



Oklahoma Bank and Commerce History Project

a program of the Oklahoma Historical Society

**Interview with Dannie Bea Hightower
Johnson and Hightower Families
Harbor Springs, MI 6/28 – 6/29 2008
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Audio taped and transcribed by MJH
(Transcription not verbatim)**

June 28, 2008. Impromptu interview

Perle Mesta was the daughter Bill Skirvin who built the Skirvin Hotel. Known as OKC's "hostess with the mostest." Great friend of Aunt Mary. Famous for elaborate parties in Washington, DC. Eventually named Ambassador to Luxembourg.

Aunt Mary's closest contender for the title "hostess with the mostest" was her friend, Perle Mesta. In her youth, Mesta had ample opportunity to hone her social skills at the Skirvin Hotel that her father, William Skirvin, built in 1910. Known for its stately ballrooms and tasteful décor, the Skirvin quickly became the venue of choice for Oklahoma City's elite. Mesta eventually graduated to the social circuit in Washington, DC and Philadelphia. Her aplomb was put to the test when President Harry S. Truman appointed her as ambassador to Luxembourg. Mesta's legendary *soirées* and overseas service were immortalized in the musical, *Call Me Madam*, featuring Ethel Merman in the starring role. Dannie Bea Hightower, interview by Michael J. Hightower, June 28, 2008, Harbor Springs, MI, audiotape and notes in possession of the author.

June 29, 2008. Taped interview

MJH: Tell me what you know about Frank Johnson

It's difficult to talk about anybody that you never did meet, and you only know about them from portraits and hearsay. There were some things that your father used to mention about his grandfather. I think that, like your father, he was a very quiet, modest man. He was extremely intellectual, which was certainly proven when you saw his library of books, up to the top shelves. And of course he had a good education. I think you'll find more information on that. Didn't he do some teaching at one point? And of course he was a newspaper person, so obviously he was a good writer. And of course he had such a sense of beauty and style.

MJH: What's the evidence for FPJ's sense of beauty and style?

Of course, you tell he had a sense of beauty and style from the house he built, planned even before statehood in Oklahoma. There it sat on that wonderful hill, right down from the Overholser house, which was a very Gothic, Victorian house, certainly a wonderful historical house, but it didn't really have the timeless, classical look of the house Frank Johnson constructed on 15th Street. It has that Palladian look, sometimes called Southern Colonial, reflected their background in Mississippi. That's what you saw in

those ante bellum houses—Corinthian caps, the wonderful steps leading up to it. It's a stately, grand house, and...[digression to renovations in 1950s].

MJH: What do you know about Frank Johnson's death?

He wasn't feeling that great. His chauffeur took him over to Sam Gloyd's house on 18th Street, because Mr. Gloyd had died that day, or the day before. He was a good friend, and had been an investor in Frank and Hugh Johnson's bank. He must not have felt well, or he wouldn't have had a driver take him over there, because evidently he liked to walk, and always walked to work, from 15th Street all the way down to Park Avenue, where the big bank was. Anyway, the chauffeur took him over to the Gloyds', and he collapsed while he was there, and the chauffeur brought him home, and he was gone. So it was an immediate heart attack. So he certainly died early, but he'd accomplished a lot of his dreams by that time. Most of that I only know from reading the scrap books...

I think the thing that led [Frank and Hugh] to Oklahoma—well, I'm sure the thing that led them there—was that Frank's father-in-law, the father of Aida Allen, had moved to OKC several years earlier and obviously liked it. So gradually, the rest of his family decided to move there too...[digression to Run etc.]

Those early men, those leaders like Henry Overholser, Shartel, Mr. Classen, and so on, they moved there to realize some of their dreams. They didn't waste any time in building Oklahoma City into the thriving community that it was. I've heard Bob Blackburn say that the "golden age" of Oklahoma City was around 1910 or 1911. And interestingly enough, he says the golden age is also right now, so much is being built downtown...

MJH: Did you know, or know about, any of the other civic leaders?

Betsy Shartel, the daughter of Mr. Shartel, was a really good friend of mine. And then her mother, Beth—everyone called her "Queenie"—I've even played golf with her. Her daughter, Betsy, had gone to Smith about three years ahead of me. So I knew Mrs. Shartel. And then the Classens—I really didn't know them, but they lived down the street on 15th Street.

