TRANSCRIPT – JOHN A. ZEIGLER, Jr.

Interviewee: JOHN A. ZEIGLER, Jr.

Interviewer: KIERAN W. TAYLOR

Interview Date: April 6, 2013

Location: Charleston, South Carolina

Length: 93 minutes

KIERAN W. TAYLOR: Okay, starting here, and Mr. Zeigler, just for the sake of the recording, could you tell me your full name and when and where you were born.

JOHN ZEIGLER: John Asbury Zeigler, February 5, 1912, Manning South Carolina.

KT: Tell me a little bit about your family.

JZ: Well, my mother was descended from Thomas Elfe, the cabinet maker on one side, and French people who were refugees from Santo Domingo on the other side. Their name was Follin, F-O-L-L-I-N. I was also descended from Colonel Joseph Glover of the [American] Revolution. My father was a druggist by profession because he could go to the Medical University and live with his uncle, who was Chairman of the Department. But that isn't what he wanted. He wanted to be a newspaper man, so over the drugstore in Florence, he started a weekly newspaper. I was about nine, and I would fold the papers as they came off the press. But he found people who were willing to put up the money to make it a daily. So, it's still there as a daily -- the Florence Morning News. Of course, it's been there now about ninety years, I guess.

KT: He was the founding editor?

JZ: Yeah, and he -- every day he had a column called, "Did You Ever Stop to

Think?" Eventually, he gave up that. He hated contention of any kind. He was very liberal, and he wrote editorials against the Ku Klux Klan and against corrupt politicians and all that. We children used to hide under the house and pretend to be scared when the Klan marched by because we were not only my father's children, but my mother was a Catholic, so we figured we had two strikes against us.

KT: Okay.

JZ: But anyway, eventually, he gave up the paper business. He was more liberal than the other people who had put up the money. He would go to black schools and talk and do things like that, and you never heard any ugly words about people in our house. And eventually, he wound up as Secretary-Treasurer of Santee-Cooper and lived in Moncks Corner. My mother's aunts had a private school on College Street, where the family house was. And when I was four years old, I would visit and learn to read, so I never liked to be read to. I always wanted to read. When we had the bookstore, we had a built-in place[1] to have it.

KT: So, you've been visiting Charleston since you were four.

JZ: Well, actually, I lived in Florence, and when I went to The Citadel, I was living in Florence. And then for the last three years at The Citadel, my family lived in Gastonia. But that was just a couple of years. But I got out of The Citadel, I couldn't find work. But I got -- at that time, the Roosevelts were making jobs for people, so for thirty dollars a month, I taught school in Charleston, teaching failing students supposedly, five at a time, English and math, like sixth-seventh grade. And I soon realized that these were not dumb children, they were bad. The teachers were getting rid of them to keep the class quiet -- because I had forty students. And when the school year was over, the principals

gave me a letter of recommendation and said that thirty-eight of the forty had passed. But I wasn't surprised because they were not dumb. That was at the time when the kids from the orphan house were part of the school. It was by the College of Charleston.

KT: These were white students?

JZ: Yeah.

KT: What was the school?

JZ: What was it called? Let's see, you know, I can't think of what it was called. That's the problem with getting old.

KT: Well, that's something we can look up.

JZ: Well, it doesn't matter.

KT: Tell me, you said a couple things that piqued my interest. So, your father came to the Medical College?

JZ: Yeah, because his uncle was the Chairman of the Medical School, and he stayed with him, and it wouldn't cost much. He had driven to (00:06:17]) earlier.

KT: Would this be where your parents met then, in Charleston when he was a medical student?

JZ: They met here. They were on a picnic at Kiawah, which was just a deserted island with one house. And they went separately, but they met there, and within a year, they married. My mother taught for one year, and she graduated from Memminger. Young teachers always taught first in black schools; there were no black teachers. And a few years ago, I went to a (00:07:05) party, and a little black woman came up to me and she said, "Could your mother have been Virginia Elfe, who married a John Zeigler?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "Well, she taught me in the fourth grade and was the best teacher

I ever had."

KT: That must have been in what, '05? I mean that must have --

JZ: Well, my mother lived to be 106, and she was born in '90. She died in -- let's see, '96, yeah. Wouldn't that make her 106?

KT: That's right, that's right. So, they were married about 1910 or so?

JZ: Yeah, 1911, then I came along about ten months later or something like that.

KT: Now she was a Catholic though. Who converted to Catholicism?

JZ: Well, all the French relatives were Catholic.

KT: I see.

JZ: The ones from Santo Domingo who came here.

KT: Oh, of course, because they weren't the Huguenot Charlestonians, they were French.

JZ: There were said to have been put in big kegs and taken to the ship by faithful slaves, and they got on the ship and escaped the revolution there.

KT: I see. And then came to Charleston in the late 18th Century.

JZ: Yeah, and they [2] -- but the (00:08:47), you know, two of them were teachers, and one taught piano, and one playing the organ at the cathedral and all that sort of stuff. And the great pleasure in those days was getting together with your friends on a Sunday afternoon and playing the piano and singing and all that.

KT: What was your earliest memory?

JZ: I think my earliest memory -- I think it's written up in one of my poems. I got my foot infected with a nail playing around in the yard, at a place called Lydia, South Carolina, where there was a drugstore. And my earliest memory is my little sisters

playing around the bed and the doctor taking me out in his buggy to look for weeds that would fight the poison. And in my poem, I say something about that was my first adventure into the big world.

KT: How old do you think you were?

JZ: I think I must have been -- let's see now. My sisters were both born, and the four of us were within six years of each other, so -- about eight, I guess. Let's see, maybe seven because I think when the great flu epidemic came in eighteen, we were in Florence by then, and my father being a druggist was put to it to keep us all as well as possible.

KT: Oh, sure. Do you have any memories of the Great War?

JZ: No, nothing at all.

KT: You don't remember your parents talking about it or having to --

JZ: I don't remember anything about it. I just remember 1918, when this flu came that I had the flu.

KT: You had it? You had the flu.

JZ: I had the flu. My sisters had the flu. My brother had the flu. We all had it.

KT: But everyone survived.

JZ: Yeah. So, let's see, what's next?

KT: What was behind your decision to come to The Citadel?

