Hi, I’m Patty Sicular. I’m Director of Archiving at the Ford Model Agency in New York City, and together with Professor Karen Cannell from Fashion Institute of Technology, we are archiving the history of fashion, beauty, photography, and Ford models. We’re at the Celebrity Vault in Beverly Hills and we’re so happy to be interviewing Bettie Johnson, whose era is 1956 to 1962. Today’s date is Wednesday, July 21, 2010. And we’re so happy to have you with us!

And I’m very happy to be here.

So, where did you grow up? Where are you from?

I grew up in Cologne, New Jersey, only 35 files south of New York City, which was very lucky, when I wanted to be a model.

And, you did, when you were young?

No, I really didn’t. I was -- I wanted to be a veterinarian. Did I just move out of --

M1: No.

OK. I wanted to be a veterinarian, and then I graduated from high school, and I decided not to do that. And I ended up being a -- oh, God -- a bookkeeper, if you can imagine, for about half a year or so.
SICULAR: And how did you wind up a model?

JOHNSON: Because I was a bookkeeper for half a year.

SICULAR: There are a lot of bookkeepers that don’t wind up -- that aren’t lucky enough to be models.

JOHNSON: I said, no, no, no, this is too much like being back in school. So I decided to go into New York. A dear friend of mine who was -- had been married to one of the Hepburns from Philadelphia -- beautiful woman -- had been a model. And she was 12 years older than I am, and she said, “You should be a model.” So I went in to Powers, and I was sitting there, waiting for an interview, and a -- a man came walking out of the office and he said, “That’s the girl I want!” Me. So, she said, “Well, I haven’t even interviewed her.” He said, “I don’t care. She’s coming with me.” And he was one of the top illustrators of that time, and he took me up to their -- they have an actual illustrators’ group building, up --

SICULAR: Was that Fifth Avenue, around 12th Street? Because there was one --

JOHNSON: No, at that time, it was up around 57th Street --

SICULAR: OK.

JOHNSON: -- I think, and Madison Avenue, I believe. [03:00] And so, then he introduced me to all the illustrators, and they were using me to illustrate their photograph. So the
first thing that I did was one for Valentine’s Day with a big red box -- heart. And then, he said, “Well, I think you should be with an agency.” And he sent me to a small agency, and the name of that was [Burt McKew?]. And I was there for about six months, and Harold Halma, who was a great photographer back at that time, he said, “I would love for you to come to my annual Christmas party!” which I did go to. And there, this woman came up to me -- a beautiful model that I had seen all over the place -- her name was Nan Rees, and she was married to a --

SICULAR: The plastic surgeon, Dr. Reese?

JOHNSON: Yes, exactly. And she said, “What agency are you with?” And I told her, and she said, “No, no, no, no. You have to be with Eileen Ford. And Jerry and Eileen are coming to this party, and I will introduce you.” And that’s [04:00] when I met Eileen, and Eileen said, “Yes! Monday morning, be at my office at nine o’clock, and I’ll see you then.” And that was that. And that was so great. And I must say, all of the models were so, so generous. Tippi Hedren -- I didn’t know her either -- I was walking into a studio, and she said, “Oh, stop, what is your name?” And I told her, and she said, “You know, I was just on a go-see for a television commercial, and they’re not going to use me, but I think they would really like you, so you
go see them.” And that’s -- the girls were just so incredible. I loved them. And I have so many friends here from that period.

SICULAR: Who were some of the other models that you worked with, that you became friendly with?

JOHNSON: Oh, my gosh, Millie Perkins, who did the Diary of Anne Frank.

SICULAR: (overlapping) Anne Frank.

JOHNSON: Lorraine Davies, who’s married to Christopher Knopf now. And Helen Ryan. Cindi Wood, [05:00] who was just a beautiful woman, and she’s the one that actually introduced me to -- or donned to me in her photographs. And, oh, gosh, Sandy [Comden?], who was just a delight; she was so wonderful. And Janet Wagner. Don, can you think of anyone else?

F1: Please go on.

