

PERSONAL DATA

Joseph Conroy

Interviewed at Eisenhower Center, Bridgeport, Ct.

Born: Bridgeport, Ct.

Spouse:

Children:

Education: Central High

Employment: Jenkins Brothers

Church: St. Augustine's

Organizations:

CONROY

MI: Joseph Conroy at the Eisenhower Building.

JC: I was going to tell you...see, I was born and brought up in the South End. Now, the South End what you know is University of Bridgeport, right? Well, when I lived, three or four blocks from Seaside Park, it was all wealthy industrialists. It was all estates down there. All these industrialists had their own houses and servants. They also had chauffeurs and gardeners when they had their children. I played with their children; I was in all their houses. We had... Bryant Electric Company was up the street from me, also Bryant Electric factory, Howland's Dry Goods; Mr. Howland had a mansion up there,, Harvey Hubbell had a mansion down there; I was in all their houses. Well, I lived on Atlantic Street. At Marina Park was P. T. Barnum's mansion which has been torn down by the University of Bridgeport and is now a lunchroom. But...Mr. P.T. Barnum's grandson lived here; his name was Marshall, I think and his wife died, and his son got killed in the war, and he lived there by himself, and he used to raise yachts, you know those big yachts that they have those international races? And he was very seldom home. Wilson Marshall was his name. Well, he had a chauffeur and across the street from me was the chauffeur's home and he had two children. I used to

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JC: play with the kids; I was in all these houses when I was a kid. He also had a gardener, directly across from me, which would be in back of his mansion - was a garden, well it was long as from here past Main Street, and this gardener kept all kinds of vegetables and everything, and of course, Mr. Marshall was never home. And all the vegetables and everything were given to the

MI: to the needy?

JC: ...well the people that lived down there and you could go in; well, you couldn't help yourself.

And Warner's had an estate down there - owned Warner Brothers. There were several brothers; they all had their big homes and they all had their servants and their chauffeurs. Right on the corner of Atlantic Street and Park Avenue was Howland's - you know the Howland's Dry Goods store, yeah? Well, Mr. Howland was very old and he had a nurse that traveled with him. He lived in Florida in the winter months and in April his house was all shut up. In April, all of a sudden in April, the place would open up; his servants would come and open the windows and open the windows and put out the blankets and everything and get the house ready for Mr. Howland. Well, Mr. Howland would come down with his nurse and he stayed maybe

JC: two weeks and then he'd go up to Vermont; he raised prize cattle; he had a farm up in Vermont. And he stayed in Vermont till October; same thing happened in October; all the servants came down, opened the windows, cleared everything, dusted everything; he stayed two weeks. The house is still there; the University of Bridgeport has it, and when I was a kid we used to play around the house. We used to play chase and everything. We never did any damage. We ran all around and jumped on everything, butt we never broke any windows or broke in. He had his garages across the street from my house, on Atlantic Street. It also seemed very strange, you know, to have a big house and only use it for maybe a couple of weeks... So what happened then, gradually when the people couldn't get servants they all moved out and all the houses were bought by the University of Bridgeport. and, you know, turned into libraries and all the school buildings.

Then I also can tell you that out on Railroad Avenue and Wordin Avenue were the Barnum and Bailey's winter quarters...the circus...well, when I was a kid the

JC: circus...you know where Wentfield is...well, that was all buildings for the circus...and from October the circus would be finished, and they'd bring all the animals, everything back to there. Well, that was a great thing for us people in Bridgeport; it was a great thing to go out, take a walk...to the circus...a fence all around, but you could look through the fence and sometimes you could see...they'd have the horses out, training them; they'd have the elephants out, training them, and it was really a cheap way of passing the time; the people would take their kids out...to go out to the circus headquarters and we'd walk around there, and if you were lucky you could see the horses out. And then on one side, they had a small fence about four feet high and they kept the wild animals; the windows were all barred. When we were kids we'd hop over that fence and look in that window and see the lions and the tigers. They were in cages, you know, but there was one particular part there where they had the hippotamus in a big tank of water, so we'd jump over the fence; maybe the fence was here and you'd only go to that window. And you looked in the window, and sometimes you looked in and you'd see the hippopotamus and then all of a sudden he might rear up out of the water and open his big mouth and we'd all get

JC: scared and jumped over the fence. It was great. Then after, I don't know how many years they stayed there, but then afterwards they decided it was cheaper, easier, probably, in Florida, in Sarasota Florida. They had all the circus wagons there, and used to paint them outside in the yard. So you could go and see all these things. It was a cheap way...especially for the kids, because all the kids wanted to see the elephants.