JZ: Well, I finished high school, I was sixteen. I hadn't thought about college. My nose was always in a book. My mother said, "Why don't you go to The Citadel? They have such good dances." My mother had gone to every Citadel dance when she was growing up. She was the belle of the ball. So, I went to The Citadel because my mother liked to dance, very rare.

KT: So, that was -- the decision was made then.

JZ: So, I went. I always said it was worth it because my -- one of my roommates married my sister, and so I have all these wonderful nephews and nieces from that marriage.

KT: Is that right?

JZ: Yeah.

KT: Who was your roommate?

JZ: He was Dick Potter -- Richard Potter. The youngest of his children is almost seventy this past week.

KT: Oh, wow.

JZ: He's doing a lot of work on Alzheimer's. He goes all over the world trying to get everybody working on it to share that -- what they find, trying to get it done quickly. While I was at The Citadel, I started The Shako, you know, all that. And one of the officers, General Days, a military officer, took me to the Poetry Society when I was a senior. That was great. The good thing about it was that all poems were submitted without names, so you didn't feel awkward.

KT: For the Shako?

JZ: No, for the --

KT: For the Society.

JZ: For the Poetry Society. So, I didn't mind. Nobody knew it was by me. Nobody knew whether it was by one of the great authors like Josephine Pinckney or John Bennett or anybody. You just felt free to condemn it or not.

KT: Right. So, a professor introduced you to --

JZ: Yeah, Colonel Days. He taught military (00:14:29).

KT: Okay. Now the campus would have been new when you arrived.

JZ: Yeah it was, yeah.

KT: You arrived in the fall of 1928?

JZ: Yeah, and I finished in ’32.

KT: What do you remember about your knob year?

JZ: You know, I really don’t remember much about it because I was the kind of person who never made a lot of noise. The people who got swatted the most were the sort of people who brought it on themselves, I found. I had very little problem with that. And I would -- I cleaned up somebody’s room, and in my later years, I walked a lot of tours because my roommate was not neat, the one who married my sister. He was like the first beatnik. His towel wouldn’t be folded right or whatever. And one of my memories is when he came through at night to check on there, somebody smelled an apple, and we had an apple hidden behind blankets on the (00:15:52), so the man went out of the room, he was eating an apple.

KT: Now you were at The Citadel then when the stock market crashed.

JZ: Oh, yeah.

KT: Do you remember how did the Depression affect The Citadel and affect your classmates?

JZ: Well, it didn't seem to affect The Citadel, but it affected me because I couldn’t get any money from home. But I had 9 College [St.] and so on the weekends, I’d go there and eat a lot, and they’d send me back home with a dollar or something you know.[3]

KT: Was your father able to keep his job?

JZ: My father had started a new business after the newspaper. He got all the local -- not just local, but all the independent owners of grocery stores to pool their buying, so they could buy cheap as the Piggly Wiggly or something, and that of course failed during the Depression, so he went around the country near Gastonia, buying up old gold and selling it.

KT: He was organizing cooperatives?

JZ: He'd just buy this stuff and sell it to some - and my main memory of that period is being home. It must have been one summer, and somebody -- a man -- young man coming to the door and asking for food. And all we had was some cold grits because that's about all we ate. So, I went in and brought him out the cold grits, and you'd have thought I'd given him a turkey dinner, he was so appreciative.

KT: Wow. Now how long did the family live in Gastonia?

JZ: Only two or three years. I forget how many, but maybe three.

KT: That wouldn't have been during the big Gastonia strike, would it have been?

JZ: I wouldn't have known it if it was.

KT: Yeah, this was the --

JZ: I think it must have been a strike because there were so many people who were hungry. And then I went -- I went to Washington to try to find work.

KT: This is after graduation?

JZ: Yeah, this is sometime after because I got a ride after Christmas. I was just home until Christmas, and then I got this ride, so I went to Washington because I had a friend there, who suggested that I come up and look for work there. So, I got up there and went to his address. I got a ride overnight with a neighbor. But I got there in the morning,

and my friend had left because his sister was ill back in North Carolina. So, I was there for about two weeks, and I wrote a short story about that experience when I came back.

KT: What were you going to do in Washington?

JZ: I didn't know, but he had said that he thought there could be work there, so -- but I was never one to push myself forward. I was always kind reticent in the background.

KT: But this would have been about the time that President Roosevelt was taking office then, just after Christmas of --

JZ: Yeah, because when I came back, you know, I left -- stayed only a couple of weeks, and came back to Charleston, and got this job with the Works Progress Administration job for thirty dollars a month, and I gave my great aunts twenty dollars a month, and I lived in the house.

KT: This was which house now?

JZ: 9 College Street. Do you know the college campus?

KT: Mm-hmm.

JZ: It's got a plaque in front of it.

KT: That became the bookstore.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: Okay. Did you have a sense growing up that you were different by -- at what point did you --

JZ: It never occurred to me that I was different or anything else. I was just my natural self is all.

KT: Yeah, but at any point, did you come to some kind of awareness that you

weren't attracted to women, and that --

JZ: You know, I never thought -- I never, ever thought of it. I had boy -- other younger sister to play with, and that was sort of -- but you know, I didn't think of it as anything, no name. I never put a name to anything.

KT: Right, right, but never any efforts on the part of family members to steer you?

JZ: Oh, no, no, no. My family never -- they always accepted whatever I was. They didn't care. And Edwin's family the same way, and even today, I remember his nephews mostly like I remember my nephews.

KT: But they embraced Edwin.

JZ: Oh, yeah, absolutely. He was so good-looking, everybody wanted to embrace him.

KT: How about in terms of your first relationship? About when did that come about?

JZ: My first relationship when I was twenty-two, I went to Washington because somebody had gotten me a job. My sister had already been given a job, and so in '34, I went to Washington, and I -- my sister and I lived together. And one night, I don't know whether I want all this to be put on record or not.

KT: Well, you can tell me, if you'd rather it not, and we can pause or stop.

JZ: Stop for the moment.

AUDIO PAUSSED

AUDIO RE-STARTS

JZ: There was one cadet that I would play around with, but I don't think he was

gay. I think he was just eighteen-year-old sex running wild, you know.

KT: But it was nothing cadets talked about.

JZ: No, nobody ever talked about it to my knowledge.

KT: Yeah, and it was only later that you would have been aware --

JZ: Words like homosexual, nobody ever heard of them.