JOHNSON: I forgot. I think I named most of them. I mean, there’s so many more. But these girls moved to California about the same time I did Magi. And Margie McNally, she was a big model at that time. She was also --

SICULAR: Oh --

MURRAY: Paulina?
JOHNSON: Oh! And Paulina Porizkova -- she’s a good friend of mine because my daughter is married to her husband’s son, so making Paulina my daughter’s mother-in-law.

SICULAR: Wow!

JOHNSON: In fact --

SICULAR: Took full circle.

JOHNSON: -- we’ll lunch with them [06:00] after this.

SICULAR: It went full circle. It really is. It’s so funny.

JOHNSON: Yes, it is, it is, a full circle.

SICULAR: Did you ever live with Eileen and Jerry?

JOHNSON: No, I stayed overnight several times when I was there. And they had invited me for dinner and so forth, and I’d stay at their home, because I lived so close.

SICULAR: And did Eileen ever give you any advice?

JOHNSON: Hmm! She just said one day -- I walked into the studio, and she said, “Come here.” She said, “I think you’d better do something about those eyebrows,” which I never could do because they’re just wild. But no, she was -- she was wonderful to me. And of course, Jerry was very, very comforting at all times. He was just a wonderful man.

SICULAR: Everybody always has the same thing to say about Jerry.

JOHNSON: I know. And Eileen could be a little prickly at times, but she was --
SICULAR: A great agent, so caring.

JOHNSON: -- really, I got very -- oh, are you kidding? She really made the whole industry at that time. I mean, she was it. And she started the whole thing with the vouchers, and people got [07:00] paid in a week instead of -- now I under-- my daughter, when she was working for Eileen, she -- -- I think they -- sometimes they had to wait for three months to get paid.

SICULAR: Great. When did your daughter work with Eileen?

JOHNSON: Oh, goodness. Oh, goodness, at eighty-- at '86?

SICULAR: What’s your daughter’s name? Her modeling name?

JOHNSON: Colleen -- Colleen Marie, yeah.

SICULAR: Colleen Marie, wow.

JOHNSON: But she didn’t work that long, and she went -- at that time, they sent everybody over to --

SICULAR: Europe, right.

JOHNSON: -- Europe to work. And, yeah.

SICULAR: So who were some of the favorite photographers that you got to work with?

JOHNSON: Oh, God. The most fun was Roger Prijent.

SICULAR: Right.

JOHNSON: Is he still there? He was there when my daughter was modeling, which is now, 20 years ago or so. He’s still there?
SICULAR: I don’t think so.

JOHNSON: Oh, he was so much fun. He was so kind. And Jack [Shannon?] -- oh, gosh, we just had -- his studio was so beautiful and it was [08:00] always -- really fine time working with him. We had a good time. He made you feel well. And Avedon was a sweetheart, and --

SICULAR: What did you do with Mr. Avedon?

JOHNSON: I did several -- several things with him. I don’t -- I think I have one picture in here from him.

SICULAR: Which one? Let’s see.

JOHNSON: Let’s see. I think it was one of the --

SICULAR: Look how beautiful.

JOHNSON: Oh, one of these. He did this one.

SICULAR: Hold this up. The Clairol. Can you see that, or is there glare?

JOHNSON: Is it too glary? You can take it out.

SICULAR: Is it too glary?

JOHNSON: This book is from back then.

SICULAR: Can you see that?

M1: Done.

SICULAR: OK. Did you prefer doing editorial or catalogs or campaigns?
JOHNSON: Oh, I would say -- well, they didn’t even have the word [09:00] “campaign” back then, you know. I did a lot of Pepsi things, which might be called a campaign today --

SICULAR: Right.

JOHNSON: And I did a lot of Clairol things too, and -- but anyway, I preferred -- I preferred the editorial, of course, because you had much more freedom to express yourself, because in the -- in the -- in the catalog, you were just -- had to be --

SICULAR: I know, you had to show every button and every --

JOHNSON: -- very strict, yes, and everything like that. And the other ones, you could fly about. And that was really fun. I enjoyed that very much. And I enjoyed the studios more than location because a fly away hair -- that was always a big problem.

SICULAR: And you had to do your own hair and makeup back then.

JOHNSON: We did our own hair, and we had to be dressed, and we had to have heels on. And, at that time, stockings with garters, and --

SICULAR: The waist cinchers, I hear.