But as I say, back to the style and appreciation of beauty, to build a house like that, when there were so few architects around...It was a house made to last, whereas the Overholser house, made of sandstone, is just crumbling and is having such problems. The Johnson house is just made like the Rock of Gibraltar.

MJH: Speaking of the Overholser, do you have any memory of the Overholser Opera House, or know any stories?

I just always heard about the Overholser Opera House. By the time I was a little girl and went downtown, that same building had turned into what I think was the Warner Theater. It was always so amazing to me that around 1900—I'm not sure when the opera house was built, but not long after 1900—there was such a cultured community. Wonderful parties were going on, and some of the houses in Heritage Hills, as it's known today, had ballrooms. The Johnsons' was one of the largest ballrooms, and the Johnsons' daughter, Ethlyn, was married in the ballroom, and they came down that lovely divided stairway into the reception hall...And that was about 1917 or 1918.

Education was so important to the Johnsons that their only daughter—they did have a little son, who died when he was about four—was sent to a good finishing school in Philadelphia, and then she went on to Finch in New York, and that was a long way from Oklahoma City.

MJH: Was it common for elite families to send their children off to Eastern schools?

I don't think it was all that common. The Johnsons were cultural leaders in Oklahoma City.

MJH: Did your husband ever tell you about his grandfather's business activities?

I don't think he needed to talk about it much. It was so obvious what a good businessman he was. He and his brother each had a bank, and then they merged the two banks, and then—was it 1931?—they were the instigation for that First National Bank, which is still on of the most beautiful buildings in that part of the world. There was that wonderful, classical motif, ancient Egyptian design, the stone, the bank vault, the great banking lobby...It's just one of the most beautiful buildings imaginable. And those two brothers were responsible for it. And I know Frank and Phyllis, as children of maybe 8 or 9 when the bank opened, were standing in front of the big bank vault. That's a wonderful picture...

MJH: Tell me the story about the guy at the end of the block with the gun.

Here was Mr. Johnson, a very quiet, modest man, probably never had a gun in his hand, and he had a friend at the other end of the street, also very famous, early developer of Oklahoma City whose name was W. T. Hales (sp?). His grandchildren were friends of mine. I always called him Papa Hales. Anyway, Papa Hales was a kind of rough customer, and he'd made his money trading mules in World War I, and then built that marvelous down the street from the Johnson house. The story was that he was going to build a house big enough that he could drive a team of mules through the front entrance. Obviously, I guess he could. But he had heard that Mr. Johnson had had some threats on his life—maybe because he was a banker, who knows?—and Papa Hales told him, "Don't you worry, Frank, I'll take care of you. I'm down at the end of the block, and I keep a gun on me all the time, and if anyone comes around you, I'll shoot him."

MJH: Did your husband ever take any trips w/ his grandfather, or go w/ him to the office?

No, because Frank Johnson died so young. And I think he was such a hard worker, and was at his desk probably all the time. But your father was very close to his grandmother—his mother died when he was about nine years old, so his grandmother virtually raised him...

MJH: Tell me what you know about Mama Lala's (Aida Allen's) world.

She, of course, stayed in the house, and she was an arbiter of social life in Oklahoma City. If she approved of something, then that was fine. Her taste was so good, and very formal, and Dad inherited that love of formality. High, high standard...[digress to later life].

But Aida Allen had such beautiful crystal and silver...Closets of monogrammed silver and crystal...When you grandchildren wanted to have a grand dinner, you'd say, "Let's have a Mama Lala dinner." What that meant was, a full-blown, every course, all the spoons and forks and so on. And Dad had a lot of fun teaching you all how to use those things. And of course we'd always wind up with the finger bowl...

MJH: Tell me about Mama Lala's friends.

Oh, she had a lot of friends. And she liked to play cards. And in those days, a lot of those older women had a poker club. And so they played poker. And when it was time to go home...she kept her electric car in the garage, which used to be a carriage house, way past the time when a lot of people had electrics. She

always kept flowers in a glass vase on the back of the electric. After playing cards, she'd take her friends home, and they all lived down the street, mainly on 15th Street, I think. So she'd drop them off, one at a time, first Mrs. Pope, and then she'd let off Mame Johnson. Then she had to go up the high hill on 15th Street, and she'd say to her friend at the top of that hill, "Well, here's where you get out, 'cause I don't think I have any juice left in the car." And then she'd charge on home!