KT: Right, so tell me about the job in DC. How did you finally get the job?

JZ: Well, my father, you see, with his newspaper, and knew a lot of prominent people, and one of them was Jimmy Byrnes. You know who he was. And Jimmy Byrnes' secretary was a friend of the family, and she got my sister a job. Then later, she got me one. But two people in the family were not supposed to have a job in Washington because at my office, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, I was a clerk typist, and there was a man in my office, who later wrote a fine book, *I Buried My Heart at Wounded Knee.*

KT: By Dale

JZ: Dale --

KT: I can't recall the name right now. [Dee Brown]

JZ: Well, anyway.

KT: Yeah, I know exactly who you mean.

JZ: He invited me to come to his house where he was living with a woman, and I got there and on the door was -- Dale [Dee Brown] or whatever he was, and [Sally Stroud]. Well, I thought, you know, oh, this is great. They're living together and they're not married. Actually, they were married.

KT: But she kept her name.

JZ: Yeah, to be able to keep her job.

KT: Oh, I see, I see.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: So, your family then had some connections to the New Deal, it sounds like.

JZ: Yeah, right, because my father's biggest and happiest recollection was the hour he spent with Roosevelt, sitting on Roosevelt's desk talking to him. Roosevelt said, "John, sit here on the desk." Jimmy Byrnes had taken him by to meet him, and so my father sat on the desk and had that hour of talking with Roosevelt. That was the highlight of his life.

KT: Wow. So, you must have met Jimmy Byrnes at some point?

JZ: Oh, yeah, you know, he was just another man as I was growing up.

KT: And I guess Burnet Maybank was also -- had connections in DC.

JZ: Well, I didn't know the Maybanks. I think I knew Jimmy Byrnes' secretary better than I knew him. She used to be a woman that was around our house some.

KT: So, after several years, you came back to Charleston.

JZ: After six years, I came -- I was saving money to write a novel. I was writing short stories, and I was having poetry published a lot in many magazines, newspapers and stuff. And I wanted to have free time to write, so I saved up one thousand dollars in a year -- in six years and came back to my aunts' -- great aunts' in Charleston and started writing on my novel. And I wrote -- then I joined a playwriting group with DuBose Heyward's widow, Dorothy Heyward. And I wrote a long play and a short play, and the college put the short play on for my birthday two years ago.

KT: How did you meet Edwin?

JZ: I was -- a good friend of mine was Topie Johnson. Topie was a first cousin of Carson McCullers. I met her because she was editor of her college magazine, I was editor of mine, and we sort of got into a correspondence. And then she was a cousin of Carson McCullers, the writer, and when I was in Charleston, I had moved back. Topie wrote me and said, "Look up my friend Edwin Peacock, he's working at Fort Moultrie. And she had his address, so I was staying with my aunt on Sullivan's Island while I was writing, and I wrote him a note and said, "Come and have Fourth of July dinner with us." And he came over on a motorcycle in white shorts. He told me later it was to impress. But he couldn't come for that day, but he came for another day. So, then we began seeing each other, and I'd walk halfway home with him. He lived on -- I was on Isle of Palms, he was on Sullivan's Island. And one night I said, "I'm in love with someone and I don't know how to tell them." I didn't know whether he was gay. And he said, "Why don't you tell her?" Well, that threw me off completely.

KT: Yeah.

JZ: So, I thought how I am ever going to -- oh, let's go upstairs, I'll show you -- and I'll show you exactly what happened.

KT: Okay. I wish we could --

JZ: You don't have (00:06:57)?

KT: Yeah, let me -- I'll get that. So, this began your relationship. You were talking about Edwin and not being able to really express how you were feeling to him, and --

JZ: So, I figured if we take a trip somewhere, maybe something will happen. Read this. "Dare I," and the next one.[4]

KT: Okay, (reading) “Dare I. See oats and grasses wave, ocean is blue, as your eyes, and as grave as your eyes, too. If I knew what you thought, I would know what to be. You, who I always sought, tell me what your eyes see. Dare I speak up my heart, dare I destroy friendship that was to start, nothing but joy. Oh, if I dared to say all that I feel, I should be night and day, setting love’s seal.”

JZ: Now the next one will tell you what happened.

KT: Did you write this before you told him?

JZ: Before I told him, oh, yeah.

KT: Yeah. (reading) “A Memory, Fifty Years Later. The moon was a great white smile in the summer night. Its glow sifting down through the shadowy trees that lined the racing mountain stream. The boulders summoned us for leaping and playing at childhood. Naked, we shouted, seeing areas without beginning or end, fell finally for the first time into each other’s arms, as natural as moon, rocks, water, and knew that together all was possible, that we had found an island in that marvelous August evening of our birth, from which no rescue was desired or even possible.”

JZ: That was it, so that happened, you see, but we had to go up to the mountains of North Carolina, so that it would happen.

KT: So, your plans at seduction worked.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: What was it about getting away that provided the space?

JZ: Well, you know, you’re out in the country, you’re out with trees around you, and you just happen to be around the rocks and the water, and it happens, you know. It’s not -- it didn't have to happen, it just did.

KT: And he explained to you that he had been feeling the same way?

JZ: Yeah, but he had never had a long relationship.

KT: Okay. And you had had -- this is -- this is something that we skipped over.

JZ: But then I had one in Washington, you know, for five years, but not a real love affair.

KT: Right, right. In Charleston, so as you returned to Charleston, were you aware of any other gay men or any kind of like a gay subculture or community, or would that be too strong of a word?

JZ: Let's see, I didn't know anybody here. Let's see. I can't remember anybody here. I can remember -- let's see, when I came back from Washington, I came back -- I met Edwin a few months later in the summer, and then it was in the fall when we were at the -- so I didn't have anybody between that.

KT: Yeah, yeah.

JZ: Just you know, right here.

KT: So, at some point, you both then went into the service.

