

Brownie Johnson-Interviewed By Carlene Spence-6-20-84

CARLENE SPENCE: -- I'm interviewing Brownie L. Johnson at Baldwin Senior Center. May I ask you your name?

BROWNIE JOHNSON: Brownie L. Johnson.

CS: How old are you?

BR: Sixty-seven.

CS: OK. Tell me a little bit about your childhood, your family. Number of children in family, and --

BR: I have one son, [Rhett?], who's 29 years old. I'm a divorcée. I'm a retired teacher.

CS: Number of parents. Are your parents originally from Bridgeport?

BR: No, my parents are originally from Georgia.

CS: Types of jobs your parents had?

BR: My mother was a housewife, my father was a butcher.

CS: Level of high-- education completed?

BR: My father went through the twelfth grade, and my mother went through the twelfth grade.

CS: And you?

BR: I have a master's in -- [20 hours?] (inaudible) on my master's.

CS: Did you, what's the name of your college [01:00] that you went to?

BR: I went to Albany State College in Albany, Georgia; Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia; New York University in New York; the University of Oslo in Oslo, Norway.

CS: Oh, wait a s-- OK.

BR: University of Bridgeport, and Southern Connecticut College.

CS: OK, thank you.

(break in audio)

CS: Do you remember anything about the Depression?

BR: I remember the Depression, I remember that we had very little, and people didn't have the bare necessities. And there were a lot of people without work and without food.

CS: What about the neighborhood you grew up in, how was that?

BR: I grew up in a small rural town, about 8,000. [02:00] I lived with my grandfather, he was a letter-carrier. And we didn't have too much, but we lived comfortable.

CS: At what age did you move to Bridgeport?

BR: I moved to Bridgeport when I was 45 years old.

CS: Where in Bridgeport did you live? The East End, or...

BR: Well, I really lived in Stratford [all?] the time. I lived in Success Park, and now I live on McKinley Avenue.

CS: What was the relationship between you and your neighbors?

BR: I had very good relationships with my neighbors. I had two [women?] on one side, and Negroes on the other. We got along very well.

CS: What type of religion are you?

BR: What type of religion?

CS: Mm-hmm.

BR: Protestant. Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

CS: As a teenager, what were some of the things you did for fun in Bridgeport? [03:00]

BR: I went to Seaside Park and Beardsley Park, and went to the Y, and played neighborhood games.

CS: Like, such as?

BR: Basketball, baseball, and running games.

CS: What were certain, some of the places that had entertainment?

BR: Pleasure Beach. The Pleasure Beach was about the only place that I went, other than the two parks, Seaside and Beardsley Park.

CS: Tell us a little bit about the Depression years, and what it was like living in it.

BR: Well, we -- when, as much as I can remember about the Depression, we had very little. I mean, the very bare necessities in food and in clothing. We owned our own home so we didn't have a problem there, [04:00] but we couldn't go to the movies, picnics and things that we used to enjoy before the Depression, we couldn't do that. There was just a scarcity of everything.

CS: What were your feelings about war, World War II, since it came right after the Depression?

BR: Well, I'm against all wars; I think things can be settled amicably without going to war. And certainly, for every war you lose so many young men, which has an adverse effect on the lives of so many women and children, so the war years were very sad years.

CS: Do y--

BR: As far as I can remember.

CS: Do you remember anything about the bread and soup line?

BR: No. I don't know them; we never had bread and soup lines where I lived.

CS: Did your [05:00] family or you lose jobs during the d-- during World War II?

BR: Lose jobs? No. My, as I said, my grandfather was a letter-carrier and his job was [protected?]. And I had a good job, I was an adjudicator working in an insurance company during the war.

CS: Anyone in your family went to war?

BR: Yes, I had two nephews. One was in the Air Force, and one was in the Marines.

CS: Did you have food rationing?

BR: Yes. We had food rationing.

CS: What was it like?

BR: Well, you had a card, and you would take it to the store and you got -- they allot, they'd specify the number of people that was in your family. I can remember sugar rationing and shoe rationing very well.

CS: How did it [affect?] you and your family?

BR: Well, [06:00] truly it didn't affect us too much because there was about four of us in the family, and the rationing was adequate for us so we didn't have any problems with that.

CS: At what age did you get married?

BR: When I was 37.

CS: Your husband's still living?

BR: Yes.

CS: After World War II, what changes took place in Bridgeport?

BR: Well, I think that more people had work that made good money during the war years. A lot of them were able to buy homes and to live a little bit more comfortable than they had previous to the war.

CS: How did the Korean conflict affect you?

BR: Well, I had a nephew that was in Korea, and we worried quite a bit about him. And even now he still has some of the scars of the war, emotionally and physically. [07:00]

CS: What was it like being black in Bridgeport at that time?

BR: Well, blacks, some opportunities were opening up to blacks because the scarcity of men that had -- the [elder were?], young men had gone to war. There was quite a bit of prejudice in Bridgeport, in housing, and very few teachers were employed in the Bridgeport system. And very few very good jobs were open to Negroes at this time.

CS: What's -- at your school, you weren't schooled here, right?

BR: No, I just went to University of Bridgeport after I came here.

CS: Was there segregation in the university?

BR: No.

CS: At, were churches segregated then?

BR: Not really, [08:00] just Negroes went to Negro churches in the (inaudible). A few Negroes went to Catholic churches, and then they had their own churches. But I can't say if that was more by choice than by regular (inaudible) [occasion?].

CS: What about the neighborhoods and the jobs?

BR: Well, the neighborhoods that I have lived in were integrated. I lived in -- when I lived in Success Park it was integrated, and where I live now is an integrated neighborhood. And jobs have opened up. Negroes, after the '60s, Negroes were able to get a lot of jobs that, before, they hadn't been (inaudible).

CS: Did you teach in Bridgeport?

BR: Yes, I taught here.

CS: What was it like being a teacher in Bridgeport, and what school did you teach at?

BR: I taught at Waltersville School, and I taught at Whittier School. Well, [09:00] the schools that I taught in were predominantly black and Spanish-speaking children, and there weren't many black teachers but I got along all right, I had nice principals.

CS: Were you ever discriminated against?

BR: No.

CS: Being black, and -- were you looked up to, were you admired by other blacks?

BR: Well, I think there was a certain amount of pride in black, knowing that you were a teacher, because Bridgeport had so few black teachers.

CS: Do you [like?] the way Bridgeport has deteriorated over the years?

BR: No I don't. I think it's a loss of pride, when you go down to some parts of the city or parts of the South End and East End, I think, are, you have [the most?] deterioration. [09:59] The lack of community pride is evidenced, the lack of police, adequate police protection for the merchants

that have stores in those areas, and lack of jobs and recreational activities for young people.

CS: How do you compare the blacks of today in Bridgeport to those back then? What are some of the differences between --

BR: Well, blacks definitely have better jobs, they have -- not adequate housing, but more blacks own houses. The schools are not completely desegregated but there are more black teachers, and there are a few black principals. That's more than what we've ever had in Bridgeport.

CS: What about the, do you like the way the black kids now are acting?

BR: No, [11:00] I, for the most part, the black children waste their time. They don't seem to be motivated, I don't know whether it's because of the -- it's the lack of supervision in the black families or what, but how young blacks don't take advantage of the educational opportunities that Bridgeport affords them.

CS: What's some advice you'd give to the younger people of Bridgeport today? (inaudible) black?

BR: So, to stay in school. And when you go in school, listen to your teachers, get your work, and strive for excellence. And that's it.

CS: Thank you very much.

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