

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

This project is a study of the changes in Bridgeport neighborhoods from the viewpoint of selected Black residents during the historical periods of World War I, the Depression, World War II, and the 1960's.

By means of interviews, we have investigated the social and economic effects of each period on Black Bridgeporters. All persons interviewed have resided in Bridgeport during at least three of the targeted periods. We attempted to explore how their families, friends, and neighbors were affected during those turbulent times. We discovered the changes that occurred on their jobs, in their neighborhoods and in the city as a whole.

This kit contains a transcript and a tape recording of the interview along with suggested activities that are best suited for grades 5-8 and adaptable for high school students.

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PERSONAL DATA

Lucille White Bish

2060 North Avenue, Bridgeport

Born: Anderson, S. C. to Bennie and Ira Heard White

Spouse: George W. Bish

Children: Lucille, Imogene, George, and Deborah

Education: High School Graduate - Stratford High School

Employment: City of Bridgeport, Dinan Center

Travel: Continental United States

Church: First Baptist of Stratford

Organizations: NAACP  
National Council of Negro Women  
American Legion Auxiliary

PERSONAL DATA

George W. Bish

2060 North Avenue, Bridgeport

Born: July 27, 1918 to Alexander Wilson and Ella Spelman Bish

Spouse: Lucille White Bish

Children: Lucille, Imogene, George, and Deborah

Education: 12th Grade - State Trade School

Employment: Tysika's Garage

Travel: Continental United States

Military Service: U. S. Army

Church: Bethel A. M. E.

Organizations: NAACP  
American Legion  
Council of Churches  
Eldorado Club

BISH

Judson: Mr. Bish, let's begin with your early childhood. Can you tell me anything about it? You were born here in Bridgeport?

George Bish: I was born here. You want the date?

FJ: If you want to give it. Not necessarily.

GB: I was born in Bridgeport during World War I.

FJ: Where did you live at that time during your early childhood here?

GB: In the north end, Marion Street off of Lindley Street.

FJ: What about your schooling?

GB: I first started school in Stratford, in Honeyspot. Then, from Honeyspot I went to Franklin School in Stratford on Barnum Avenue. Then from there we came to Waltersville School in Bridgeport and then to Lincoln. I put some time at Harding and then switched over and went to trade school -- state trade.

FJ: You mentioned three schools that are in Bridgeport that I can think of. Waltersville -- Is that the same Waltersville that we have now?

GB: Yes.

FJ: In the same place?

GB: The same place.

FJ: What about Harding?

GB: We went to Harding on a co-operative course; that is, you took two subjects in Harding, English and math. Then the rest of the day we had to go to state trade school on the corner of Kossuth and street. It's now Bullard-Haven; but, then it was called state trade school.

FJ: But the street names that you're saying, that was in a different location.

GB: Yes. We had to walk from Harding down to state trade school, to Kossuth Street.

FJ: So, you walked from Harding down to Kossuth Street.

GB: That's right. Five days a week. And if it rained, we'd have to go to school on Saturday.

FJ: You'd have to make up days you missed during the week?

GB: You'd have to make up days you missed during the week. So, if it was good and clear, we went to school five days a week like the rest of the kids. And then if it rained, and we had a day off, we had to make it up on Saturday. They only gave you so much time to get from Harding to trade school. They are a long distance apart; so half the time you were hop, skip and jumping or halfways running. But, that's the only time because at that time trade school was long on trade and short on related subjects. Then, you had to put in another year on account of those related subjects. Actually, you went to trade school for five years.

FJ: Oh; where the other kids went four years.

GB: We had to go five years by them doing it that way.

FJ: What kinds of things did they offer? What did you take?

GB: I'd taken up concrete plastering and part of that [included] carpentry. They also had foundry and auto and carpentry and drafting and all the other subjects that they teach now.

FJ: You mentioned foundry. What is that?

GB: Foundry is where you melt the iron ore with other metal and pour it in a casting, a mold.

FJ: The school that you mentioned that you had to walk down to is now Kolbe Alternative. Do you know when they moved the state trade school to Bullard-Haven's new building?

GB: No, I don't know.

FJ: Mrs. Bish, when did you come here? Had you already started school?

Lucille Bish: Yes. I started school in Youngstown, Ohio in the primary grade. I went two years there. I came to Bridgeport. I lived on French Street here in Bridgeport, off of North Avenue, which I-95 has taken that part.

FJ: So, French Street is no longer in existence?

LB: Yes, it is. The other end. Part of it is -- from Main Street over to I-95. Then, we moved to Stratford; and all my schooling, grade school through high school, was in Stratford. I graduated from Stratford High.

FJ: Was Stratford High still in the location where it was then?

LB: Yes. Only they added on to it.

FJ: Mr. Bish, were there many Blacks in the school where you went.

GB: Yes. There were quite a few. They were in the foundry, concrete or cement, and in auto. That's where the majority of the Black kids were.

FJ: Did they have what you'd call a college-bound program like they do now?

LB: They had painting and decorating in this school at Bullard-Haven.

FJ: Could people from Stratford go to this school?

