



**Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey -  
Black Oral Histories  
1983/146**

Oral interview of  
Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love

December 10, 1983

**Conducted by Clarence Caesar**

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The following interview was taped on December 10, 1983, at the home of Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love, of 3620 Clay Street, in Sacramento. Mrs. Love is a native Sacramentan and a resident of Del Paso Heights and has been so for over 50 years. As a youth, she attended schools in Del Paso Heights, most notably Del Paso Elementary and Grant High School from which she graduated. Mrs. Love's father, the Reverend Hercules Benbow is one of the earliest Black residents of Del Paso Heights and was subsequently one of the largest land owners in the area in the 1920s and 30s. Mrs. Benbow's insights into the early development of the Black community of Del Paso Heights form the crux of this interview.

**Clarence:** First of all, could you tell us something about yourself, where you were born, where you went to school.

**Mrs. Love:** I'll tell you who I am first. [laughs]

**Clarence:** Ok, fine. [laughs with Mrs. Love]

**Mrs. Love:** I am Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love [laughs]. Been married twice. The first one was Johnson, ok. As a Benbow, I was born and raised in Del Paso Heights in the 20's. Lived here all my life and enjoy it. And it was a very few people here. Very few Blacks, Indians, Mexicans, and Whites. Mixed races. And we got along altogether like sisters and brothers and going through grade school and graduating there were a few more Blacks that came out and I had at least two in my class, so it wasn't very many.

**Clarence:** What schools did you go to?

**Mrs. Love:** I went to Del Paso Elementary from the first through the eighth grade, I didn't go to Kindergarten. I was too smart. [laughs] And then from there we graduated at the eighth grade and went from the 9<sup>th</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup> at Grant Union High School. They didn't have no junior high.

**Clarence:** So Del Paso Elementary was from K-8<sup>th</sup>?

**Mrs. Love:** And that is something they don't do today. The high school went from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> and then you graduated from there. We didn't have no junior high schools, and we didn't have no preschools like they have today. But I guess it would have been fine if we had them. [laughs] I don't feel like that I missed anything because when I went to school my mother had taught me how to read and how to, learning my A, B, Cs, knew how to color, knew how to count and to spell cat, and rat, and bat, and that's how come I was in the first grade.

**Clarence:** Could you tell us something about your parents, where they came from, and when they came to Sacramento and why they came to Sacramento?

**Mrs. Love:** Well, I don't know the reason why they came to Sacramento, and I don't know exactly the year that they came to Sacramento, but I know that they evidently had to have got married in the 20s or in 1920 or 1921 because of my oldest sister being born in 1922. And, there is an old lady in Berkeley, California, that knew my mother before she ever got married, and if I

go back down there I could talk to her, you know, and get a little information from her, but, I don't know the reason why they came, and I know that she was working with the Father Devine Mission, what's her name? Aunt Dora, and uh some way or another they introduced her to my father and they were married.

**Clarence:** Where were your parents from?

**Mrs. Love:** My mother was from Donasonville, Louisiana, and my father, Memphis, Tennessee, and his mother, Bennie Davis, her maiden name, is the sister to Brigadier General Davis.

**Clarence:** Oh, Benjamin Davis?

**Mrs. Love:** Yes, that is her sister.

**Clarence:** Did they move to Del Paso Heights immediately upon arriving in Sacramento?

**Mrs. Love:** No, they stayed in Sacramento until he had his first home built and then moved out here.

**Clarence:** So they lived on the West End, or Downtown, or?

**Mrs. Love:** It was right Downtown on K Street, if I'm not mistaken, at a hotel. They were staying in a hotel.

**Clarence:** So they moved into a home that was built specifically for them?

**Mrs. Love:** For the family, uh huh, and I was born in it. I think all of us was born in it but my oldest sister, she was born in Sacramento.

**Clarence:** Where was your home located at the time?

**Mrs. Love:** On Dry Creek Road, what is that address? Uh, 1705 Dry Creek. [laughs]

**Clarence:** As to the physical appearance of Del Paso Heights, in those years, what can you remember?

**[Counter 50]**

**Mrs. Love:** What I liked was in the springtime most of the time they would redo the streets and they would have the water trucks, you know, the graders and things out there and we would run behind the water trucks playing. [laughs] I liked to just smell that fresh dust and they would try to keep the streets up. It was always, you know, something exciting, because there wasn't nothing too much happening. That was about it.

