



## **The Mary Doherty Johnson Papers**

(Two boxes, one oversize)

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Mary Doherty Johnson was born on March 29, 1922, in Winsted, CT., the oldest of four children. Her parents were James Doherty and Ethel Constable Doherty. Her first residence was in West Haven, but the family moved to New Haven when Mary was about halfway through second grade, when she was seven years old. Her father worked for the Associated Press for over forty years.

Mary attended the New Haven State Teacher's College from 1939 until 1943. She taught second grade at the Walnut Beach School in Milford for a year. Moving to the Cheshire Elementary School in 1944, where she received a raise of \$300, "for a grand total of \$1300" in salary. She taught there for five years. She resigned in June 1949, marrying Carl Johnson on December 26th of that year. The Johnsons lived at McConahey Terrace in New Haven for the duration of their marriage, raising three daughters, Mary Louise, Beth, and Martha.

In 1965, Mary began substitute teaching, "mostly at the West Hills School" in New Haven. In 1967, she became a permanent substitute at the Sheridan Middle School, and decided to return to teaching on a full time basis. She interviewed with the Personnel Director of the Board of Education, and got a contract at Troup Middle School in New Haven (then a "junior high school"), where she taught until her retirement fifteen years later in 1982.

Mary Johnson's family has been an important part of her life, but an equally significant part has been her ongoing labor, peace, civil rights and social justice activism and the relationships forged in the course of that work. One of her earliest experiences was as a neighborhood activist who initiated the formation of the West Hills Community Council in the mid-1950s. She describes it as a group whose goal was "to make [neighborhood] life better independent of politicians...to make politicians work for you on neighborhood issues." The Council tackled standard issues such as baseball field renovation and installing traffic lights, but she says that its "greatest achievement" occurred when a local social worker, Hugh Woodard, advised them that housing built in the area for arms workers during World War II and occupied ever since by their families was being sold by the federal government "to the highest bidder." This involved over 300 units in the area, and the Council went to each of them to inform them of the situation.

After receiving pressure from the Council and the families occupying the units, the City of New Haven in turn put pressure on the federal government, which eventually relented and established priorities for

the sale of the units: first priority would be given to people who already lived in them; second, to World War II veterans; third, to Korean War veterans; and fourth, to people living in New Haven.

Like many activists, Mary says that the Vietnam War propelled her further into peace work, although she had done some anti-nuclear work in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During the 1960s and 1970s, hers was a familiar face on all night bus rides from New Haven, Ct., to Washington, D.C. for large anti-war demonstrations. In the 1980s, she continued to travel to Washington to protest United States intervention in Central America, and was arrested in April, 1986, with others in the rotunda of the Capitol building for sitting in front of a bust of Martin Luther King and reading from the speech he made when he decided that "the time had come" for him to publicly oppose the war in Vietnam. Periodically, they said in unison, "That time has come for us in relation to Nicaragua." After a week long trial, charges were dismissed.

Mary also continued her peace activities more locally. She was a member of Spinsters Opposed to Nuclear Genocide (SONG), a New Haven based women's affinity group, joining them in demonstrations at the local army recruiting station as well as at General Dynamics Corporation's Electric Boat Shipyard in Groton, Connecticut. During the 1992 Christmas shopping season, she was arrested with another activist at a Bradlees' store in East Haven, Connecticut, for placing stickers which read "Don't Buy War Toys" on items such as G.I. Joe figures. This latter incident reveals much about Mary's character. She and other participants managed to walk out of the store without being stopped. One member of the group was, however, roughly apprehended. When Mary saw this, she returned, waiting for police to arrive. The two were initially charged with "criminal mischief in the first degree," a felony, but the charges were reduced in court and the case was settled.