GB: Anybody in the neighborhood. But, you had to get there the best way you could because they didn't send a school bus.

[Laughter] Walking, hopping and the trolley!

FJ: Did they have any other programs other than trade programs that Blacks were included in?

LB: That's all there was.

GB: That's it. It was just a trade school.

FJ: What about preparing for college?

GB: You couldn't go to college on those degrees. That's why I had to go to -- It's now the University of Bridgeport. -- Junior College of Bridgeport.

LB: It was down on Fairfield Avenue. That's where Bridgeport University started from. It expanded down into Seaside Park. The way I understand it, Cartwright was the first professor down there. And the school has been expanding ever since; but, it started from Fairfield Avenue -- a great big, old mansion.

FJ: If some Black kid wanted to go to college, how could he go there?

GB: If their parents had money. That's the only way I know of getting there.

FJ: Could they participate in the college preparatory program in school?

GB: In trade school there wasn't any. In junior college, yes.

LB: In Stratford High you could. You had college preparatory courses in regular high school, but not in the trade school.

FJ: So, everybody at Harding wasn't going to trade school?

LB: No, no.

FJ: Were there Blacks in the college "prep" [courses ]

LB: In Stratford there was.

GB: I don't quite remember; I couldn't tell you that off-hand. But, I know no student, white or Black, could go to college right from trade school because he wasn't prepared for it.

FJ: I want to talk about your neighborhood. Was the neighborhood you lived in predominantly Black or a mixture?

GB: It was a mixture.

FJ: What about yours on French Street?

LB: On French Street there was a lot of white folks there.

FJ: Was there any area where Blacks sort of located unto themselves, a Black neighborhood?

GB: Not as you would call it. Mostly, it was in the south end. But, the north end, the east side and the east end were all integrated.

FJ: Only in the south end you could find a [Black] neighborhood.

LB: They were mixed down there, too.

FJ: They were really mixed there, too?

GB: Yes. But, it's not like the east end now, predominantly Black. It was all mixed, fifty per cent white and fifty per cent Black. In fact, at one time there was more white than there were Black.

LB: I would say the south end wasn't like that [predominantly Black] until they built those projects. The city was mostly integrated except along here, I would say.

FJ: What kind of activities did you have when you were not in school?

GB: Sports. Trade school only had a basketball team and that's all. All my other sports came outside of the school. We formed our own team -- the Young Collegiate Juniors. Today, I was telling you I went to the football game to see my grandson and I met my

old coach, George Brown.

FJ: Was it like Little League is now?

GB: Nobody took us under their wing. We had to form it ourselves and pay our own expenses.

FJ: But, you did have an adult coaching you?

GB: George Brown was probably the oldest of the group and probably we had some that were older than he that were playing football.

LB: That was outside of school. That wasn't with the school.

FJ: What was the age of those boys that were doing that?

GB: About fifteen to twenty-one.

FJ: So you formed your own league.

GB: We formed our own league and played in Stratford and Norwalk. We played football in Stratford where the town fair is. That used to be an open field. We played in the north end where the boys and girls' club is. We played on that field. Central wasn't up there then. It was all wooded area. We played all over the stumps and rocks.

FJ: What did the girls do while the boys played football -- for recreation?

LB: I lived in Stratford.

FJ: What did girls do there?

LB: Nothing.

FJ: There were no activities for them to do, just chores maybe.

GB: Chores and go to church on Sunday.

LB: There weren't many Black kids in Stratford really. We all were scattered far apart.

FJ: But, you came together in the church, didn't you?

LB: Yes.

FJ: Did it have anything?

LB: We had the B.Y.P.U., Sunday school -- regular church.

FJ: There was nothing --

LB: Constructive, no.

GB: The same thing here, too. There wasn't enough Blacks in our neighborhood to make a Black unity. It was always, if we didn't include the white boys, there wasn't a team.

FJ: So, the team that you're talking about was integrated?

GB: Yes. It was integrated.

LB: We'd get together in the evening and play baseball or skate up and down the street or something like that.

FJ: That's what I'm talking about.

LB: Anything like a social -- it wasn't that much, unless you came to the "Y" in Bridgeport.

GB: We had a Black "Y".

FJ: Where was that?

GB: On Beech Street. It's now the Polish Veterans or something.

FJ: Phyllis Wheatley "Y" for Blacks. Girls and boys?

GB: Girls and boys.

LB: In later years they merged with the white "Y" when they built the one up here on Golden Hill Street. And that's when the Black disappeared. The "Y" after years went down. It was a Black "Y".

GB: All our outside social life was all integrated.

LB: Mine wasn't, though.

GB: All our sports. We made our own toys, scooters, skateboards

and roller hoop -- where you put a wire on a steel hoop and roll it down the street. We had our own wagons.

FJ: Tell me about your un-integrated social activities. You did skating. Did you do any of those things that he's talking about?

LB: Once in a while we came into town to the "Y".

FJ: That wasn't anything regular.

LB: No. I'm talking about The Phyllis Wheatley Branch and then they moved from Beech Street up on Barnum and Central Avenue. They used to have dances and skating there. We used to go there and different church activities. That was about it. The N.A.A.C.P. Junior. I used to work in the N.A.A.C.P. a lot.