JZ: Well, we were -- got to be thirty, and we didn't want to be drafted in Columbia, Fort Jackson, so we thought let's go West and get drafted in the West, and we'll see some different country. So, he had a friend in Santa Fe who was always saying come out, so we went to Santa Fe and stayed with him two or three days and found a house in a village called Tesuque a little Indian village. And we stayed there four months, having changed our drafts to there. And we -- the money began to run out. I was still writing my novel, but the money began to run out, so we wrote -- Edwin wrote the finance office because he had worked in one at Fort Moultrie. The one in San Francisco

was his former boss, and said, “Come at once.” So, we left the next day on the bus and got to San Francisco, and found an apartment, and he went to work immediately, and two weeks later, I finished my novel. I went to civil service and I was working next to him. So, we lived there, and we had a nice landlady, and then I was fixing grits and sausage for lunch one day while listening to our classical music station, and everything went blank, and they told us about Pearl Harbor. So, we had to find some materials to hang over the windows. Everybody was sure that San Francisco was going to be bombed the next, but it didn't. Then we figured we’d better go ahead and get in the service and get in the Navy because neither one of us felt that we could kill anybody just point blank. So, we joined the Navy, and we were both -- became Yeomen Third Class. Well, he got sent to Monterey and I got sent to Morro Bay. And then an order came through that they had too many Yeomen. They’d have to become something else. Well, the thing that seemed to be closest was radio because you had to be able to type, and we were good typists. So, I got a hold of Edwin and said, “Edwin, choose radio.” And a few days later we were told that radio would be going to Boulder, Colorado, Seattle, various places. And I couldn’t get in touch with him. But knowing Edwin, I knew he would choose Boulder because that was (00:15:34) country, so I did, and a few days later I got on the train and then he got on the train with his group, and we got to Boulder, and lived in the university dorm. But Peacock, starting with “P”, roomed with Peabody. Zeigler came at the end and didn't have a roommate. That was wonderful because if I had no roommate, he could visit me a lot. And then after four months of radio, there were 200 -- twelve were going to Alaska. Edwin had always wanted to go to Alaska, but he hadn’t done well. His hearing was already getting bad. So, I got second or third place to Alaska, and eleven were chose in

Alaska, and finally, he got Alaska. So, we get on the train and we go to Seattle, and we go to Bremerton Navy Yard and we get a ship and we go to Alaska. So, we go to -- oh, what's the big place in Alaska?

KT: There's a --

JZ: Kodiak, we had to go to Kodiak. And then he got sent to a place with five other people, just to listen out for planes. And I go to a place with thirty people, Yakutat. And we were there a year and a half, and then my bases closed, so the office gives me leave to go home for a month, and Edwin and I shared the last -- my last week and his first week of the holiday together in Washington at a friend's house, so that was good.

KT: Okay. Now, did you ever have any fear, like when you were in Colorado, that you would be found out?

JZ: No. It never occurred to me at any time.

KT: But you had to be careful.

JZ: I was -- oh, yeah, of course, but something must have shown because when I went to Yakutat, there was a young stud who had been at radio school with us, and also in Alaska, he's there when I go, too. He grabs his crotch and says, "Zeigler, don't you want it?" I said, "Shut up, Farrell". He was an attractive youngster who was engaged, but before long, he and the cook were wandering over in the woods together, but I never did anything with anybody.

KT: But he saw something in your, presumably.

JZ: Presumably, he'd seen back in Boulder for four months, he had seen something.

KT: I see, I see.

JZ: Me going to Edwin, him coming to my apartment all the time.

KT: Right, but otherwise, you had no fear of being found out.

JZ: No. If I had been found out, it would have probably been great. I'd have been out of the service. And then I had a lot of kidney stones. I had to go to -- go to Guam, so I had to pass a kidney stone, and they put a thing up me, what do you call them? What is the word for it?

KT: A catheter?

JZ: Yeah, they put a catheter on me.

KT: I don't even like to say the word.

JZ: In the morning, I'd have a hard-on and it'd be out. But anyway, then I get to ship, then I got sent to the dispensary because I had it again. And finally, one day the doctor said, "Zeigler, we're going to have to operate." I said, "Well, what will happen if you do?" "Oh, I'm afraid you'll have to get out of the service." "Operate tomorrow."

KT: You wanted no part of it.

JZ: And Edwin had gotten out because of his hearing, and he was working in San Francisco. And our plan was that if either one of us ever got to San Francisco, we were to go to Mrs. Schwab our landlady, and see if she had any word for us. So, I went there, and Mrs. Schwab said, "Yes, John, I was able to give Edwin the little apartment in the basement." So, Edwin and I had a reunion. And as I told somebody, I had to carry a newspaper around in front of me for three days. But anyway, well, then I came back home, and he came back by bus. I was flown back. He came back by bus, and to see relatives along the way, and when he got to Charleston, we started building bookshelves.

KT: Well, let me back up very quickly. Before we get to the bookstore, where did

you live in San Francisco?

JZ: Post Street.

KT: Post Street, that's in --

JZ: But it was behind the hotel -- what was it?

KT: I couldn't tell you -- it's a famous hotel, right?

JZ: Yeah.

KT: It's still there, I believe.

JZ: Francis --

KT: The Francis Drake.

JZ: Something Francis. [The St. Francis Hotel]

KT: How about the Drake? No?

JZ: Anyway.

KT: I know which hotel you're talking about, but this would be the -- it's now referred to as the Tenderloin.

JZ: Yeah, I don't know.

KT: I don't know.

JZ: I haven't been there since.

KT: But you were -- or maybe it was -- yeah, I think that would be in the Tenderloin, but do you remember at that point, like San Francisco, especially during the war, would have had a gay culture. Do you remember -- did you go to bars?

JZ: There was a bar -- we were not much on bars, but we would go sometimes to a bar. One was called the Longest Bar in the World.

KT: What was it called?

JZ: I forget what it was called, but it was said to be the longest bar anyway. And we decided in our office because we were both working in the same office, there was a gay person in the office who we got to talk with, you know, he recognized us. And he kept telling us about a bath he went to, so we thought well, it would be fun, let's go to that bath some night. So, I went, and I remember with sort of trepidation, as I entered this place, but we had a great time.

KT: Mm-hmm. Now there would have also been -- this would have been the beginning of organizations like the Mattachine Society. Did you ever have any awareness of political groups?

JZ: No, never. That was -- came later, I think.

KT: Mm-hmm. So, did you ever consider staying in San Francisco after the war?

JZ: Well, we had decided by then that we wanted a bookstore, and we didn't know -- we didn't have much money, and place to have it, we used my family basement right across from the college. We did consider San Francisco, but it was far too expensive to try to open a bookstore, you know, when you had to pay rent.[5]

KT: So, the plan was then to come back to Charleston. You had said you began by making bookshelves?

