ: School teachers. We went to school together.

VH: Did you ever attend any organized activities in the Park?

OJ: I used to play in the summer programs. They used to have swimming programs at the pool at the lodge before they took the pool out. I think it was every Saturday afternoon, they had a water carnival And just put on a good program for the tourists.

(unintelligible segment)

VH: (asks question about plants)

OJ: Lots of flowers; wild flowers; Sego Lilies; there was a few in the Park. Flowers of all kinds. Blue Bells, Red Bells You could find them high up on the mountain trails

(Transcription of the March tenth interview was stopped at this point. Dialogue was mostly illegible)

Second interview March 28, 2004. (See side B of cassette)

VH: You mentioned that you worked on the water supply; bringing water for Springdale's culinary use from Zion?

OJ: I didn't help bring it but I worked on it after it was installed. We used to go up every year and clean the sand traps so that water would come clean down through the canyon up there in Oak Creek.

VH: Does Springdale currently get water from that?

OJ: No. Later the Park had us take it out and they supplied us the water out of their tanks above Springdale.

VH: Oh, so you still are getting water from Zion Canyon.

OJ: We're getting water from the river.

VH: Oh from the river.

OJ: They have a purification plant and everything.

VH: Not from the springs.

OJ: No, we're not getting water from the springs. (skipped a couple of sentences by VH)

VH: You spoke of the German Brown as being a native trout. What was its habitat?

OJ: Well, it was in the river but during the flood period, usually which is in the early spring, late winter they would go back into the clear water streams up in Zion's canyon. And that preserved them from being washed out in the floods.

VH: Would there be more than one tributary that they could find refuge in?

OJ: Oh yes. There are lots of springs in Zion go back up into the source where it's coming out of the mountain and that's where they'd go when it gets too muddy for them. That's how come they were saved. Actually, if they were out in the river itself, the mud and what have you when it comes down through would have washed them out.

VH: In fact, I've seen a couple of times a fish that had been swept down by the muddy flood.

OJ: Bishop Madsen, when he lived in the Springdale area, used to have a saying that "Fish would have to swim backward to eliminate dust in their eyes." (laughter)

VH: So what tributaries then would have been sanctuaries for the Brown's during flood stage?

OJ: There's two or three up in what they call the Narrows where the Virgin comes down through and its solid rock on both sides. There's a lot of springs from there clear down in various areas that they can get back into.

VH: Now you spoke of your father fishing for the German Brown's; you didn't yourself. Anyway, talk about fishing.

OJ: They used to plant 'em. They used to plant them every year and they'd wash out from the floods. But intermixed with the ones that they planted, they did catch German Brown's at different times, and I've had various ones here in town, young fellows, that used to go up and fish a lot and they come home with German Browns.

VH: What they planted, like Rainbows or—

OJ: Some of 'em were Rainbows, and the Spotted -- black and white trout and they planted for several years and then decided it was just too expensive I guess to keep stocking the river when they went out with the floods.

VH: What about what we call suckers.

OJ: Lot's of them.

VH: They've survived nicely?

OJ: They do very well along the bank even in a muddy situation.

VH: Your talking about the German Browns is quite interesting news to me.

OJ: Well, I didn't believe there was very many in until, oh it's been about fifteen, twenty years maybe a little longer than that ago. Mr. Chamberlain moved in up here and we were building his home. He brought his family and his boys were all outdoorsman. They liked to fish and everything so

one morning they took their fishing reels and headed up the creek, and I happened to see them from where we were building and I says, "There isn't any fish in that river." And they said, "Oh, there's fish in there." And I says, "Well I'll give you fifty cents for every one you bring home tonight I mean I'd pay you that. And they brought seven home that night. They were all German Brown.

VH: About how big?

OJ: Oh ranging from nine to ten inches to fifteen, sixteen inches-- good sized fish.

VH: Unless anything else about fish occurs to you, lets move back to your swimming days.

OJ: OK, you just want to know about the ponds that we that we had in the park?

VH: First of all, you said you rarely if ever swam in the river itself?

OJ: Oh, we swam in the river quite often. We found ponds that were anywhere from two or three feet deep to some that we made that were deep as four or five feet. Up in Oak Creek; not Oak Creek. What's the canyon (Pine Creek) We'd go up every year usually, where the floods took it out, we'd reset the rocks it would make us a nice pond. There's a natural spillway that used to come down over and still there I'm sure. And dig it out so there was a depth right underneath the rock. We'd just go out past that and build a rock dam across that would let the water through OK but we built it up so it (the water) would go higher and we could swim in it.

VH: And was this true every year?

OJ: Pretty much. Of course it hasn't been for a long time; I don't think they'll even let you go swim up in there now.

VH: Well no. But would there be enough water?

OJ: Oh yes. That stream continuously runs winter and summer. Sometimes it gets a little weak in the summer but it's always coming down.

VH: I need to be more observant. What about Oak Creek?

OJ: Oak Creek; we always had water. There's springs coming out there that supplied the whole town

VH: Oh, of Springdale?

OJ: In the old days. Before they took it out. They supplied us, the Park did, for a number of years until we decided we could put in a purification plant and save on expense.

VH: Oak Creek would have been the main source of culinary water for Springdale.

OJ: It was.

VH: From the time they first got---

OJ: Well, when they first settled Springdale; this was before I was born they used to haul it from the river and put milk and stuff in it to settle

VH: That's true of all the settlements.

OJ: Once they did get in a line it went to Oak Creek because there was dwellings up there. You see Springdale went clear to Oak Creek in the early days. When the Park took it over, they bought everybody out

(skip some talk about early Springdale)

VH: You did not build any kind of pool in Oak Creek by damming it off?

OJ: The fact is-- in the winter time they used to get ice out of ponds Oak Creek. When it froze solid, they cut that out brought it out for ice for the winter (summer) block houses. That was way before my time.

VH: About how old were you when you first started damming off that creek?

OJ: Old enough that my mother would let me go. I was probably eight, ten; I was with-- A group of us would go up; my sisters who were older. And a lot of the town's boys and girls would go up.

VH: Well, Zion. Did your mothers consider it as a "safe area" for their children?

OJ: As long as there was somebody there with us.

VH: If you and a few others wandered up into the canyon, they weren't concerned?

OJ: Not if there was a few of us. They'd get real concerned if we didn't show up we'd been up there alone. We never did go alone.

VH: But that's true of all of us I think who grew up fifty or sixty years ago. Our mothers weren't concerned if we roamed out in the hills because they were just part of what kids did.

OJ: As long as we let them know where we were going. I can tell you that some of us didn't and the whole town would be out looking if we didn't get back in time.

VH: Yeah, Zion does give the opportunity to get up on a cliff and get hung up.

End of pertinent dialogue.