FJ: Did you? They had a youth group at that time?

LB: No. We just worked with the adults.

FJ: Everybody worked together.

LB: There weren't that many adults that worked. So, somebody had to pitch in and do it.

FJ: So the youngsters did it. Good! They need to do that now! What about your holidays? How did you celebrate them during your childhood? Was Christmas something?

GB: Christmas was awfully sad at our house. My father died two days before Christmas. We had to take down the tree. My mother would feel it about that time of year. So, there wasn't any Christmas at our house. We didn't even have a tree. If we did, we got one of those small, decorated trees, about eight or ten inches high with the bulbs and whatnot and stuck that up, just to have some spirit in there.

FJ: What about you?

LB: We had Christams. It wasn't very much; but, we celebrated Christmas.

FJ: Not a lot of gifts?

LB: No. We had no money. It was during the Depression era.

FJ: Did you have decorations, a tree, dinner?

LB: We had Christmas dinner. If there were plenty of woods out there, we had a tree. We made our own decorations.

GB: We didn't even have that.

FJ: Because of your father's dying. I guess it brought back the [memories].

GB: And it does right now.

FJ: What about Easter? Did you celebrate Easter particularly?

LB: An Easter egg hunt.

FJ: At the church?

LB: No; we used to have it ourselves. We had a week out of school then. That's when we had our spring vacation was Easter week. We used to get together. We'd all bring our eggs.

FJ: You say this is during the Depression. So, where did kids get eggs?

GB: You brought your own. You grew your own or raised your own. [Laughter]

FJ: So, you had chickens in your backyard. What else did you grow back there in the backyard?

LB: Every vegetable there is on the market. We had a grape arbor and raspberries, blackberries, strawberries; an old apple tree; corn, tomatoes, okra, collard greens, turnip greens, potatoes, carrots, celery, onions.

FJ: You were in the north end. Did you have all those things growing, too?

GB: No. We lived in Stratford then, too. We lived part of the Depression in Stratford and part of the Depression in Bridgeport. And while we were in Stratford we had chickens and a garden.

FJ: So, you came to the Easter egg hunt, too?

GB: No. I didn't even know that existed down in that part. But, making the wagons, we lived on Hollister Street in Stratford in what they called the Heights. There were three hills, one, two and three. If you've ever been up that street, you know what I'm talking about. We used to make our own wagons and get up the top of the hill and run like the devil and sit in it -- two or three of us -- and end up on Bruce Avenue because we'd roll down one hill and go on level and go on down the other hill. In front of the house, there wasn't any build up in the neighborhood. The nearest thing on Stratford Avenue was St. Michael's Cemetery, and over that was the sound. We used to watch the ships go by. Now the railroad tracks.

LB: We had the garden and chickens then. But, even after the Depression my father was working -- He used to do odd jobs down at Sterling Park. You know where Sterling Park is in Stratford.

FJ: Where is it?

LB: You know Sterling House?

FJ: Yes.

LB: There used to be a park there. Old lady Sterling left that land for a community park for the people of Stratford. I graduated in Sterling Park. We had our graduation ceremonies there.

FJ: I walked back there for the first time a few months ago and it's still very beautiful back there.

LB: Has it still got the flower beds?

FJ: I'm not sure it's like it used to be.

LB: No; because I-95 took some of it.

FJ: Both of you lived in Stratford. But, you didn't know her at that time?

GB: No.

FJ: You were pretty young at that time, weren't you. Did you have enough to eat during the Depression time?

GB: No.

LB: We did.

FJ: Because you had your own farm.

GB: Once we moved back to Bridgeport, there wasn't any space to garden. While we were in Stratford we were set up fairly well. Meals were skimpy and far apart. And what people would give us -- mostly beans. We had beans fried, boiled, any way you could fix them.

FJ: Why'd you move back?

GB: My mother wanted to move back to Walters Street. And that's when we changed schools. I couldn't tell you why.

FJ: It was some personal reason for her? Yes. You did have enough to eat. What about your parents' employment during that time, relatives and friends? What kind of work did they do?

GB: My mother did housework and worked as a laundress.

FJ: During the Depression?

GB: During the Depression.

LB: With me? My mother never worked.

FJ: Did your father find work during the Depression?

LB: Like I said he worked down at Sterling Park.

FJ: Oh, yes, as the gardener.

LB: He used to work down there and he used to work for the town of Stratford itself, helping to build the dikes down off Lordship Boulevard. W.P.A. My mother never worked. There was eight of us in the family.

FJ: Did you have any other relatives that were adults around you?

LB: My aunt.

FJ: What kind of work did they do?

LB: My aunt did a little bit of day's work. Bessie -- you know my aunt, the old lady Bessie Davis that lived on Johnson Court?

FJ: Is she?

LB: She was. And then I had two uncles and brothers.

FJ: Did they live here?

LB: Yes.

FJ: Were they all able to find work during this time?

LB: At the time, they worked in the aluminum shop. Alcoa Aluminum was here in Bridgeport. They worked there. My other uncle worked in the brass shop.