JZ: We had to make bookshelves; you see that mantle that was in the shop.

KT: Which one? What am I looking at?

JZ: The mantle piece. The mantle piece, that was in the shop.

KT: Oh, really.

JZ: We bought two mantles, three mantles the one in my upstairs sitting room, and the one in the dining room before the college examined (00:25:13) to buy us, we

changed them, so the college bought what they saw.[6]

KT: I see. So, you opened the bookstore when?

JZ: February 19th --

KT: Was it '46?

JZ: Forty-six, it was Carson McCullers birthday. She was an old friend of Edwin's.

KT: And Carson had -- she'd already been a friend of yours.

JZ: Edwin's.

KT: Yeah.

JZ: She used to come see us, you know, but it was her sister -- I mean her cousin who introduced us.

KT: Was the bookstore a hit from the beginning?

JZ: Oh, yeah.

KT: Yeah? Were there other bookstores in Charleston?

JZ: There was one.

KT: Tell me about the early days of the bookstore. What was it like there?

JZ: Well, we started out with one room. Imagine this room is it, with a fireplace and bookshelves all around. Then we added the hall that was next to it. Then we added the back room. At first, we slept in the back room, but when my sister and her children moved away from upstairs, then we went upstairs because her husband was going to medical school.

KT: So, then the whole --

JZ: And she had children.

KT: Then the whole house became yours.

JZ: No, because my aunts lived upstairs. It was a huge house.

KT: Mm-hmm, and your aunts were Septima and Virginia Follin.

JZ: Yeah, they were the ones that had the school.

KT: Mm-hmm. By any chance, would you remember -- I had mentioned that - one of my interests is in labor history, and during that period, there was a strike at the cigar factory. And I was wondering if you have any recollections of the tobacco workers?

JZ: There was a strike, I remember it was a hunger strike we had at The Citadel.

KT: The hunger strike.

JZ: We had a hunger strike. Nobody would eat.

KT: Tell me about this.

JZ: Well, that's all I can say is we had this hunger strike. Nobody would eat. The family was sending food.

KT: Why was it that no one would eat?

JZ: Because the food was so horrible.

KT: Would this have been your senior year?

JZ: Let's see, what year was it? I don't remember what year.

KT: And I think I've heard of this.

JZ: Amazing that I even remember it.

KT: How did the strike end?

JZ: With getting better food.

KT: So, the administration --

JZ: I used to take bread up in the winter and toast it on the --

KT: The radiator? Now I think I had heard something about them pulling down the flag and hoisting up a -- like some kind of different flag. Do you remember anything like that?

JZ: No.

KT: This would have been during General Summerall's tenure, right?

JZ: Yeah. He was there while I was there.

KT: Do you have any recollection of his --

JZ: His son married a remote cousin of mine, Tunkie Summerall.

KT: Mm-hmm. But do you remember anything about the General?

JZ: No. All I remember is that on his birthday, we got up early, put on our best clothes, and marched over to his house, and he was fully dressed, and outside waiting for us, so it was as though it were planned by him.

KT: Did the cadets enjoy that, singing to the President?

JZ: No, they just did it.

KT: It was a tradition.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: The Citadel has a few traditions that they like to celebrate and continue. So, this is some -- this is a picture of -- that's Carson McCullers, correct?

JZ: Yeah.

KT: Now, you told me earlier that in--at about this time, you joined the NAACP locally.

JZ: After the war.

KT: Was that a risky thing to do in Charleston?

JZ: Oh, no.

KT: No?

JZ: And the Interracial Committee, which consisted of several prominently born Charlestonians, mostly women. The funniest thing in here[7] is a letter from a Citadel cadet, who was graduating, and he thanked us for having commercial intercourse with him.

KT: Was that--I assume that was an unintended double entendre.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: So, lots of students came in for books? Who were your clientele?

JZ: The whole city.

KT: Mm-hmm.

JZ: We'd have a fire in the fireplace, you know, and people would sit there by the fire. One Englishwoman, the wife of a famous English pianist was in the shop for hours one day. We didn't know who she was, but as she was getting ready to leave, she said, "I'm Mrs. Clifford (00:31:46). My husband is concertizing, and I wanted to see Charleston. You have the nicest bookstore in America -- or the United States."

KT: That's Prentiss Taylor who you were telling me about.

JZ: He did this drawing for the bookstore.

KT: Oh, wow.

JZ: That's in my bedroom.

KT: Would you do poetry readings or any other events, or was it just book sales?

JZ: No, we had autographing parties because we had enough Charleston writers--my wonderful niece by marriage made this [scrapbook].

KT: It's nice.

JZ: And then she put little things in, too.

KT: Well, this looks like General Mark Clark's wife came to sign her book.

JZ: Yeah. The funny thing about General Mark Clark, we were at a party at a big plantation house, and we were under the porch, Edwin and the General were. And the General told Edwin he'd just come back from Washington, where he'd been taken to dinner at a place where men went and danced together, and the lamb chops were so good that he commented on them, and then he wanted lamb chops to bring home. Well, you know, somebody who lives in Charlotte had told me that they were pretty sure he had a lover in Charlotte. Anyway --

KT: General Mark Clark had a --

JZ: What I've heard.

KT: A woman or --

JZ: A man. He had a--and that's why he probably didn't mind telling Edwin about going to that place.

KT: Interesting.

JZ: Because he knew we were gay because we had had the books -- we had had his wife and all that stuff.

KT: Sure, sure. So, by that time, the community knew about what your relationship --

JZ: Oh, I'm sure they did.

KT: Yeah.

JZ: They didn't seem to care. Nobody ever invited one of us without both.

KT: Right, so you were invited to social functions together.

JZ: Oh, yeah.

KT: Interesting, but you think the General was kind of coming out to --

JZ: Yeah, in a way.

KT: Well, that would -- boy, that --

JZ: Who would take a General to a place like that, you know, if they didn't feel free to do it.

KT: Right, right, that would be a tremendous risk.

JZ: Oh, yeah, he could be furious.

KT: What was the name of the restaurant? Would you remember the name of the club?

JZ: I don't know what it was.

KT: Well, tell me about that though, so in the 1950s, even in the 1950s, prominent Charlestonians are inviting the two of you to events together.