**Clarence:** What were the main business areas that you had to go to get to buy things at that time?

**Mrs. Love:** At North Sacramento and Downtown.

**Clarence:** Was there anything in Del Paso Heights that was available to buy food or clothes, or anything like that?

**Mrs. Love:** Not clothes, we used to always send off to Montgomery Wards or to Sears for clothes, we ordered, most of the time our clothes, winter clothes. And my mother, she did a lot of sewing, she would go Downtown to buy material and she would, with six girls, she would make clothes, we would need a lot, and she taught us how to sew, crochet, embroider.

**Clarence:** What types of friends or relationships did you have when you were younger?

**Mrs. Love:** Like I said, we had Mexican friends, Indian friends, and my mother, she always had Sunday School in her home, and so they would come over and we'd make ice cream every Sunday and they would always come because they liked that treat. [laughs] Always liked that ice cream. And a lot of times she would have cake, and they would just, you know, they lived around different areas, but they would come in and we would go out. White and Black.

**Clarence:** So you didn't feel any particular racial friction or anything like that?

**Mrs. Love:** None whatsoever. No.

**Clarence:** What about in other areas that you went to, like North Sacramento or Downtown, did you feel any, any particular distinction between you and anybody else?

**Mrs. Love:** No. Like I said, not until oh, the late 40s when different people began to migrate out to California with their Southern ways and their attitudes, and tried to put them in operation. Then we began to feel a little bit more pressure here and there, you know. They brought in that junk with them. If they had left it back where they came from, it would have been fine.

**Clarence:** So most of the people that you grew up with were born in Sacramento or?

**Mrs. Love:** Born in Sacramento, the children were. Some of them migrated out here, and we had to get them straight, you know, about name calling. But it didn't take long, they found out that nobody else was doing it, so they stopped. We all became just the best of friends.

**Clarence:** How were you effected or your family, how were they effected by World War II and the opening of McClellan Air Force Base and the influx of people into Del Paso Heights in those years?

**Mrs. Love:** Well, when McClellan Field Base was being built, the hangers, we could stand on our front porch and look direct into the hangars. Long years ago, you can't do it now because of the housing and trees and the different things that have gone up. But, my father used to work out

there, he was a cement finisher. He worked in North Sacramento when they had the WPA and he worked on that and he was a cement finisher and he showed us a lot of the sidewalks that he completed and the swimming pool over at the McClellan. Grant Union High School, and the sidewalks around Grant, he did those. He worked a lot of hard hours, long and hard hours because he had to watch it you know. The work was good for the men. Even though things were strenuous during the war, when they had things rationed, you still got along good and you had the commodities, I remember that because they used to give us the best of the food, really. We got those, I remember the peaches and oranges and great big things.

**Clarence:** These were Japanese people?

**Mrs. Love:** What?

**Clarence:** Commodities did you say?

**Mrs. Love:** Commodities is a supply of food.

**Clarence:** I'm sorry, I misinterpreted you. Commodities you said.

**Mrs. Love:** And they would give those out, I think it was, I don't know if it was once a week or once every two weeks. But anyway, I remember it. [laughs] Just like the margarine, that old white margarine and then had this little red pill that you put over it and mixed it up in there to make it yellow.



**Clarence:** I didn't know that. These are government sponsored programs?

**Mrs. Love:** I think they were. Something, I guess like what you would call welfare but they didn't use that word at that time, but that's what it was. It was like a government issue of food to the poor.

**Clarence:** What do you – As far as new people moving into Del Paso Heights did you have trouble making new friends with the people that moved in?

**Mrs. Love:** Never. Because my father, he was steadily building, building houses for people. I guess he knew that they were migrating in, and he had motels and plenty of little houses for people to stay in and we never had no problems, never.

**Clarence:** If you needed medical attention or any type of professional help like a lawyer, who did you go to?

**[Counter 100]**

**Mrs. Love:** We didn't have no problems to go to no lawyers or anything like that in those days. But Downtown on K Street, you know my mother's doctor, his name was Davis, if you got sick we'd go to the one that delivered most of us. They came out to the house at that time. [laughs]

**Clarence:** So there were no drastic measures that you had to take in order to ensure that you had medical care or any situations like that.

**Mrs. Love:** No, nothing like that. If you wanted to go to the doctor, you didn't even have to make an appointment, you just went in there and sat and waited your turn, and that's the way it was.

**Clarence:** What about police protection?

**Mrs. Love:** That wasn't necessary, you would go off and leave your house open and people didn't steal in those days. Not like it is today.