She must have been a better driver than Frank Johnson because, the story was, when they would go to parties, everyone said, 'Don't take the first place in line, 'cause you know you have to save that for Frank, because he never has learned how to back up.' He just knew how to go straight ahead.

Originally, the Johnson house had a porte-cochere on either side, so the carriages could go all the way around the house, and then out to the street. You sure couldn't back up a horse-drawn carriage very well. It's the same way with a car—you just drive in and keep going along the circle, and there you were on Walker.

MJH: When they first moved into their house, did they have a horse and carriage?

Oh, sure. The garage—or carriage house—had three divisions. The first two were for the buggies and carriages, and then the smaller one, a little bit narrower one, as it still is to this day, was for the horse. And up above—you can still see the outlines even today—was where they kept the hay. That's why the drive was so big—you had to have plenty of room for a carriage.

MJH: Do you know when the hay loft was converted to servant quarters?

No, I don't. But everybody's help lived in the back of the main house. That was just the customary thing to do. So the hay loft was divided in half during the Johnsons' time, and the cook was on one side and the chauffeur was on the other. And there was an outside stairway and an inside stairway...

MJH: Were the Johnsons frequent entertainers?

I think they entertained a lot. There are so many beautiful lace tablecloths, monogrammed... That was a great day to have tea. They had all these beautiful tea services, punch bowls, lace tablecloths... So I think Mrs. Johnson was pretty busy entertaining.

And then, when her daughter died—she was so young, only 32 years old, right at the height of her life—she had these two little children, and she was president of the Junior League at the time active in the Junior League Horse Show, and she developed pneumonia, and there wasn't much you could do about it in those days.

The Johnsons had a place in the country... It was turned into a club after World War II. It was called The Chase Club. But it had been the Johnsons' country place, because Ethlyn, their daughter, had horses, and hackney ponies, and was a beautiful rider. She had famous horses, and was chairman of the Junior League Horse Show in the early thirties. They kept their stable out there. It was on what's now Eastern, and it's still there, and a lot of people still think of it as the old Chase Farm. It was a long way out in those days.

MJH: Did Frank Johnson ride?

Yes, everybody rode. And of course Frank Johnson's granddaughter, Phyllis, just lived for her horses. She had one, I think it was a three-gaited horse, called Maid of Salem, and she took her all the way to Madison Square Garden. She was a beautiful rider, and then [your dad] her brother, Frank, rode when he

was small, and their father, Billy Hightower, played polo and rode. And that's when there was a beautiful stable in Nichols Hills at that time.

MJH: Where was the stable?

It was about where May Avenue and Britton Road are today. It was a great, big, beautiful stable...It was The Nichols Hills Stable. Dr. Nichols built it.

MJH: So riding was pretty common among the elite...

Yes, that was the social thing to do. Quite a few people did ride, and they wore their wonderful habits...Horses were a part of their lives.

And of course they [the Johnsons] had a music room...

MJH: Did Frank Pearson or Aida Allen play an instrument?

I never did hear that they did. In those lovely grand houses...it just went along with the house. It sounds so old-fashioned now, in a way, but the music room was the place where the piano was, and of course in those days there was no TV, even radio was not that common, and so there was a lot of entertainment in having people over and having people play the piano for parties, and children did play musical instruments because they weren't glued to the videos. In your lovely houses, they had a music room.

MJH: Did the Johnsons take trips?

Yes, the Johnsons loved to travel. They went to Europe, and Aida Allen bought laces in Belgium...they loved to do the big trips. And of course when [their grandson, Frank] was only six years old, Billy and Ethlyn took him and his sister to Vienna and so on, and they would take a nurse with them. It was pretty grand living.

MJH: How about Uncle Hugh? He wasn't well toward the end of his life?

I think what he had were some severe allergies. It sounds to me like it was asthma. He really wasn't very well. And of course he was married to this vivacious, energetic Aunt Mary—she had a lot of nicknames, Little Auntie and so on, but she was of course Mrs. Hugh Johnson. She did all of her gallivanting in the daytime. She'd stay gone all day and would always go home and then be quiet at night. He just wasn't very well...

MJH: How active was Hugh in the bank?

I think he and his brother were equally active, and once again, I think he had a very bright, wonderful mind, like his brother. They must have gotten along extremely well to put their two businesses together and merge them into one bank.

MJH: Did you ever hear any stories about his business mind?