JOHNSON: -- there were those waist cinchers. The waists were this big. (laughter)

SICULAR: And you’d have [10:00] several -- you know, now, you usually stay a whole day at the studio, half a day minimum
or a whole day. But models would, at times, do an hour here, two hours there, just running all over town.

JOHNSON: Yeah, we were up and down that town all the time. And it was great when you had an all-day booking, or an all-day location, because then you had -- you could avoid the taxicab drives, which were always hell.

SICULAR: Did you do a lot of trips? Location trips?

JOHNSON: Yes, a lot of trips to the Bahamas, mostly, at that time. That’s where we went. And Paris. London.

SICULAR: Wh-- what did you do?

JOHNSON: London for Brides magazine, we do. We went over there. That was really fun.

SICULAR: And how about Paris? What did you do in Paris?

JOHNSON: I worked with Dor-- Dorian Leigh?

SICULAR: Dorian Leigh?

JOHNSON: Yes!

SICULAR: She had an agency.

JOHNSON: Yes, yes, Suzy Parker’s sister.

SICULAR: Right.

JOHNSON: Yeah. So I just stayed there for a week, then I went on to Sweden and Denmark, and -- to visit some relatives. Before that, I had been in London. Yeah, [11:00] it was just a grand time.
SICULAR: Did your -- what did your family and friends think about your career?

JOHNSON: They were very -- my friends were so excited for me. And they were just all -- my parents were very -- very, very supportive. And my brothers, yeah, they really loved it. They loved that I was having such a nice time. And it was so close, too, because I would go home every weekend. Everyone would say, “Well, let’s go --” I was invited to the, oh my goodness, to the inauguration -- how stupid! And I said, “No, I want to go home and see my family for that weekend,” which I did. So that was really dumb. And there was another one with Reynolds Aluminum. They were flying to the Kentucky Derby, and I said, “No, I -- I have to get back and see my --” I -- I love my -- my home, and my brothers, and my friends, and -- and -- and I was --

SICULAR: And that’s more -- that’s nice. That’s sweet.

JOHNSON: Yeah, it was great. It is, it is. Because everything [12:00] just worked out beautifully for me.

SICULAR: It’s really great.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SICULAR: Do -- you know, you look so beautiful.

JOHNSON: I do? Oh, that’s --

SICULAR: You -- and today’s your birthday! Why do you -- I’m sure -- I know that you’re beautiful here and you’re
beautiful now. Do you have any special beauty secrets? Or fitness? Or...

JOHNSON: Not really. You know, I think it’s a matter of attitude, number one. Being a happy person, taking care of yourself the best you can, although I’m not a real stickler about that, you know, it’s kchoo-kchoo. I’m outside a lot. I -- I had horses for years, so I have some skin damage from being out all the time with the horses. And my children -- and that’s -- that’s my life.

SICULAR: What do you think of the difference between when you modeled, and when your daughter modeled, and seeing magazines now?

JOHNSON: Oh, wow. Well, the magazines today are just in-- incredibly exquisite, I think. [13:00] And the photography has just -- has come way up. Also --

SICULAR: But the models -- it’s funny because, you know, we’re archiving at Ford Models, and the models out of modeling now, and they see the pictures from your era --

JOHNSON: I don’t know.

SICULAR: -- they’re saying the photography is so exquisite that --

JOHNSON: Yeah, I think it’s just, you get --

SICULAR: -- and the models, which is so amazing. They didn’t have Photoshop back then, so --
JOHNSON: We didn’t.

SICULAR: -- and the models now really appreciate the models of your era and of other eras, which is really --

JOHNSON: That’s so funny you should say that because Paulina, just the other week when I was down here, was saying -- she was looking at some of my pictures, and she said, “Oh, God, this is so, oh! This is extraordinary! This is so beautiful! Much better than today!” Now, I don’t agree necessarily, but I think we had some pretty special photographers at that time.

SICULAR: You -- I mean, we can see your book -- can we turn the pages? Do you want me to bring the book over?

M1: No, it’s fine.

SICULAR: OK. I mean, these pictures are just so amazing. What are your memories of some of these? This is beautiful. This is the most beautiful.