**Clarence:** I have often heard that said from other interviewees that that was the case in other areas of Sacramento, in downtown and such.

**Mrs. Love:** No problem, no problem with nobody ever stealing, snatching purses or doing anything like that. I never heard of it. Never heard of it.

**Clarence:** Could you describe Grant High School [hard to hear counter 111] what types of students they had, what types of say, competition you might have had with other schools, Sacramento High or McClatchy High?

**Mrs. Love:** I don't remember anything of too much like that, because I didn't go to the games. Games would give me headaches. [laughs] Well, I went to a few and I would come back with the biggest headache and I just didn't like headaches and so I just wouldn't go. Well they had games always, you know, competition, like, but to be able to tell you about the sports, I wasn't on into it too much. I had to play sports, and I played in games myself, you know, basketball, but to remember the different schools and the different people we competed against and all that, I think that's a little far back for my brain. [laughs]

**Clarence:** What about the education? The academic aspect of it.

**Mrs. Love:** The education was good. It was real good, because I think we got something then that they don't give the children today, and I think they should give more of it and compel them to get into music, home economics, and when I say home economics, we cooked. They taught us to cook. Taught us to set tables, taught us wait tables, and taught us to, like if you wanted to grow up and have a cooking job, you know, we really prepared foods for this and we had to serve other groups in our room, in the big cooking room, like there was four to a table, well we had to prepare and go and serve other children and do our best to get graded. I don't think they have this today like they did then. We had to make our own aprons and we had to do things, but today the children when they go to school they don't even realize that they are being prepared to be a parent when they get out of school. They are just going to school for an education, and all they got on their mind is a job. Most of them are not going to have a job. But the average one who need those and come out of school is going to end up being a parent. And they don't realize what it takes to be a parent and the preparations and all that. The mind isn't tutored to where that

they can handle it once they get off to it. And I think the preparation time is in school, to where that, well we made, you know, like their talking about that they have a, what do you call it, a diary? To where that they've set up and prepared and laid up a lot of different things. But that is what we did. We used to call it like a hope chest too. I still have a lot of things that I made in school. For different occasions, but I never wore them out. [laughs]

**Clarence:** Did you feel any, did you feel that the teachers treated you any different because you were Black?

**Mrs. Love:** No.

**Clarence:** As a student?

**Mrs. Love:** No, they didn't have that prejudice. The only time we felt anything, is like if anything got stole, they would call out the Blacks and they would question us for their [hard to hear, counter 141]. And when we found it out, the president of the school, the principal, I mean, of the school he had all of these things in his desk. He was the thief. When they, people would turn them in, he wouldn't, you know, give them back, and so, I don't remember what they did, but I know they expelled him. We got another principal, I don't remember his name right off. But that's what happened, and it's the only time, and another thing too, we couldn't swim in the swimming pool.

**Clarence:** Could not swim in the swimming pool?

**Mrs. Love:** In the swimming pool. They had a public swimming pool, you know, in the summer time. Now during school they wanted us to swim in it. But my mother wouldn't let us swim in it because too many of them were taken polio. And I mean they would drop them with polio just like, you know, an epidemic. And then, um in the summer time, we could down there, we could watch them swim, but we couldn't swim. They wouldn't allow us to swim with the whites. And that's the only thing that I can remember as being fully prejudiced, it was the swimming pool.

**[Counter 150]**

**Clarence:** So were there other activities that you were involved in where you being [hard to hear, counter 151]

**Mrs. Love:** Uh, nowhere else that I know of. Not in the stores. We could eat in any restaurant. We could use any bathroom, you know, it wasn't like in the South at all, never. Never.

**Clarence:** Did you develop any relationships with people in other parts of town? Say like in downtown Sacramento, or in the Oak Park area?

**Mrs. Love:** Oh yeah, we had a lot of friends all over town. Yes.

**Clarence:** What about outside of Sacramento? Did you travel around to other areas?

**Mrs. Love:** Yes, we used to go down to Oakland, quite a bit. Because we used to take the ferry, I remember, you know from Vallejo over into Oakland, and uh I can't remember myself going over into San Francisco, but I know my parents did do a lot of traveling, always did.