MI: May I ask your name?

JC: Joseph Conroy.

MI: Could you tell me your age?

JC: Seventy-six.

MI: And where were you born?

JC: Bridgeport.

MI: And what is the date of your birth?

JC: March, 1908.

MI: Could you tell me about your family?

JC: Well, I never...I got married late in life and we were married about twenty-four years. And my wife got sick; she went to Dinan Center. She was upl there for a year and she died. I do volunteer work up at Dinan Center. They have two gift shops up there and I run the gift shops since I retired. I'm retired eleven years and I do a lot of volunteer work.

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MI: Could you tell me about your childhood? Was it happy, fun, lots of things to do?

JC: You mean...

MI: Were there many things that they have for kids nowadays as there was back then?

JC: You mean when I was a kid? Oh, yeah. Well, I think we had more things than you kids have nowadays. In the first place we had four, five or six big shows on Main Street. We had the two Poli theaters, we had the Globe theater, we had the Cameo theater, we had the Ritz Ballroom, used to go out to the Ritz Ballroom; Thursday night was prosperity night; twenty-five cents to go to a dance. And Sunday they brought all the big bands - Rudee Vallee and Glen Miller and I think there was more than two...

MI: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

JC: I have one sister.

MI: What's her name?

JC: Julia.

MI: Were your parents employed...did they have jobs?

JC: Who?

MI: Your mother and father.

JC: Oh, yeah. My father worked in Jenkins Brothers. My mother never worked. Women never worked much...my father worked

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JC: in Jenkins Brothers and I worked in Jenkins Brothers [for] forty-eight years.

MI: What ethnic background are your parents?

JC: They came from Ireland; they were born in Ireland.

MI: When did your parents come to Bridgeport?

JC: They came in 1905 from Ireland and came across, you know, on a boat, yeah.

MI: You were born in Bridgeport?

JC: In 1908, yes.

MI: Where did you live?

JC: I lived on Broad Street originally until I was five years old and then I moved to Atlantic Street...well, you know where that is, don't you?

MI: What level of education did you complete?

JC: Well, I went to Sacred Heart School, I went to Central High - the old one - the City Hall across the street, and then I went to business college - nights, when I started to work.

MI: Did you go to college?

JC: No.

MI: What was education like during the years of your going to school?

JC: I don't think it was as perfect as it was now. I mean, we didn't have all these advantages that you have - all these trips and no psychiatrists or any of those kind of people, no.

MI: What groups or activities were you in while you were going to school - were you in any groups or activities when you were in high school - Key Club or something like that?

JC: In school? Well, I never was much...in school, I want to tell you that - I don't remember. In the Athletic Association maybe, but I never played anything, I never was in the Drama Club or anything else, no.

MI: What was the percentage of ethnic groups that went to your school? How many blacks in your school when you went to school?

JC: No. Not too much minorities when I went to school, no.

MI: Do you remember World War II?

JC: Yeah.

MI: How was it - was it hard on your family?

JC: Not exactly, we had rationing of sugar. I know it was hard; my mother used...somebody would tell her that they were giving out a pound of sugar,, maybe over on the East Side or something. She'd go over there.... There was a lot of rationing, I think.

MI: Could you tell me about the Depression and bread and soup lines?

JC: In 1929? I was lucky; I worked all during the Depression. We got a cut in pay, but I never lost any time. The company where I worked, they worked for three days

JC: a week. Every other week sometimes the men only got two days a week, but they managed to keep their jobs, you know.

MI: Did your father lose his job during the Depression?

JC: Yeah - my father always worked. His pay was cut and his hours were cut; in other words, they gave more men work by cutting their hours. And I imagine it was pretty hard to make ends [meet]. I know my mother took in roomers, you know, to make both ends meet. I often wonder how she educated both me and my sister and managed, but it was tough.

MI: What changes occurred during World War II? Were women having more jobs? Did they start to work during World War II?...

JC: very few women worked, I mean especially married women.

MI: Could you tell me about the Korean War?

JC: I don't know too much about it.

MI: Could you tell me about some of the neighborhoods; do you know anything about the North End?

MI: No. I live in the North End now, but I don't know too much...because I only moved to the North End in 1951. It hasn't changed that much since I've been here - I haven't seen too much change in it.