JOHNSON: This is funny! This is so funny because Bert Stern -- [14:00] that was after Fourth of July weekend out in the Hamptons --

SICULAR: And this is 1961.

JOHNSON: This is 1961, and they did not want us to be tan. So I was out there for the whole weekend, of course, and what happened? I got tanned. So I walked into the studio and he said, “Hrumph! You know, you’re looking much too tan.”
So he said, well, I was there, so he decided he would take a couple of rolls of film, and then he dismissed me. He said -- he was very aggravated at -- with that. So I was so surprised when a couple of months later, it made the cover, and it was one of their big ones for the year. And they loved all the coloring -- the fall colors were just perfect. So that worked out well.

M1: The (inaudible), just kind of tilt it.

SICULAR: Tilt it? Like this?

M1: Yeah, that looks good.

SICULAR: OK. Tell me when I can turn the page.

M1: Yeah.

SICULAR: Turn?

M1: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Do you want me to get closer?

SICULAR: Do you -- here are some bridesmaids pictures. Were these done in London?

JOHNSON: Those were done in [15:00] London. I think this was done in London over here. And I think this was for Vogue. But I’m not sure, you know.

SICULAR: Do you remember the photographers for any of these?

No?

JOHNSON: Oh! Roger Prijent was in --

SICULAR: Roger Prijent sent you --
JOHNSON: -- was in London with me, yeah.

SICULAR: Beautiful picture! And these are Pepsi.

JOHNSON: These are Pepsi’s, and I’ve forgotten who --

M1: Just tilt them a little more.

SICULAR: And what were you saying was the story between these two?

JOHNSON: Oh, the -- the exec over at the agency kept using me for all his Pepsi-Cola things, and -- and they said, “Well, we like -- we love Bettie Johnson, but you have to get another -- a new one, come on!” So he -- well, all he did was bring me back, and he made my eyes brown and took out the cleft in my chin. (laughter) It’s really funny. Oh, let’s see.

SICULAR: Clairol -- this is Mr. Avedon --

JOHNSON: That was another -- that was Mr. Avedon. Oh, he was such a peach to work with.

SICULAR: And how about this?

JOHNSON: That was in -- oh my gosh! [16:00] Grace Kelly’s photographer.

SICULAR: Conant Howell?

JOHNSON: Conant --

SICULAR: Conant Howell? Howell Conant?

JOHNSON: Howell Conant.

SICULAR: Conant?
JOHNSON: He was a big fan of mine. And -- and that was so much fun because they brought the horse into the studio since --

SICULAR: What was it for?

JOHNSON: It was for Smirnoff --

SICULAR: Oh, Smirnoff, OK.

JOHNSON: -- [Cofian?], I was going to say.

SICULAR: New kind of coffee.

JOHNSON: Yes.

SICULAR: I’ll just move this over. Do you remember the first time you saw yourself in print?

JOHNSON: Yes! I was the little fountain (inaudible), yes, that was so --

SICULAR: It must have been such a thrill.

JOHNSON: It was, it was.

SICULAR: And how about your first magazine cover?

JOHNSON: Oh, that was thrilling. N-- this is a great story here. This was for Mademoiselle, and I believe the photographer was Steven Calhoun. And when I did that, they had the band behind me, the steel drums going. It was so much fun. And when the magazine came out, [17:00] they just got hundreds of cancellations, because of me being in such close contact with black people, which was just -- it is so wonderful that we have come at least --

SICULAR: I know.
JOHNSON: -- out of that era. And these are -- these are all Mademoiselle, I’m sure. I did a lot for Mademoiselle. And I don’t know what the “Shh!” was about, and (laughter). And that was just one of the head sheets right there.

SICULAR: And this was, where?

JOHNSON: And this is Cindi Wood. Sh-- this is the one that introduced me to Don. This is what -- unfortunately, she died from breast cancer not long after that photograph. And then, the ones over there are of Don and myself.

SICULAR: And what -- what was your first magazine cover for? Do you remember?

JOHNSON: Oh my goodness, I think it was Mademoiselle.

SICULAR: Mademoiselle?