**Clarence:** What about Marysville or Stockton?

**Mrs. Love:** Oh yeah, Marysville.

**Clarence:** What church were you affiliated with during those years?

**Mrs. Love:** We used to go, I don't know what the name my mother's was at that time out here, but we used to go down to 8<sup>th</sup> and W, which was the Church of Latter Christ Church, we used to go to L. Nahomans, he was on 16<sup>th</sup> and R, you know, he's the one that is out on Roosevelt, now, but he was on 16<sup>th</sup> and R at that time, and let me see, there was another one down on we used to go to Father Devine's Mission sometimes in Sacramento.

**Clarence:** There was a Father Devine's Mission here in Sacramento? I never heard about it. Did it last long?

**Mrs. Love:** It lasted quite a while, yes.

**Clarence:** What was the basis of Father Devine's Mission, as far as the religious instruction  
[hard to hear, counter 171]

**Mrs. Love:** Well they had a like a free kitchen. And they had donations if you had it, but if you  
didn't they [hard to hear, counter 172]

**Clarence:** As you know I [hard to hear, counter 173]

**Mrs. Love:** And I know they cooked some good food, I used to paint signs for them. Menu  
signs, you know. [laughs] When I was still in school, I had a job with them.

**Clarence:** Back to the Del Paso Heights of old, of your earlier years, how would you say that  
Del Paso Heights has progressed as a community?

**Mrs. Love:** Well it has progressed, since we got sidewalks, and street lights, and better homes,  
and I can't speak for the people being better, but they're not too bad in this neighborhood. But  
then you can't guard who's bad and who's good, because a person's mind could change at any  
time, you know, to do whatever they want to do, and so you can't go on that, and it doesn't make  
any difference where you are at.

**Clarence:** As a child living here I can remember [hard to hear counter 185]

**Mrs. Love:** It was fuller, it had more grocery stores and it had auto shops, and it had more taverns, and the people here weren't as rowdy here as they are today. It doesn't make any difference if the person got drunk, your job was still pass by and go to the store and they never were bothered in the least. Because I know, father many times [hard to hear counter 188] he never, not once had any offences or nobody ever bothered me, you know, nobody's children or anything.

**Clarence:** What about some of the clubs that were around then, like Black Cat [hard to hear counter 191] [Clarence has a cough and his voice is very hard to hear at the end of his sentences]

**Mrs. Love:** I think it was, it had to be I think, around in the forties but I don't exactly when. I was quite young and I know that it was there and of course, I wasn't allowed to play up in that vicinity or go. Being that I was raised a church person, it was like I wasn't in there anyway.

**Clarence:** So I take it that those two clubs, the Black Cat and [hard to hear counter 196] Club did not have the best of reputations in the community?

**Mrs. Love:** Well it didn't have uh, well because of us, we didn't believe in dancing, we didn't believe in drinking, Christian people, you know, and but the sinner people they had to have somewhere to go and that was their, [hard to hear counter 198] enjoy going to the tavern. They called it the Black Cat. [hard to hear counter 200] the name of the room.

**[Counter 250]**



**Clarence:** I seem to remember that the Black Cat itself had a pretty violent history?

**Mrs. Love:** As things got worsen, yes, and people came, more people came out here, it got tough as the people got tough.

**Clarence:** It didn't effect the overall makeup of the community as far as being a [hard to hear counter 203].

**Mrs. Love:** Oh no.

**Clarence:** Could you tell us a little bit about some of the churches in this area and how they got started. For instance, do you know anything about Baptist or Mt. [hard to hear counter 205].

**Mrs. Love:** Well mostly all of the churches that is on here, well I am trying to think what year it was, it was in around 43 or 44 my father had completed a big two story church on 1216 Roanoke [hard to hear counter 210]. As people began to come out here [hard to hear counter 210] was one big church, and mostly all of the churches that's established in Del Paso Heights came out from our church.

**Clarence:** What's the name of the church?

**Mrs. Love:** We just called it, at that time, Del Paso [hard to hear counter 213] then later he got a charter and he called it, uh, the Del Paso Deliverance Center [hard to hear counter 214].