JZ: Oh, sure. In fact, one terribly rich woman in an enormous house on the Battery, and owned Magnolia Gardens. And she would invite us to come and have drinks on her beautiful porch overlooking the water. And she told us once that the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, had come to Charleston to speak at the Poetry Society, and with her was her husband Eugen [Eugen Jan Boissevain]. Well, Mrs. Hastie took them to the gardens the day after the reading of the poems. And she said, "It was the only time in my life I was every propositioned by both a husband and wife on the same day."

KT: This wasn't the judge's wife.

JZ: No. [8]

KT: Okay. Did you know Judge Hasty?

JZ: No, she was -- Mrs. Hastie had been a -- I forget what she had been, [Sara Calhoun Simons] or something.

KT: How about Osgood?

JZ: No, she'd been -- but she was as white headed as me. She said, "You're the only intelligent men in Charleston."

KT: Well, I wondered about that. How -- did you enjoy socializing with the old Charleston families?

JZ: Oh, yeah, yeah.

KT: Yeah, and they were –

JZ: You see, when I was at The Citadel for instance, I went to all the dances. I danced with all the local debutantes and everybody, you know. I went to the tea dances.

KT: Mm-hmm. I'll pull this around so you can look as well.[9]

JZ: This is George Rabb. This was the first person that ever worked for us from the college. We always had a college student helping. He was the first one, and later, he was head of the Chicago Zoo.

KT: His name is George Rabb.

JZ: Yeah, he came to see me.

KT: Oh, fantastic, but he was your employee.

JZ: Yeah, he just worked around, you know, bicycle deliveries, things like that.

KT: And then at some point, you befriended Maurice Sendak.

JZ: Oh, he was living here for a while, marvelous guy. There he is.

KT: Oh, that's a good picture.

JZ: He died last year.

KT: You always had a pretty close relationship to the College of Charleston?

JZ: Yeah. I should have gone there really.

KT: Why do you say that?

JZ: Because it was across the street from my family home. I wouldn't have had to pay rent. It would have been so much cheaper.

KT: Yeah. Who is John Doyle?

JZ: He taught at The Citadel. He taught English at The Citadel.

KT: I'm sorry, he was what at The Citadel?

JZ: He taught English.

KT: Oh, okay. Did you maintain close ties to The Citadel over the years?

JZ: No, no. I have close ties to this college. The college gave me an award about two weeks ago, the Excel Award.

KT: Yeah, they had you on campus, right?

JZ: They made me a -- gave me a doctorate a few years ago.

KT: Mm-hmm, at the college.

JZ: Yeah. That was before it was painted [a picture of 9 College Street].

KT: This says Calder Willingham wrote a novel called *End as a Man.*

JZ: About The Citadel and (00:40:29).

KT: And this was a book that you sold at the bookstore?

JZ: Yeah, we had it in the window until the librarian saw it and said, "I may not be able to give you my business if they know that you do this." They bought books from us.

KT: Mm-hmm. What year would that have been?

JZ: Oh, gosh, I have no idea.

KT: In the 1950s maybe? Yeah.

JZ: I'm 101 years old.

KT: Oh, I understand. Was your bookstore ever considered -- would it have been a kind of meeting place where kind of outcasts from the city -- not only gays and lesbians, but other kind of political outcasts might feel comfortable there?

JZ: It was a place where everybody felt comfortable.

KT: Yeah. There couldn't have been too many places like that in Charleston.

JZ: No, there weren't. People still stop here at Harris Teeters, and say, "Oh, we miss the Book Basement," but that's 42 years ago. I don't even know who they are because they're slightly different from when they were twenty.

KT: Now tell me about that. Well, first of all, I'm very curious about the 1960s in Charleston, and did you have much of a -- I know in other places you had -- not so much in South Carolina, but you had kind of a counter-culture with young people. You had bookstores and I know in Columbia, they had a GI coffee house, and they had record stores. But was -- did Charleston have much of a counterculture?

JZ: No, it didn't

KT: No, nothing like that.

JZ: Not to my knowledge.

KT: Yeah. When did you know that the college was interested in your property?

JZ: Well, (00:42:47), and so Edwin and I looked around and found this house. My mother said, "John, you can't buy that house. There's nothing you can do with it."

KT: That's this one we're in.

JZ: Yeah, I knew you could, so I took seven months to get it in shape, and then the college got it.

KT: Was that hard to let go of the bookstore?

JZ: Not really.

KT: No?

JZ: It was a good time to let go because it began to fade away -- bookstores did.

KT: Was business still strong though, in the end, or did it -- had it --

JZ: It was pretty good. We never made much of a living, but --

KT: Mm-hmm, but that wasn't the point, was it?

JZ: No.

KT: Then did you continue working after the bookstore?

JZ: Oh, no.

KT: No.

JZ: No, it was about that time my aunt died, who left me that house, so that took care of this, and she had given me a beach house because after her husband died, she didn't like the beach that much. And then I sold the beach house for $85,000.00. Today, it would probably be a million.

KT: Right, right.

JZ: And invested well, and that's what I live on. This was funny. She was the children's librarian at the County Library, and she asked if she could bring her children over to play in our beautiful garden after they finished their summer reading session, you know.

KT: This is Jenny Smith.

JZ: Yeah, Jenny Smith. So, she said if you have any marching music, when they come in the back gate, because there was a gate halfway in the house -- along the house, there was a gate. The only thing we had was something we had been sent as a joke, the Russian Internationale. So, these Charleston kids marched into our yard to that Russian hymn.

KT: To the Internationale -- the International Anthem for World Communists.

JZ: The kids didn't know that.

KT: That's funny. And then did you -- you and Edwin lived in this house?

JZ: We lived in this house, yeah.

KT: So, for eighteen years.

JZ: Yeah, because he died in '87 [sic 1989], I think it was, of a heart attack on his way to -- we used to go down to the senior centers at this place on (00:45:59). And he was in there, just having a weekly -- whatever they did every week, and he dropped dead.

KT: Do you remember where you were when you got the news?

JZ: I was here, and the woman at the place knew me, and I would go there, too. She telephoned me and told me, you know, and he wasn't dead quite yet, but she had gotten the fire engine people to come over (00:46:39). That was that.

KT: Yeah. Were you able to see him before he passed?

JZ: Well, he was -- I don't -- he said he didn't know anything. The firemen who were working on him, his heart. Then I have a (00:47:05) here, and (00:47:05) had a car and drove me to the hospital, but he was dead by then.