JOHNSON: [18:00] Yeah, yeah.

SICULAR: And then --

JOHNSON: I think I did three or -- three or so for them, and -- and maybe one for Glamour. And I did about seven, eight --

SICULAR: And when you had your covers, did Eileen laminate them and hang them in the office?

JOHNSON: At that time, no. Uh-uh.

SICULAR: In the ’80s, when I worked on the highboard, which is yearboard, they would have them laminated. And you would walk the gauntlet of all the covers of -- of that month --

JOHNSON: Oh, how great, wow.
SICULAR: -- which was fun.

JOHNSON: That must have been impressive.

SICULAR: Yeah.

JOHNSON: [19:00] Yeah.

SICULAR: So it’s -- it’s been, you know, quite a wonderful career.

JOHNSON: It has been. And I met incredible people because of it.

SICULAR: What’s your big-- what’s your biggest surprise of your career?

JOHNSON: Well, how far that career has taken me, in terms of meeting really incredible people. Having dinner several times with President Reagan and Nancy, going with Bo to the royal show at the -- at the -- can you stop this for a minute?

SICULAR: Yeah.

JOHNSON: It’s their castle. Horse show, and we were in the box with the Queen. We sat right behind her and her children. This was in 1996, and Bo Derek was the one responsible for taking me over there with her. And I made the Queen laugh. And I became the hit of the show there because everyone said that -- the Brits said, “Oh! You made the Queen laugh! You made the Queen laugh!”

SICULAR: How did you make her laugh?
JOHNSON: I made her laugh by a very simple thing. I think she’s starved for entertainment. It was so funny because as she was leaving, I just introduced myself to her, and I said, “This has to be the most beautiful place. It’s actually horse heaven!” And she said, “Oh, ho, ho, ho!” She threw her head back. She thought that was so funny for some reason.

SICULAR: So amusing. The Queen was amused.

JOHNSON: She was amused, very much so. So that was a gr--

[20:00] that was fun.

SICULAR: So it’s been a great career.

JOHNSON: And I’m -- yes, and also been on the yacht -- of the presidential yacht -- with Ethel and Robert Kennedy, when Don was doing a film there, Advise and Consent, with Otto Preminger. That was -- and you know, so it just segued into all sorts of wonderful things.

SICULAR: And did you want to tell us how you met your husband --

JOHNSON: Oh, sure.

SICULAR: -- and discuss your husband a little bit?

JOHNSON: Oh, my shallow husband! He... (laughter) Not at all, but this was funny because --

SICULAR: And what year was this?

JOHNSON: This was in 19-- oh, goodness! 19--
MURRAY: 60.

JOHNSON: -- 60. Thank you, Don.

SICULAR: You can come into the picture, if you want.

JOHNSON: Come in here, sweetheart.

SICULAR: Come on over!

JOHNSON: Come over here. And let me show you who my husband is. Can you see these?

MURRAY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: OK.

SICULAR: [21:00] So, how did you meet your husband?

JOHNSON: So -- well, I --

MURRAY: I picked her out of a magazine!

JOHNSON: He did. Uh-oh! (cell phone music)

SICULAR: Is that someone’s ca--?

JOHNSON: Sorry.

SICULAR: That’s OK.

MURRAY: It’s hers.

JOHNSON: Here, let me go and end it.

SICULAR: OK.

M1: In 20 seconds, and, OK, we’re ready.

SICULAR: So, tell me, how did you meet your husband?

MURRAY: I picked her out of a magazine.

SICULAR: Right, and her husband is... You can --
JOHNSON: My husband is Don Murray. He’s a beautiful, wonderful human being. We’re -- been in contact now for just about 50 years. So we’re still here. Ups and downs, but here we are.

SICULAR: And you picked -- so tell us the whole story.

MURRAY: What happened is that my friend and business partner, making a movie -- our door was -- and they -- Walter Thompson Modeling, I mean --

JOHNSON: J. Walter Thompson.

SICULAR: Thompson?