Not really. Because, once again, I was married to Dad in 1949, and think how much earlier those people had died. But I did hear more about his grandmother [Aida Allen], because she did raise him, and he had a lot of fun telling me stories about her because I think she had a great wit.

MJH: Tell me one or two of Dad's old stories

He would quote her all the time. At the dinner table, you were always supposed to try everything. She'd always say, "Just try it. If you don't like it, just spit it out."

She evidently had a really fun sense of humor. She was fond of saying, "Each to his own taste, and the old lady kissed the cow."

MJH: Sounds like she was pretty eccentric

Well, I don't know about that, but she was pretty much above the crowd, sounds to me like.

MJH: Was Aida Allen popular?

Oh, I think so. She wasn't the kind of energetic, vivacious person that Aunt Mary was. I think they were probably total opposites. I wonder if they even got along that well.

[Aida Allen] planned these elaborate, beautiful parties. Of course, she had some sad times—to lose a little boy, and then she lost her daughter when she was only 32, so you can see why she would cling to this one grandson, your father. But he was unspoilable, for some unknown reason. So he thought it was all just kind of humorous, the way she liked to treat him like a little prince.

MJH: What were some of the organizations Aida Allen was involved in?

I think they had something they called the "Five O'clock Tea Club." They even put out recipes from the Five O'clock Tea Club. Your dad used to laugh because his grandmother hardly knew where the kitchen was, and so her contributions, I think, to the recipes for the Five O'clock Tea Club was to spread a little peanut butter on a little piece of toast and stick it under the broiler for a minute. That was her contribution. People had maids who lived on the place...

MJH: How about their church lives?

I don't know. I think they were Presbyterians, but I never heard much about that...I don't have any idea if that was important. I know when World War came around, there were pictures taken up in the ballroom of Mrs. Johnson and her friends, and they knitted for Britain, because everyone was knitting something to send to the boys.

MJH: How about the conversion of the ballroom to a playroom?

There was a ballroom in the middle of the third floor with a stage, and so on... [Digress to architectural changes in late 1950s]. The ballroom is the largest floor of the whole house. There's more space up there than anywhere.

MJH: So, what's your overall sense of Frank and Hugh Johnson?

I imagine them as very hard working men who had a vision of where Oklahoma City could go. Evidently they were scrupulously honest. There was some story about when there was going to be a run on the bank...Frank Johnson did something to stop it...You'll probably run across that in a newspaper story. But that was kind of a famous story. I think [Frank Pearson's] word was as good as it gets.

MJH: And that applies to Hugh too?

I would think so.

And then of course Frank Johnson was so fortunate in that his daughter, Ethlyn, married this extremely capable, popular, just wildly popular person, Billy Hightower, from Altus. He just stepped right into a position at the bank and became—to say “a pillar of the community” would be putting it mildly. He did some incredible things, like helping to bring Tinker Field into Oklahoma City during World War II. So that was a wonderful thing, for the Johnsons to have this son-in-law step into those shoes at the bank, since they didn’t have a son.

MJH: What was the relationship with the Vose family?

I think that R.A., who lived just a block away, and Frank Johnson and Hugh Johnson who lived next door to R.A. Vose were all very good friends. Mr. Vose, I think, was on the original board, but not until Frank Johnson died, and then his brother became president of the bank, and then when he died, and then Billy Hightower became president, so then he died quickly...So after those untimely deaths, the Voses took over the leadership of the bank. They had been there, but I think Mr. Vose stayed in the background.

MJH: What did people call R.A. Vose?

People called him “the Owl.” Of course, as you know, our families are connected. Mr. Vose’s granddaughter married my brother. So everyone called him “the Owl” because he had a kind of little round face and wore these big horn rimmed glasses, and he looked like an owl. He really did... [Digress into current relationship b/w Johnson / Vose progeny].

MJH: Well, for now, that’s fabulous...

I’ll tell you another story. You were talking about the neighborhood friends...Mrs. Overholser—they called her Miss Annie—was a very good friend of Aida Johnson. And Dad remembered very well that his grandmother would say—she always called him brother—“Now brother, come on, we’re going to go up and visit Miss Annie.” Of course he didn’t want to do that at all, sit around with two old ladies, in rocking chairs on the porch. But he can remember going up there...He thought Miss Annie was the loveliest...she was a very sweet, dear lady... [Digress to DBH’s chafing dish group. Found a book in Hightower library to take to Overholser house to embellish room when Overholser house was opened to tours. Book had inscription indicating that book had been given to Aida by Miss Annie on eve of trip.]