KT: Yeah, and that was after how long together?

JZ: Forty-nine years, forty-nine wonderful years.

KT: Wow, yeah. You said that the two of you never fought?

JZ: Never once.

KT: You never -- there were never tensions.

JZ: The only time --

KT: How can that be? I don't believe you.

JZ: The only time I ever fussed at him was if I thought he went out too early in the morning riding his bicycle or skating.

KT: Skating?

JZ: Being out on the streets with all the bums and all, you know, I'd always worry about that.

KT: Right, right.

JZ: And he'd always pick up money, and we'd give it to the something or other place here. He was very daring. He was always taking chances.

KT: Yeah, so he was the daring one, huh?

JZ: Yeah. I was the more conservative -- conservative and physical [00:48:40].

KT: Mm-hmm. How else were you different -- your personalities different?

JZ: Oh, I'd say he would eat anything. And I'm a picky eater. I don't like onions and garlic and tomatoes.

KT: So, this sounds like -- this is a little note that -- regarding a poem that you had written for the Confederate dead, and that was one of your first poems presented to the Poetry Society?

JZ: Yeah, well, when I was at The Citadel, that was then -- they asked us all to

write a note to the Confederate dead to be read in May. Mine was chosen, but I was too bashful to read it. I never could get up -- twice I was asked to read poetry at (00:49:46), and I was too bashful. It would have done me so much good to do it. And the man who read the poem, I was on the platform and the cadets were strewn out in front. He made three terrible mistakes in reading it, and of course I was furious.

KT: Tom Waring, is he someone that you knew well?

JZ: No, he was the editor of the paper, and he was much older than I.

KT: Right, and a very conservative in his political outlook?

JZ: Oh, yeah.

KT: These are various memories of the Book Basement

JZ: Yeah, different people who worked for us.

KT: Danny Moore.

JZ: Yeah. He became a Marine Officer.

KT: Okay.

JZ: I still get a Christmas card from him and his wife.

KT: Now in the -- so you spent a lot of time socializing with the old Charleston crowd, but was there also -- at what point did there emerge a distinct gay community?

JZ: I don't think I ever knew a distinct gay community. I never knew one.

KT: No? There was no - for instance --

JZ: I might have been too old for it.

KT: Okay, okay. I was wondering if there were ever -- was there a tradition of just men getting together for dinner for instance, of just the couples, for instance.

JZ: We had a very close couple, lived in Mt. Pleasant, had about ten acres, and we

saw them and played bridge with them. We saw them a lot, and they were more gregarious, and they have one or two other gay friends, but there weren't many of us.

KT: But nothing that would rise to the level of a gay community.

JZ: No. Kip and Jerry were great. It was so funny, a friend of mine recently saw on the internet a book by Carson [McCullers] inscripted, "To Kip and Jerry with lots of love," for six thousand dollars. It was so funny. There was this thing inscribed by great friends, who she got to know them by visiting us, you know,

KT: Right, six thousand dollars?

JZ: Yeah.

KT: Boy, that's something.

JZ: I think my niece made a great job out of these.

KT: She sure did, and where did she pull all of the different letters?

JZ: I must have had stuff in boxes or something.

KT: Right. And then what's -- so you -- this is -- you donated some materials to the college, but then also to Duke University, correct?

JZ: Duke.

KT: Yeah, how did Duke find out about you?

JZ: Carson has given -- Carson's biographer had given all of her material to Duke, and so when Edwin died, I gave Duke thirty volumes from all over the world, different languages, you know, (00:53:58). And so, Duke loved having all that, and they have a huge archive of gay things, so they began to be my repository.

KT: Okay.

JZ: And this is something -- under this, see that thing?

KT: This white binder?

JZ: Yeah. That's from the college.

KT: Oh, nice.

JZ: That was my last birthday. You don't want to hear all that.

KT: This is a musical program?

JZ: Yeah, I'm very involved with the music there.

KT: Yeah. Now you play piano, correct?

JZ: No, I don't play anything.

KT: No, but music's always been very important to you.

JZ: Right.

KT: Is that something as well that you get from your aunts?

JZ: One had studied voice in New York, and another one played the piano and the organ at the cathedral. And my mother and father used to take the boat from Charleston to New York to go to the opera, so you know, there was always music.

KT: Yeah.

JZ: But we couldn't afford a piano when I was growing up, but when my sister came along, there was enough money to have a piano.

KT: Well, let me -- this is something that just popped into my -- so your mother, you'd said is Catholic.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: Does that mean she baptized you and raised you -- did you grow up Catholic?

JZ: I grew up Catholic, but never felt religious at all, never.

KT: Okay.

JZ: I remember when I was nine, my siblings were seven and a half, six, and four. And my mother got us ready for church in Florence. We got to church a little late, and the priest stopped what he was doing and made a comment about people coming in late. Well, I saw how awful that was of him to say that, knowing what my mother had gone through to get four of us ready, and from then, I never had the slightest feeling for religion.

KT: Would you have -- but did you continue to attend church?

JZ: Oh, I had to because of my mother, but never --

KT: Oh, sure, and was that a -- when you finally broke with the -- stopped attending church, was that a problem for your mother?

JZ: No, my father never went to church. He was Methodist.

KT: I see.

JZ: And I didn't mind going to church in my teen years in Florence because I sang in the choir, and I was looking down on the backs of people. If I had faced them, I couldn't have sung because often I had to sing solo. So, I was singing to their backs.

KT: And that you could do.

JZ: Yeah.

KT: In Latin.

JZ: Yeah. We sang masses then, Mozart masses and (00:57:27) mass and all that.

KT: Yep.

JZ: Anyway, you don't want to look through all that stuff. I want you to look at that other thing.

KT: Oh, is this the -- the Charlie Magazine. I did see that, too.

JZ: Oh, you saw that.

KT: I did.

JZ: Okay.

KT: Where you were named one of Charleston's most progressive.

JZ: Crazy.

KT: What does that mean? It's a nice honor.

JZ: It just means I always looked forward.

KT: Yeah, well, tell me just in kind of wrapping up here, how do you think -- just in your long years here in Charleston, how do you think the city has changed?

JZ: We have many more restaurants. There was one restaurant when I first came back.

KT: What was the restaurant?