FJ: The brass shop was here during the Depression?

GB: Yes. They had two branches.

LB: Alcoa Aluminum -- they worked. I had a cousin who was in the shop, too. His name was Bob; Mack worked. That's about it for family that was working. anything much. They did hard work.

FJ: For little money.

JB: For nothing.

FJ: I guess there was some money.

LB: They had a job [when] so many were without one.

GB: When I finished trade school and went out on construction, they were only paying us about fifteen cents an hour.

FJ: When was this? Do you remember the year?

GB: I forget.

LB: In the thirties. And you'd work all day long humping garbage for a dollar a day.

GB: We mixed [cement] in a long tub, about as long as this table, with a hole: so many shovels of cement, so many shovels of sand and so many shovels of lime. And you mix all this up good in consistency that you can use on a trowel; put it in a hod on your shoulder so you can walk up a ladder. And you only got about fifteen cents an hour.

[end of side one, tape one]

FJ: Carry bricks and cement up a ladder?

GB: The hod was Y-shaped; it was about that high on the side and back. It had a bottom. The front was open. And you filled that full of concrete and carried that on a shoulder, your right or left, and you walked up a ladder. It had a long handle on it. Then, if they wanted brick, you put the brick in the same hod. And you try to climb a ladder with it. That was all for fifteen cents a day. Then, we had an apprenticeship for about four years before you got your release to go and work out in the open field.

LB: What were you going to say?

FJ: I wanted to ask one more question about the Depression. Do you

have any special recollections about it that stand out in your mind?

LB: As I look back on the Depression then, it was more or less the same as it is right now. They had aids for people. Now they have the A.B.C.D. for fuel and all like that. During the Depression these stations for food and milk. Out there in Stratford they only had it once and they discarded it. There was nobody out there to use it.

GB: In Bridgeport they used to come around in a truck and bring a box. We used to call it having boxes. If any of your parents went on aid, they'd give them a box. They'd give them five pounds of beans or ten pounds of beans, and some dried prunes or some soup or whatever it was that they could buy the most of. Bags of oranges or whatever the city feels like giving you, you had that box. And then the next week you turned that box in and you got another box.

FJ: So that's how you survived during the Depression.

GB: But, my mother was stubborn not to get on the city aid.

LB: I wouldn't use that word stubborn.

GB: I would just use the word stubbhorn or too proud. I don't think proudness is what it is. It was stubbornness.

LB: Like I said, we raised a garden and my father worked and got money and we bought what [we could]. We canned, and canned and canned.

FJ: Can you think of any examples of people's ingenuity that enabled them to survive during this time?

GB: Well, you learned what money is. You learned what life is all

about -- how hard you had to make it.

LB: What did you mean by ingenuity?

FJ: Something special that someone thought of just to try to get by during that time. You had your garden.

LB: Some people sometimes made bread and sold it.

FJ: Yes. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about.

LB: Taking in laundry. A lot of people took in washing and did ironing for different people. That's the way they earned money. We had vegetables in the garden and we sold them. The churches would give to the people. The churches used to have a "picnic" every Saturday. They would buy hot dogs and things. And sell them for ten cents. That's the way the church raised money.

FJ: How do you think people's spirits were during this time? Do you think they let the idea of the Depression get them down?

LB: I think so.

GB: I would say some did, and some didn't. Some became very strong after that; but, they never let anything get them down. They lived with it. They did no complaining; they did what they had to do to survive.

LB: The same thing now. You live with it or you don't. We're not used to all the fancy frills. If you've got it, you've got it. If you don't --

GB: If you don't, you don't have it. We didn't have the "dope," or marijuana; we didn't have that stuff. You never had to be afraid to walk down the street at night or any time of night without being hit in the head. I could remember being a youngster and if the cop brings you home -- It wasn't too often that they'd bring you down to headquarters. The

neighborhood cop would bring you home after he had hit you with that stick. Then you got another beating when you got home.

FJ: What about medical care during the Depression?

GB: In the city of Bridgeport we had a blue card. We'd go down to the welfare building and we'd get free medical care. It was on Madison and Main. The welfare building now is in the Brass Company office. We used to go down there and come from Walters Street and walk up there. You'd show them the blue card you carried with you and you'd get free treatment. You had to wait. It was so crowded there -- one doctor and one nurse. And you had your medical treatment that way.

FJ: What about childbirth?

LB: At home.

FJ: Midwives?

LB: No; my mother had a doctor. Dr. James.

GB: My mother had a doctor. Dr. Bradley, a Black doctor.

FJ: They would come to the house.

LB: Yes. I don't know about midwives.

GB: Dr. Bradley delivered me, my kid-brother and my kid-sister.

FJ: At home.

GB: Yes. At home.

FJ: You say you were delivered by a Black doctor.

GB: Yes.

LB: Same here.

GB: My oldest sister and my oldest brother were born in New Rochelle.

FJ: I'm going to move from that to the World War II era unless there's something else you want to tell me about the Depression that stands out.

GB: No. I'm kind of glad it's gone.

FJ: All right. World War II -- where were you?