**Clarence:** On Roanoke?

**Mrs. Love:** Yes.

**Clarence:** So you are saying, was this a Baptist affiliation?

**Mrs. Love:** No. [hard to hear counter 216]

**Clarence:** [hard to hear counter 216]

**Mrs. Love:** But anybody could come and so anybody did come and when they got I guess enough money accumulated they would start a [hard to hear counter 218]

**Clarence:** Could you tell us anything about [hard to hear counter 219] Black businessmen that you can recall, who started some businesses –

**Mrs. Love:** Well uh, in businesses, my father was about the biggest landlord that was here, then when I got married in 48, I married a man from Texas as a young girl, came from where his brother had a grocery store at this same spot, at 3620 Clay was Orange Avenue at that time, but they changed it to Clay Street and we had a grocery store here. For a while and then the Murpheys down on Roanoke they started a grocery store too on Rio Linda and it didn't last too long either. I don't know what their problem was, but I know what mine was, we let out too

much credit and we was too poor to carry it, and so it just wiped us out. Then, let's see, then they had some, I think some Colored barber shops and some hairdressers. Then they had a Colored [hard to hear counter 233] they came out here from Rio Linda. Then Dr. [hard to here counter 233] he was here on Roanoke but then he moved over on to Grand Ave., and uh, let's see. Besides the taverns, I don't know who all owned the taverns, because uh, not you know, situated.

**Clarence:** Was there any attempt to try to close the [hard to hear counter 240] or pretty much stick to themselves?

**Mrs. Love:** Could you say it again?

**Clarence:** Was there any attempt on the part of the business community in the Black business community of Del Paso Heights to form an association of some kind, or did they pretty much stick to themselves?

**Mrs. Love:** I think they all kind of stuck to themselves, I would say, because a few would get together saying "we're going to do this or we should do this" and different things. I know what you are saying, [hard to hear counter 246]

**Clarence:** There seems to be, today, a lack of economic enterprises in Del Paso Heights as far as [hard to hear counter 248] Boulevard is no longer there, it has been torn down.

**Clarence:** I guess everything has moved to Marysville Boulevard, uh, do you have any ideas as to why that happened?

**[Counter 250]**

**Mrs. Love:** Well for one thing, there was the [hard to hear counter 250] we had a [hard to hear counter 251] Stop and Shop and we had a nice Sprouse-Ritz where you could buy different things, so you didn't have to go far to get shoes, clothes, and household needs and everything. I don't know if anything did happen. I know that somebody said they wanted [hard to hear counter 257] burned it down and [hard to hear counter 257] because the first little thing that go wrong, you know, they would be burned out, wiped out and they didn't want that. [hard to hear, counter 258] It was really a tragic deal that happened and it just scared the, and then everybody started losing their service stations, and just moving away. Making it look like a ghost town and it really hasn't been forgotten I guess because they made a [hard to hear counter 262]. So violence is one thing than can keep businesses out of your neighborhood. Because people will retaliate. If they learned to retaliate in court instead of doing it, taking things in their own hands, then [hard to hear counter 268]

**Clarence:** What do you see as the future of Del Paso Heights? Do you see any gains being made as a community from what you see here now?

**Mrs. Love:** Do I see what?

**Clarence:** Any gains being made as a community? Do you see Del Paso Heights moving forward or backwards or?

**Mrs. Love:** Well it has since 1970, when they put in Redevelopment to get, to revive a lot of these old homes and make them look nicer, it has been growing. It is growing slow because of the finance people, you know, so many of them after they got their homes was unable to maintain them and they lost them. But as far as, I don't think it is going to go backwards, I think it's going to press on to go forward because people have a mind, and the younger people will try to do and try to have more than what they had in the future.

**Clarence:** So you see it as moving forward?

**Mrs. Love:** Only moving forward. It might be moving slowly, but still going farther.

**Clarence:** How do you feel about the development of surrounding areas like on the other side of 880 and the warehouses they are building over on Norwood, do you think those will have any impact on the community at all?

**Mrs. Love:** Well I don't know whether or not they'll have any impact on the community but there ought to be some jobs available, for the community if they are capable of handling it.

**Clarence:** How do you feel about the recent election of Grantland Johnson to the City Council? Do you feel that is an important step?

**Mrs. Love:** Say that again?

**Clarence:** How do you feel about the recent election of Grantland Johnson to the City Council?

**Mrs. Love:** Oh, I think it's, yeah, I knew him before you were born. [laughs] Yes, I think that's a great asset. I really do. I am proud of him. I just hope he can make things work to get things done, you know. Because truly we need somebody in there, you know, that has a mind and wants to work. And I think he has it because if he didn't, he wouldn't have went that far. That's what I am talking about, a drive. You just got to have that drive and get in there and do it. And if a person is doing it, I think we should stand behind him.

**Clarence:** Mrs. Johnson, I would like to thank you for your time. Thank you for the interview that I enjoyed. I hope we can get together again at another time in the future.

**Mrs. Love:** Thank you.

**[End of Tape one, Side one, Counter 299]**