MS: How about the East Side?

CONROY

JC: No, never had anything to do with the East Side.

MI: Is there anything historical on the East Side?

JC: Well, I know there's Stratford Avenue; Stratford Avenue used to be quite a nice street years ago. It had a lot of business there and they had a couple of movie houses. We used to go to Hippodrome; they were small movie houses. They're all gone. It's a funny thing, but the people who lived on this side of the town, with the bridge...gone and more or less stayed on this side, you know what I mean?...If they bought a new house or a new rent, they stayed over on this side of the bridge. Whereas the people on the East Side, if they moved, they always moved on the other side of the bridge, I don't know why. Maybe because, on account of transportation problems, because there wasn't too many cars then. I walked to school from the South End all the way up across the street there.

MI: Do you know anything about the East End?

MC: No.

MI: How about the West Side?

JC: You mean West End? Well, I don't know too much about the West End either. Then State Street was a very nice street; had all kinds of small businesses and they had a nice movie house there, the West End theater, and I used to bowl

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JC: out there in the bowling alley, up there by Bassick High School. That's pretty well all shot. The West End, on Colorado Avenue was highly populated by the French. St. Anthony's church - and all the French people lived there. They had a French priest and everything.

MI: Where did the Italians live - on which side of town...?
...I heard that ethnic groups lived lived in certain parts of the city.

MI: What church did you attend?

JC: St. Augustine's.

MI: What can you tell me that was good about Seaside Park?

JC: In fact, I lived all my life in Seaside Park; I was only three or four blocks from the park. We used to play ball and we used to go swimming; when I was smaller, all the mothers in the South End, because, as I say, the mothers never worked then - we used to go swimming by P.T. Barnum's monument. Between P. T. Barnum's monument and Howe's monument. All the people from the South End used to go - the mothers used to go down, and they used to carry regular umbrellas, you know - rain umbrellas because they didn't have them fancy ones then, and they'd sit there on the rocks, and we'd go in swimming and they'd sit with the rain umbrellas, well that's the only kind...And then we used to go

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JC: down there and play ball all the time because they had a lot of ball games and everything else.

MI: Could you tell me anything about Pleasure Beach?

JC: Pleasure Beach was a great amusement resort, and I lived in the South End and on Henry Street - you know where Henry Street is? Well, we used to get a boat there and you'd go down there - my mother and father would take me - we'd get a boat, not a big boat, not a big steamer; maybe hold about twelve or fourteen people. We'd get the boat and we'd go towards the harbor and we'd land at Pleasure Beach.

Pleasure Beach had a...they had all kinds of amusements.

They had a Pleasure Beach ballroom; it was a beautiful ballroom; we used to go over there to dances. And that was run in the summer. That was another thing; they had all the big bands come there, but then they also had the local bands; you'd go over there either stag or take your girlfriend or your boyfriend, but most of them went stag, you know. And it wasn't too expensive, maybe fifty cents. And of course the rides were only ten or fifteen cents.

MI: Nowadays they're a dollar something.

JC: They had the merry-go-round and the whip and then they also used to have some companies and some societies would have their outing over there - go over there and have like picnic and then you'd go on all the rides and everything. They had a big field where you...and then they had the penny

CONROY

JC: arcade...and that's a shame that Pleasure Beach was let down.

We used to go over there some Sunday nights when I was a teenager, and if you didn't go to the dance you'd just go over there and pass the time. So that's another thing that kids don't have now, you know. Of course you can go to Rye Beach, but it's a long way to travel, and expensive.

MI: Do you know anything about Beardsley Park?

JC: Yeah. Beardsley Park - in my day they didn't have thea zoo at all. Well, you could go swimming there before they built the Thruway or whatever. There was a sandy beach over there and you could go swimming. A lot of people that didn't like salt water - they had life guards up there and everything. And then they built that road going up there - they knocked out the sandy beach because you go swimming on the park side because I guess it was dangerous. And all it...was a picnic ground, and there was no zoo or nothing up there but the trees and the flowers; in fact a lot of people that got married used to go up there. And I went up a couple of times when I was in a wedding party and they had pictures taken up there by the flower house and the hothouse; it was quite a place to go to get your pictures taken. But I think it's better now with the zoo and everything; it's a good attraction, you know - take the kids. Well, I'd go up there myself and look at the animals.

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MI: Were movies and shows popular in the twenties and thirties?