GB: World War II I was in the service.

FJ: Where were you?

LB: In Stratford.

FJ: Were you married by this time?

LB: No.

FJ: You participated. Did any of your other brothers participate?

GB: No.

FJ: What about your brothers?

LB: Three brothers.

FJ: What do you remember most about this period?

LB: D-Day.

FJ: What do you remember most about it?

LB: You mean the battles or anything like that?

FJ: Anything that stands out in your mind.

LB: I remember my brothers going into the service. It was the first time I had ever seen so many soldiers together out there in Stratford at the Army barracks out there. And D-Day was such a sad day. It will always [stick with me].

FJ: Were you in there when the war started or you went after it started?

GB: I can't hardly think of it.

FJ: Tell me about being there.

GB: I enlisted. But, many things in there happened to me so fast that I couldn't recall any one single instance that would stand out in my mind.

FJ: Anything that you want to tell me about is fine.

GB: One of the things that stands out in my mind that helped me out here in civilian life is some of the education I received in there. I did take up auto later on in years in state trade school. And it helped me to get into the Air Force. I used to work down there at the air field in Stratford. When they found that out, they pulled me out of the outfit, the three sixty-six and put me -- Though it was all under the Army -- into the air corps. I ended up in Langley Field. From Langley Field Hampton was just right there. They sent us to college to Hampton Institute [for radio engines study]. Then, later we went down to Tuskegee. There were two Black schools.

FJ: Were you in a Black company?

GB: Yes, with two white officers. We had ninety-nine men to a squadron.

FJ: Do you remember ever seeing any Black officers?

GB: We had one. But, he proved very ineffective because we were in the South. We were in Virginia. The white officers wouldn't even accept him in the officers club. And he couldn't mingle with them. They got rid of him because one day he was gone.

FJ: Does anyone know what happened to him?

GB: We had our own set of problems. Part of my training was in maneuvers that we had in the air base at Atlantic City and one in Newark. And we had to go on a run to these different air bases, always on call. That's how I got so far, seeing so many places. I'll tell you the truth about the whole thing. I liked the Army. I liked the physical work and physical

condition they kept you in; but, I wouldn't want to make it a thirty-year career.

FJ: Did any of your friends go into the service?

LB: The fellows, yes.

FJ: How did the war affect your family? Was there a shortage of food? There was rationing during this time.

GB: I don't know how it affected my family.

LB: They had coupon books or something, didn't they? Stamps?

FJ: Ration stamps.

LB: I don't think it affected our eating. For butter, maybe?

GB: Butter and sugar.

FJ: I'm thinking about your loved ones? Your friends and family that were part of the service -- did they go overseas?

LB: I had three brothers overseas.

FJ: Were you very concerned about them?

LB: Oh, yes. Especially, since you definitely never know when or what.

FJ: What about work during this time?

LB: That's when work began to pick up. And Bridgeport was supposed to be called the "industrial city" of the New England States. There were more factories here. You could come here and get a job. You could walk out of one door and into another one to get a job. It was booming town during the war.

FJ: How did that "boomingness" affect your family and your neighborhood?

LB: It increased the morale and the culture.

FJ: Because of more money?

LB: More money made the standard of living higher.

FJ: Were there more houses built during this time because of the money or were they so busy working?

LB: There still was a housing shortage.

FJ: Was there a move to another neighborhood during this time?

LB: No. Everybody stayed put.

FJ: The social standing changed because there was more money.

LB: Right. Living standards and everything.

FJ: Was there a change in race relations during this time?

LB: They're the same as they are now. [Laughs]

GB: I don't know how to answer that.. I don't think you have enough tape on there for me!

LB: It did change somewhat from high school to the war. People are a little better treated.

GB: I'm kind of sorry you asked that question.

LB: We are accepted more now that we were before.

FJ: I was really trying to see if you could remember how it was during World War II. Had Black neighborhoods expanded at this time as compared to what it was like in the Depression?

LB: Yes. People migrated here.

FJ: Many Blacks came in and the neighborhoods expanded?

GB: Yes.

FJ: Where did they live?

LB: Most of them had rooms. People would share their homes.

FJ: Did they live in a specific area like up on the north end?

LB: Anywhere they could find a room.

GB: Anywhere where people had turned their home into a rooming house.

FJ: There still was not any Black neighborhood as such during this

time?

LB: It was getting to be, near the east end around Smith Street and in that area. During the war that started the beginning of the really Black neighborhood because on Stratford Avenue it wasn't like it is now. You could walk up on Stratford Avenue and buy anything [you wanted]. You didn't have to go downtown for anything.

GB: You didn't have to go downtown at all. We raised our four children off of Stratford Avenue.

LB: They had children's stores, shoe stores, markets, a theater, hardware store, fish market, meat market, drugstore -- everything. When the Blacks started moving in, they moved out.

FJ: And Blacks started to move in during World War II.

GB: When I left, I knew ninety per cent of the Black people between Devon to Norwalk. When I came home, I didn't even know my next-door neighbors.

FJ: Because things had changed. What about after the war? What happened with work?

LB: It still was blooming.