JZ: Henry's.

KT: And now you -- we have a few more choices.

JZ: We have a lot of choices, yeah. That's the main thing I noticed. And let's see, what else. Of course, something else I noticed and approve of highly is the way places feel free to have black employees waiting on you. For instance, I had to go -- I had my will changed somewhat and had to have it notarized yesterday. We go into First Federal, this is my bank, and all the tellers are black women. I think how great that is. I go to the Post Office, most of the tellers are black women. And I just think it's great that we've come that far.

KT: Mm-hmm, but it took a long time and a long struggle.

JZ: It sure did. Well, there was a time when women couldn't even vote.

KT: Yeah. Do you have -- is there anything that maybe we touched upon earlier that you wanted to go back to, or maybe something that I didn't bring up that's been very important to you in your life, that would be important to get on the record?

JZ: I think the most important things in my life -- I've got a tremendously good family, and I've got eleven nieces and nephews, and they're all close to me. And their children and grandchildren, and that's one of the things I'm very lucky with. I have a nephew and his wife in Mt. Pleasant, and they're my lifeline. And I'll be having a waffle lunch with them tomorrow. But that and -- of course, my forty-nine years with Edwin, and all the wonderful trips we used to take. We even went to Iran once.

KT: Wow.

JZ: Iraq and all over the place. The only place I didn't go with him was China. And I didn't do that because we would have had to have been on a tour, and my stomach was rather queasy, and I couldn't see being on a tour and not being able to throw up somewhere, so I didn't go.

KT: Is that one he did alone then?

JZ: A friend of mine went with him, and the friend was older than he, so he looked after my friend.

KT: Mm-hmm.

JZ: If I could have changed anything about myself, it would have been not to have been shy in front of people.

KT: To be a bit more outgoing?

JZ: Yeah, because I think my poetry was worth more dissemination than it got, but I was just too -- you know, too shy to read it in front of anybody.

KT: Right, even -- so in the -- did being the owner of the bookstore help with that because to sell, you have to be more outgoing, make people feel comfortable.

JZ: I could do that, but it was not as if I were alone in it, they were part of it. I mean the person that I was talking to was as much in it as I was.

KT: Right.

JZ: I wasn't just standing up. My voice wasn't always such a grating sound.

KT: Well, thank you again for taking out the time.

JZ: Well, now I'm going to ask you a question. Are you gay?

KT: Ask me. I am not.

JZ: You're not.

KT: I'm not, no Sir. But I've been -- I'd like to think I've been very sympathetic, and have -- yeah, been a long-time supporter of tolerance and gay equality. And in part, that was part of my interest in talking to you because I'm very curious as to the -- what the experiences were for gays and lesbians in Charleston before the rise of a public recognized movement.

JZ: People didn't talk about it. I knew several gay women couples who were very prominent in the local society. And other people may not have known it, but I recognized -- can recognize it, you know. I think it was more difficult in a way for the people in what is called high society to be gay than other people. I know one young man from a very, very prominent family, he committed suicide. I'm sure it was just because in his family, it was just difficult to --

KT: Sure.

JZ: And the Charlestonians often -- there used to be gay male couples who would

come to Charleston in the winter, who were very socially prominent, and the local people would say, “Oh, the boys have come back this year.”

KT: And these were men who -- they lived in New York?

JZ: Oh, someplace else.

KT: Yeah, or Boston.

JZ: But they liked to come here for a month in the winter or something.

KT: I would think also just among like the antique dealers and artists that those would have been trades that would have -- you would have seen many gay men working in those.

JZ: Right.

KT: And then also I guess with the Naval presence, you would have had on the other side of things, kind of a pickup scene.

JZ: Well, there were people I know who used to pick up sailors.

KT: Yeah, and what were the -- and was most of that clustered around like the Market Street area, or what --

JZ: No, I think if people were going to pick up sailors, they’d be on one of those streets which led out -- say Meeting Street, which led out to the Navy yard. They’d be waiting for a ride maybe, and somebody would pick them up maybe, give them a ride.

KT: I see.

JZ: And that was very popular with Dawn who changed his sex.[10]

KT: Right, and Dawn is somebody you knew, correct?

JZ: Yeah, he used to come in the bookstore, and when we closed the bookstore, he owed us four hundred dollars

KT: I assume you never collected on that.

JZ: No, we had just sold a lot of copies of his last book, and of course, he would ordinarily you'd think, pay at the end of the month you know, but he just didn't. It was kind of (01:06:58).

KT: Yeah, that's -- from what I've read, it sure sounds like --

JZ: Always pretending to be -- he'd have a pillow in his stomach you know, like he was pregnant. But tomorrow he might forget to put it in.

KT: Oh, my goodness.

JZ: He was crazy. Then he married his Negro butler.

KT: Mm-hmm.

JZ: But anyway.

KT: Yep, well, thank you again.

JZ: You're very welcome. I want you to go over there, and you see my -- that thing you put your name in.

KT: Oh, you've got a sign-in book?

JZ: Yeah, over there. I'm always forgetting names and stuff. You see a pen?

KT: I do. Amy Tan was a visitor? Amy Tan?[11]

JZ: Oh, yeah.

End of recording.

Verified by Paul M. Garton. DBA The Transcript Co-op April 17, 2013
Mary Jo Potter, May 2013

Notes by Mary Jo Potter, May 2013

[1] In the aunt's old school

[2] John is talking about the grandchildren of his Sainte-Domingue refugee ancestors here--his great aunts.

[3] 9 College Street was the family home inhabited at the time John was at the Citadel by his aunts and great-aunts all of whom doted on him.

[4] John must have handed Kerry a copy of The Edwin Poems, his collection of poems chronicling his relationship with Edwin

[5] In Charleston the ground floor of a house is referred to as the "basement"

[6] What John is saying here is that when the College of Charleston became a state school, he was forced by eminent domain to sell his ancestral home which was also the site of his bookshop to the College of Charleston. He was able to save three mantles from the house and install them in his new house on Wentworth St.

[7] John is showing Kerry his scrapbook on his bookstore, The Book Basement

[8] It was Mrs. C. Norwood Hastie and the house referred to is the Roper house

[9] Kerry is showing John the Book Basement Scrapbook

[10] Gordon Langley Hall became Dawn Langley Hall after a sex change

[11] A young piano student at the College of Charleston