End

June 29, 2008. Impromptu interview

“Western horsemanship? I don’t think they ever thought about it. They brought their culture with them and tried to distance themselves from the frontier as fast as they could. They brought their sophistication and culture from the East. They left that Western bit in the dust.”

“Remember, the Johnsons had that Southern gentility.”

“The old Nichols Hills stables were located on May Avenue. You can still tell where the riding trails were on the golf course at The Oklahoma City Golf and Country Club by the rows of elm trees that flanked

them. Riding trails were part of the original Nichols Hills development. Dr. Nichols knew how important horses were to the city's leaders."

"Dr. G.A. Nichols, developer of Nichols Hills; G.A. Nichols' granddaughter, Carolyn; Dan W. James; Ethlyn Hightower; Phyllis Hightower were all great riders. I remember riding those trails as a little girl w/ my father."

"The Junior League of OKC sponsored lots of horse shows. They were always grand affairs—beautiful horses, incredible riders, and plenty of elegant parties to celebrate the occasion and, of course, raise money for good causes."

"Phyllis Hightower and her horse, Maid of Salem, made it all the way to Madison Square Garden."

"Junior Leagues usually began as local service organizations. As soon as they conformed to very strict standards, they submitted membership applications to the national board of directors. After Oklahoma City's service club submitted its application in 1927, a group of ladies came down from New York to see if the place was sophisticated enough to pass muster. Mrs. Charles Urschel, whose husband was a wealthy oilman from Pennsylvania, hosted the first dinner at her home at the corner of 18th and Hudson. She probably had the most elegant collection of silver and crystal and china west of the Mississippi. Well, after being wined and dined at the Urschels' and probably the Johnsons' and who knows where else, those ladies returned to New York with all kinds of tales about Oklahoma City's sophistication. Oklahoma City's application to the National Junior League was granted immediately."

"Mrs. Charles (Mary B.) Rumsey was the first president of the Junior League. Ethlyn Hightower was president in 1932, and she actually died in office, of pneumonia."

"G.A. Nichols lived at 18th and Hudson, catty-corner from the Urschels and across the street from Sam Gloyd. That's who Frank Johnson was visiting when he had a heart attack. His butler rushed him to his home three blocks away, and that's where he died."

"Tom Slick was always known as the 'king of the Oklahoma wildcatters.'"

July 2, 2008 Impromptu interview

In the 1930s, Charles Urschel was kidnapped by Machine Gun Kelly and his gang in broad daylight from his home on the corner of 18th and Hudson. He was taken to a remote location, maybe in Arkansas. While in captivity, he paid close attention to the drone of airplanes as they flew overhead. When his ransom was paid and he was released, he told authorities about the timing of the flights. That was enough of a hint for authorities to check flight plans and narrow down their search for the outlaws' hideout. Machine Gun Kelly was eventually arrested and tried in Oklahoma County.

Telephone interview w/ DBH, October 14, 2008.

Johnson home was built in neo-classical style, Greek revival architecture.

FPJ more than likely drank sherry from a cut glass decanter. DBH and FJH built recessed bar in corner of library.

Entryway had arched doors.

Home decorated with dark wood, carved antebellum and Victorian furniture.

The central staircase was Victorian era oak staircase, double.

Silk wall coverings.

Archways.

Music room was light and airy in French style, patterned silk upholstery. Piano, elaborate gilt furniture with silk upholstery. Wedding cake ceiling of molded plaster with angel ornamentation, three dimensional cherubs, each with different expressions.. Entertainment in the home.

Carriage house for horses and carriages. Carriage entrance went around house. Columned Portecochere on east and west sides. Total symmetry.

Cannas planted around, tall, used as hedges. Reds, yellows, like a palm, leafy. Die off in winter, to reveal prairie. Prairie view beyond. Home was built on highest area.

FPJ planted sycamores on south side of house.

Stained glass window atop stairway landing. Stairway of heavy oak balustrade, perfect for a child sliding down. Recessed seats at base of stairs of tufted leather.

Mahogany paneled dining room. Dickensian mantle. Great beams in dining room.

Doilies, finger bowls, lace table cloths.

5th and Robinson was where Johnsons lived, site of Murrah Bldg., before moving to 15th Street. Envisioned townhouse w/ little land.