FJ: What about neighborhoods? Had people pretty much settled in? Did they build homes after the war was over?

GB: Some were being built.

LB: Mostly, people purchased homes that were existing when the whites moved on.

FJ: Would you say they purchased homes primarily in the east end?

GB: It was on the east side and the south end where the Black people began to gather. The white people were making more money than the Blacks now. The spending was as it is now.

They were beginning to move out. And as they did, the Blacks moved in. But, it was still integrated.

FJ: It was still integrated; but, it was sort of more in one area [that Blacks lived].

LB: Yes. On the east end.

FJ: Had living conditions improved as a whole for everyone after the war?

GB: Yes, because there was more money around.

FJ: What did you do for social activities after the war?

LB: Go to the Ritz Ballroom and Pleasure Beach Ballroom.

FJ: Where is that?

LB: It doesn't exist any more.

GB: They all burned down.

FJ: Where were they?

LB: The Ritz Ballroom was down here on Fairfield Avenue. And Black Rock.

GB: And Pleasure Beach Ballroom was at Pleasure Beach.

LB: Pleasure Beach was an amusement park then. We used to go over to the amusement park.

FJ: It really was booming socially then.

LB: We'd have the Big Bands come in.

GB: Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

LB: [We'd] go to the parks and up to Savin Rock in West Haven.

FJ: What was happening up there?

LB: That was an amusement park where Jimmie's is now. They tore down Savin Rock and built condominiums up there.

GB: We used to bring the kids up to Savin Rock to go on all the rides.

LB: And Pleasure Beach was good.

FJ: Did you get married during this time?

LB: Yes. In 1945.

GB: I thought I'd forget that date; but, you are, more so than I.

LB: Next question. [Laughter]

FJ: How did you meet?

LB: My brother, Bascombe, brought him to the house. That's how we met. In Stratford we used to have the Rosemont Ballroom. We'd go down there Sunday nights. That's about all the recreation we had.

GB: The boys from Bridgeport used to go down there.

LB: People came from all over.

GB: But, your group went.

LB: Next question, please.

FJ: I want to hear about the courtship; she keeps trying to change [the subject]. Did you meet at the Rosemont Ballroom?

LB: No.

GB: I danced with her; but, she said I didn't. It's hardly likely a boy danced with a girl he didn't remember. Maybe she might forget; but, he won't forget.

LB: I used to go down to the Rosemont, not too often. I always went to Brooklyn, New York, Sundays.

GB: I went in more for sports.

LB: He came over a few times and started going to the Elks with Bascombe.

FJ: When did the Elks come in? When did they become popular as a social group?

GB: They were the only organization that gave a large dance and brought in the Big Name Bands. You could not go without an invitation.

LB: They became popular during the war when more people joined.

People had the money to join the organization. It was a small group in the beginning. Also, the Masons.

FJ: So, the Masons were established during World War II or after?

GB: They grew during the war.

FJ: Were there any other social or fraternal orders?

GB: There was the Oddfellows.

FJ: It was through these organizations that the Big Bands would come here and have [the dance] at the Rosemont?

GB: They would have it at the Ritz or Pleasure Beach Ballroom.

LB: The Rosemont was just a house.

FJ: But, the Ritz was really a big, beautiful place?

GB: Yes.

LB: With sunken floors [for dancing]. The American Legion was here.

GB: It started during World War I. When we came back, we joined.

FJ: Were there any social clubs for women? Did the ladies join the Elks?

LB: Yes. The daughters are in the Elks. And the Masons have Eastern Star.

FJ: Had Eastern Star started back then?

LB: Yes.

FJ: What about an American Legion? Did they have an auxilliary?

LB: Yes. It started from World War I veterans.

FJ: Did you have a church wedding?

LB: Yes.

FJ: Tell me about it.

LB: We got married in Bethel Church. We were supposed to get married in our church in Stratford; but, it got burned. It wasn't ready; so, we moved it down to Baptist in Bridgeport. We had the reception at the Rosemont.

FJ: How many bridesmaids did you have?

LB: Three.

FJ: Who was your maid of honor?

LB: My sister, Ernestine; my girlfriends, Grace and Catherine.

FJ: Catherine who?

LB: Grace Dowell and Catherine Harper.

FJ: Where did you live when you first got married?

LB: Seventy-eight Smith Street. I stayed with my sister. Then we moved downstairs to eighty-two Smith Street. And we stayed there until we moved two years ago to North Avenue.

FJ: So, all of your children were born from Smith Street. You have lots of memories there, I'm sure. I'm going to the sixties unless there's something else about World War II and right after that you want to tell me about.

LB: Blacks started to get more employment in different places. The only Black nurse -- the first one that I knew -- was Nellie Chase. She was from Florida and she used to live with me. And she got hired at St. Vincent's hospital.

FJ: Before that they didn't have any Black nurses?

LB: No Black nurses.

FJ: In the forties?

LB: In the forties. Most employment that Blacks would get there before the forties, before the war, was domestic work. But, other areas started opening up --

[end of side two, tape one]

FJ: You were telling me about employment in the and the factories. They could only get certain positions.