Mary joined the New Haven Federation of Teachers in 1967, and, although she never actually held a union office, she was a member of the Executive Board until her retirement. In 1970 and again in 1975, teachers who were perceived as leaders were sent to jail for contempt of court for defying injunctions not to strike. In 1970, she was the only woman among the fourteen jailed. In 1975, she was part of the teachers' negotiating committee, which was first sent to jail on a Friday afternoon. They were held until 3.a. the next morning, and then released due to parent pressure. The teachers then negotiated with the school board all weekend, but were suddenly told "all bets were off" at 8 a.m. on Monday, when, exhausted, they were returned to jail. Although this was obviously a tactic by the school board to wear the teachers down and break the strike by removing the leadership at a crucial point, the Federation had anticipated such a possibility and had trained a second negotiating team. Other striking teachers were arrested, but, because of the leaders' foresight, the second team of negotiators continued the talks, and a contract favorable to the teachers was negotiated within the week.

In 1974, Mary got involved in the national organizing effort of the United Farm workers' Union, helping to strengthen a New Haven committee that leafleted, picketed, and passed out information about the boycott of Gallo wine (made from non-union picked grapes.) Organizers were called back to California in the mid 1970s, but Mary continued the committee, producing at her own expense a handwritten newsletter about the struggle, which she delivered locally. She maintained the newsletter until 1980. A highlight of her work with the UFW was a trip across country by bus in 1976 to attend a union convention in Southern California. She remembers that she "was twice the age of everyone else" on the trip.

Over the years, Mary has been involved with many other organizations such as the May Day Celebration Committee; the Coalition to Stop Trident; the Pledge of Resistance; and the New Haven Coalition

Against the War in the Gulf. She has marched and been arrested in support of Yale union Locals 34, 35, and GESO (the Graduate Employee Student Organization.) She was active in the movement to pressure Yale to divest its holdings from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s. In the 1990s, she worked with a group of citizens who were outraged that the city of New Haven, under pressure from a downtown redeveloper, removed several key bus stops from the central downtown area. She continues to be an active member of several groups which address a wide range of social justice issues, including the Greater New Haven Central Labor Council; the New Haven Federation of Teachers Retiree Chapter; the Greater New Haven Labor History Association; the Coalition for People; the Middle East Crisis Committee; and People Against Injustice.

Mary Doherty Johnson celebrated her 80th birthday on March 29th, 2002, with her daughters, sisters, and a host of nieces and nephews at Westerly, Rhode Island. Appropriately, a celebration was held on Sunday, April 7th for hundreds of her friends and colleagues at the Building and Construction Trades Council's "Labor Temple" on Water Street in New Haven.

### **SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE**

The Mary Doherty Johnson Papers consist of two boxes (one oversized) of personal papers, organizational notes and other materials, a videotape of Ms. Johnson talking about Teachers' Unions in the 1940s-1970s, and an autobiography of Cesar Chavez, UFW organizer. The collection is divided into six series: Personal Papers; New Haven Federation of Teachers materials; United Farm workers' Union Materials; Central Labor Council Materials; Papers re: miscellaneous organizations and activities; and oversize materials and mixed media. The personal items include postcards from friends and family, from about 1975 until about 1989; three photographs of Ms. Johnson at younger ages (1923, 1939, ca.1939, and ca.1940); her marriage license (1949), and a document from the City of New Haven Board of Aldermen in recognition of her 70th birthday (1992). The four series which deal with Ms. Johnson's organizational work constitute the bulk of the collection, and they cover the years 1970 through 1992, the majority falling between 1970 and 1987.

Highlights of the collection include a file on the 1975 New Haven teacher's strike, a pivotal event in the development of the union, which includes personal letters to Ms. Johnson when she was imprisoned at Niantic Correctional Center with other organizers; handwritten newsletters of the New Haven United Farm workers' Support Committee, written and distributed by Ms. Johnson from 1976 until 1980; and Ms. Johnson's notebook from 1974-1975, in which she recorded notes about meetings of several organizations in which she was involved at the time.

Because Ms. Johnson has been involved in so many organizations in the greater New Haven area, the collection provides a kind of "snapshot" of political activism in the city, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

This collection is a subset of a larger collection of Ms. Johnson's papers, which unfortunately suffered serious water and mold damage while stored at her house. The Greater New Haven Labor History Association is pursuing options to try to repair it or make photocopies for preservation.

### **PROVENANCE**

The collection was a gift of Mary D. Johnson to the Greater New Haven Labor History Association in 2001. It is currently stored in a newly renovated room at the back of Ms. Johnson's house in archival folders, boxes, and albums.