MURRAY: And he was married to Cindi Wood, this beautiful model. And he said, “Don, the world is full of beautiful women, and I know most of them.” So he threw a bunch of magazines in my lap and he said, “Pick any one, and I’ll get you an introduction.” I didn’t take it seriously. I took it as a game, so I picked six girls, a couple -- three blondes, two brunettes, and a redhead. And five of the six turned out to be the same person, but he --

JOHNSON: And my friend said, “Well, you’re in luck, because Bettie is coming to visit me for her first time in California in about 2 weeks.”

MURRAY: Yeah, so she came out, and we met. But we didn’t get married right away. We knew each other for about a year
and a half, and we were together about a year and a half.

And then finally got married over in Berlin.

SICULAR: And then you went to Venice.

JOHNSON: Went to Venice. Walking down the boardwalk at the film festival, and lo and behold, here came the sixth model.

MURRAY: But we survived. It was Renée.

JOHNSON: Yes, we were --

SICULAR: Oh dear, oh!

JOHNSON: -- in touch with her.

SICULAR: Well, you have the most beautiful wife of all.

MURRAY: [23:00] I -- I agree.

SICULAR: And kindest and sweetest.

MURRAY: I’m a very lucky man.

SICULAR: You are.

MURRAY: I think (overlapping dialogue, inaudible) --

JOHNSON: I am very lucky, too, because he is a wonderful guy.

SICULAR: And what do you think of her modeling career?

MURRAY: I -- I think it’s -- it’s amazing because she -- she was very funny, because Eileen said to her one time, “You have to have a book.” You know, she said, “Why do I need a book?” She said, “Because all models have a book.” And she said to Rusty, “Rusty, bring out my schedule.” And
every -- every day was booked. She says, “Why do I need a book? It’s my book!”

JOHNSON: Well, actually -- actually, I always had a book, at least I had tear sheets. But she wanted me to go out and get a lot of -- what did they call them?

SICULAR: Magazine editorials? Editorial pictures?

JOHNSON: No, not editorial --

SICULAR: Head shots?

JOHNSON: Head shots and all that stuff. And I didn’t like doing that, so I would just put these and -- but she was very gracious to me, always. And --

SICULAR: And did Eileen give you any advice [24:00] when you got married?

MURRAY: No, no, as a -- no, as a matter of fac--

SICULAR: To treat her models well?

MURRAY: Oh, oh, she always -- she was always very protective of her models.

JOHNSON: Oh, she was. Eileen was fantastic --

MURRAY: She -- she was a terrific influence. She really was.

JOHNSON: -- at that time, she -- yeah.

MURRAY: I think she was probably, in the history of modeling, I think she’s the most important figure in the history.

SICULAR: Yeah!

JOHNSON: Oh, absolutely.
SICULAR: Yeah, her and Jerry.

MURRAY: Very terrific.

JOHNSON: And Jerry. And Jer--

SICULAR: Do you have any -- any last thoughts?

JOHNSON: Oh, I just -- I’m just so -- so overwhelmed how she took -- could -- such good care of all her models. She was so great. She was Mother Hen, and he was Big Daddy. Just wonderful. I just had the most wonderful experience modeling, never had any bad experiences, which is quite remarkable, I think.

SICULAR: That’s great.

F1: Would you share your story about Carmen, and the call to Eileen Ford?

JOHNSON: Oh, OK. Do you -- yes! I was [25:00] working, and I don’t remember which studio I was in, but I was very unhappy about the makeup person that was doing me for this really big --

SICULAR: Was it a TV commercial?

JOHNSON: A TV commercial, yes. And so I said, I -- I -- I don’t like that, and I would like them to take -- they made very large lips, and I didn’t like it. So I said I wouldn’t do it, and they sent Carmen in. She was working on the set, and Carmen was great. And she has a wonderful vocabulary, as you mentioned --
SICULAR: Yes, I know, I’m her booker. (laughter)

JOHNSON: And she came in and talked to me. And she said,

“Well, I agree with you.” So she told them that, and then they went and called Eileen, and said I was misbehaving. And Eileen said, “I don’t think so. I have worked with Bettie for years, and she’s always been charming [26:00] for everyone to work with.” And so, she said, “I’m on her side, so take off her makeup and do it over.” And that was that.

SICULAR: OK. Do you want to wish Eileen -- [26:18]

END OF AUDIO FILE