LB: Before the war, they got maintenance work. If you got in, they

hired you.

FJ: Was there some question as to whether you could get in?

LB: They just wouldn't hire you. You'd go there and apply and being Black, you just didn't get a job. That's all -- unless you wanted maintenance. But, to work on the line or office work -- no.

FJ: They wouldn't let you work on an assembly line!

LB: Not until during the war. All the places were the same. We got the hard, heavy, dirty work. There was nobody [Black] in an office. Down at Department Store downtown the best job you could get in there was running the elevator. Avco [Lycoming] wasn't here then. I don't know about Chance Vought. They didn't have any Black girls in the office. My sister, Barbara Clemons was the first Black girl in the office in Avco. And that's only been about twenty-seven years ago. We just did menial work -- nothing of any progress until after the war. And then, the N.A.A.C.P. had to get in and push for these things.

FJ: This is what I'm hearing. Nellie Chase came from Florida already trained. But, if you had to get training, you could not get it here. Therefore, there were no Black nurses because nobody would accept them. Is this right?

LB: If you wanted to be a nurse, you went to New York -- Harlem Hospital.

FJ: If you went to New York and you got your education and got back --

LB: You just got here; that's all. I don't know if they'd really applied or not until she came. She went on and tried and

they hired her.

FJ: It is sort of hard to imagine; somebody going to school and not coming back and applying.

LB: They stayed in New York. They didn't even come back. Many people left here and got jobs in Washington and they stayed. Why come back here? There was nothing here.

FJ: You were telling me about going into a profession like nursing. Suppose you wanted to go into something like teaching?

LB: There wasn't any. I never had a Black schoolteacher. Twelve years of schooling -- no Black teacher.

FJ: How did your teachers treat you?

LB: All right. That was just in class. We didn't participate in too many of the activities in school because we felt we weren't wanted.

FJ: But, you didn't incur any rudeness or any kind of demeaning activities because of your being Black. Were there many Black kids in your class?

LB: No. Only two of us graduating. So, you can imagine how many went to school.

FJ: Do you remember any kids who may have started out with you that probably dropped out of school?

LB: Some did, yes. A lot of the boys did.

FJ: Was it for any particular reason?

LB: I don't think so. They wanted money and to earn something for themselves. They had desires of independence.

FJ: But, they were not discouraged as such?

LB: No. I don't think so.

FJ: Did you feel that you were a part of things that were going on

around you?

LB: No.

FJ: Do you think that this feeling was perpetrated on purpose?

LB: No. I think it was just me.

FJ: Since we've backed up again, Mr. Bish, to going to school in Stratford, before I go to the sixties, could you tell me: did you have any Black teachers?

GB: No. I never had a Black teacher.

FJ: What was your relationship with the white teachers? Did they treat you fairly, you think?

GB: As a youngster you get one impression; and as an adult you see it differently than a child would going to school.

FJ: Tell me both.

GB: As an adult person, I really couldn't describe that. I know I didn't like school, didn't like certain subjects. English I never failed. Math I took because I always wanted to be an engineer. One teacher had an effect on me that went to school with my older sister. It turned out to be an English teacher. She sat on me.

FJ: She did what?

GB: She just "gave it to me" -- "You're going to do it or else!" That's how I never failed English. But, the rest of the teachers looked like they didn't want to be bothered with Blacks until I got to Waltersville School. In Stratford they had an "attitude."

FJ: As a child you thought this?

GB: Yes. They had an "attitude," especially when we went up to Franklin School. You weren't invited to participate in the

programs or things like that. How many lived in Stratford?

My brother and I and Russell --

LB: Just say a number, six or seven.

FJ: What was your relationship with those kids?

GB: As far as the kids were concerned, we got along fine. We played football, baseball, basketball, softball. Outside of that there wasn't any relationship. And as far as the teachers were concerned, it looked like they had an attitude of, "Sit in the back and get out of my sight."

FJ: Did all Blacks have to sit in the back of the class?

GB: No; but, that was the "attitude."

LB: Then, too, I felt that our parents never participated in school. They never went to the P.T.A. meeting or anything like that. I think that played an important part.

GB: I can tell you about that. My mother was supposed to help me with my homework. When she'd get home at six or seven at night, and we'd done the cooking, five minutes later she'd just plop right down at the table and fall asleep. That's how tired she was.

LB: We were talking about going to the school. Our parents didn't go to P.T.A. meetings; so, that meant that the teachers didn't have any interest in you.

GB: My mother couldn't go to school; she had to work to support us.

FJ: Do you feel that teachers' attitudes were any better when you came to Bridgeport?

GB: One, I can say, because I went to her funeral. The rest of them, as far as I'm concerned, --

FJ: "Down hill."

GB: "Down hill." [Laughter] You may laugh about that; but, it wasn't funny at that time.

FJ: During the sixties did you participate or were you aware of the social upheaval during this time? Did it have an impact on you? Were you aware of it in particular? The Martin Luther King movement? The busses?

GB: I was for all that "movement."

LB: You said the Martin Luther King movement?

FJ: I'm talking about the entire social movement of the sixties. I just pinpointed Martin Luther King to get you in the era.