JC: Oh, yeah, but I don't remember...you mean the names of the pictures and shows?

MI: Was it like a family thing?

JC: Oh, yeah. The Lyric theater used to have stage shows; that was up where Clifford House is now. And down below, where the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company is that was the Park theater. And they used to have plays; of course I told you they had Poli's Majestic, Palace, Globe, Warner Brothers over on State Street, the Plaza down there on Fairfield Avenue. So if you wanted to go to a show, if you couldn't get in one... Sunday nights when you went to those movies, if you didn't go early you'd have to wait in line all the way up Congress Street. I went to the movies two and three times a week.

MI: How much were the movies?

JC: Forty cents; you paid less if you sat up on the stairs. And the Palace theater held three or four thousand people. It was packed on Sunday nights...big, long lines. If you couldn't get in the Palace and a good picture was playing there you went across to the Majestic or you went to the Globe, you know. The Globe had a vaudeville act, a good vaudeville act. And it was cheap. Of course we didn't make much money. When I went to work I only made twenty-twenty-five dollars a week. When I used to tell the girls that worked for me - this is

JC: later on, years, I'd tell them what I told you - about . all the shows and all the places we had to go, and I used to go to New York to the ball games; I went to Madison Square Garden - I wasn't married or anything and I said I made twenty-five dollars a week. They looked at me like I was crazy! How could you do it? You used to bowl...for thirty cents in a bowling alley. But you only made twenty-five dollars. And we used to go down to the park there where... they have the hot dog stands - ten cents for a hot dog, fifteen cents for a hot dog. But you only made twenty-five dollars, twenty dollars. When I was in high school we used to walk out to the circus grounds; my father would give me twenty-five cents and then we'd walk uptown and buy a hot dog.

And I used to go to Newfield Park, where they used to have the Eastern League - that was a class A league; some of the players went to the big leagues, and I was always great for sports. Well, my father gave me twenty-five cents on Sunday; we went with three or four other kids, it costs me fifteen cents to get into the ball game. We had ten cents left. If we walked over - you know where Newfield Park is? We would walk from the South End both ways, we had ten

JC: cents to buy something, and if we took the bus - the General Electric bus, we used to take, and we paid five cents on the bus one way and five cents on the bus the other way, so you took the bus and you didn't get anything to eat - couldn't buy no hot dog or soda or anything else, but it sounds amazing - you figure what can you go on twenty-five cents on now - you can't buy nothing; you can't even get on a bus. We'd walk, and sometimes we'd hitch a ride, plus they had trolley cars in my day; trolley cars ran down Park Avenue to Seaside Park. You know, all the times I went to school I never can remember school closed down on account of snowstorms or anything, because the trolley cars always had attachments in front, when the trolley cars used to come down and push the snow. But we never rode on the trolley car much; we walked, and of course the trolley cars had a pole - you've seen them. ...some of the kids were fresh. The trolley car would stop; they'd run and they'd pull it - they pulled the thing down so it couldn't start. And he'd have to get out and come back and push - it was a pulley that went on a wire with the electricity

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JC: And every year one of the big treats in Bridgeport was to go to Savin Rock; Savin Rock was a tremendous amusement park - Pleasure Beach was only peanuts compared...oh, they had several roller coasters - all kinds of rides and everything. My father used to take us for the day on a trolley car to Savin Rock - open air trolley car and all the cars would be so crowded that the men would have to stand on the running board and when we came out of Savin Rock we always wanted to try to get in the first seat right in back of the motorman, and you'd go and you'd get that wind and everything; it was quite a ride, you know. That's almost up in New Haven - you know where Savin Rock is, yeah. But everybody used to go there; we only went once a year, maybe once in a while, if you were affluent you went twice, because people couldn't afford... the rides were only ten cents, fifteen cents...my father and mother used to take us up there every year, and then we had a steamboat that used to go to New York - the Richard Peck. And my mother used to take us down there. You'd get the boat the same place where you get the Port Jefferson boat and that would go down past Norwalk and you'd get down to New York

CONROY

JC: and you could come back on the boat or you could stay
overover.

MI: How much did the ferry cost?

JC: I forget - not much - probably about fifty cents or
seventy-five cents at the most to go to New York.

So, looking back, it wasn't too bad a life; we had all
these things that they don't have now, yeah.

MI: O.K. Thank you for letting me interview you.

Interview by: Monette Irby

Interview with: Joseph Conroy

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