GB: My opinion on that is that I always believed in Black businesses and supported Black business and work with Black business whether a candidate or not. If you see a man needs help going into business, support him as much as you can.

LB: During that era of Martin Luther King and during the sixties, I went along with his program a hundred per cent. When it came around to Carmichael Stokes [Stokely Carmichael] and that "Burn, baby, burn," I used to tell the kids that "I think that is the wrong approach, " because you're going to burn yourself outdoors and he won't feel the effects; you will. But, for a peaceful movement, I went along with it.

FJ: Did you participate in any of the movements or any of the activities to bring about social change?

GB: We worked with the N.A.A.C.P. years ago. We were trying to get into the Y.M.C.A. They wouldn't let us in. We had a Black woman come down.

[Tape interrupted]

FJ: Mr. Bish, according to your wife, you were talking about the

forties and we're on the sixties. What I need to know is about the participation and the activities that were going on in Bridgeport, if there were activities.

GB: I really couldn't answer that because I don't know too much about it.

FJ: Are there any activities particularly that you can remember?

LB: No, because I didn't participate in it. I supported anything that was going on.

FJ: Did Bridgeporters have anything that was going on at this time?

LB: Nothing definite.

FJ: What effect do you think the Civil Rights Movement had on Bridgeport?

GB: In Bridgeport, I don't know.

LB: Some improvement.

GB: There were a lot of Black people in positions that they never had before.

FJ: What about de-segregation of facilities?

GB: She's talking about going downstairs.

FJ: That's segregation.

GB: That all changed. You can go into any restaurant. One you could go into, they wouldn't hardly serve you.

LB: That was before the war.

FJ: Were there any changes in neighborhoods as a result of the Civil Rights Movement? Were there any areas that were just predominantly white and now Blacks could move in, in Bridgeport as a result of the sixties?

GB: Up in the north end, in that condominium up there, when I was service officer at the American Legion, we had a lot of

complaints. I don't know exactly what year it was. A Black tried to move in there. We put up a heck of a fight for it. I know that was after the war.

LB: In the fifties.

FJ: So, neighborhood changes had already occurred here. Was there any effect on the Black and white attitudes?

LB: I think it changed a lot of our attitudes. I think it was a great improvement, respectively.

FJ: Respect for each other?

LB: Right. They began to accept us as people.

GB: I'd like to put another view to that question. The only time I felt segregation was more or less in sports. When I swam on the swimming team for Boys' Club, some places would let me swim in the pool; other places wouldn't. And I'm on the swimming team of the Boys' Club of America. Torrington was one of them; Westport and Stamford. Now, they have these fellows on swim teams that can swim or play ball at all these places.

FJ: But, you're saying that when you were young, you could not. There's definitely been a change.

GB: Now, living conditions and what not, I couldn't tell you about.

LB: I was just going to say, the attitude of people in general the whites towards the Blacks and the Blacks towards the whites -- I think, has changed a lot. People realize that you've got to treat us as human beings.

FJ: What about government programs, subsidies, pilot programs -- was there any change in that as a result of the sixties?

LB: You mean rents and things like that?

FJ: Rents and subsidies. Did C.E.T.A. come during that time?  
Did A.B.C.D. come because of the sixties?

LB: In this area?

FJ: Yes. Do you think that that had an effect on poor people or Blacks?

LB: I think it did. It was good for the high school children, because a lot of them need summer jobs -- which was very good for them. It gave them an income. They learned self-reliance, how to take care of their independence from that. I feel that the C.E.T.A. program was a help and also to people who were handicapped.

FJ: What about the job-training

LB: I don't really know too much about on-the-job training. I don't think it proved out too well.

FJ: Is there anything else about the sixties that stands out?  
I'm going to move to another era now.

LB: No.

FJ: I wanted to ask about the Viet Nam conflict. Did it have an effect on you and your family?

GB: I have a lot to say about it. I can say this: I wouldn't let my son go. He wanted to join the Marines. Being in service I've met the Marines and I know what they stand for and how they drill and what not and how they treat them and the attitude that they have. And any conflict that was started, they would be the first in the action like they are in Beirut or any other place. And I didn't believe that he should go into the Marines. He was more qualified to go into the Air Force because he had mechanical

training; but, not the Marines.

LB: You shouldn't say, "I wouldn't let him." He didn't pass the physical. He had to have an operation and after the operation they never bothered him.

FJ: There were no family or friends participating.

LB: A lot of high school kids that went to school with my daughter; a lot of those boys went over there. She married a fellow that was wounded over there. It was just a war that a lot of kids got messed up in.

GB: They should never have let it happen.

LB: My son missed it because he had to have an operation.

FJ: I've asked you all the questions I wanted to ask. Do you have anything in addition, that I didn't ask you about, that you would like to include in the interview?

LB: With this interview, the kids who have studied the colonial days, and the Pilgrim days, can see how we came up during that period of Depression. When they first came over, they had nothing. And with the Depression as compared to now [with some people].

FJ: We seem to be going back to the same stages.

LB: We're going around in a circle.

End of Interview