

## 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

Bessie E. McIntosh Frye

70 Evelyn Street, Stratford

Born: 1908--Jennings Ordinary, Virginia

Spouse: Bennie W. Frye

Children: Edward

Education: B. S. in Education, Virginia State

Profession: Teacher--11 years - Virginia  
27 years - Bridgeport, CT

Travel: United States and Canada

Church: First Baptist Church of Stratford

Organizations: Les Treize Business and Professional Club  
NAACP, Charter Member  
Afro-American Educators Association  
Frank Jacoby Committee, University of  
Bridgeport  
The Dunbar Lyceum, 1920-1925

Special Awards: Gov. Hiram Bingham Oratorical Contest  
Winner, 1925

"A Study of Bridgeport Neighborhoods:

A Black Perspective, 1900 -- Present"

Interview by: Frances Judson

Interview with: Bessie E. McIntosh Frye

Date: October 23, 1983

Judson: Mrs. Frye, could you tell us about your early childhood and your coming to Bridgeport?

Frye: Yes, I'll do that. You want to know when I came to this area, in other words, Bridgeport, because that's where most of the activity was.

FJ: When did you come to Stratford? You live in Stratford.

BF: Our family was here ahead of us. I came here with my mother and sisters and brothers in 1919. However, we had contacts with my relatives who were living here from the very beginning. I think they came about 1900.

FJ: Your roots in this area go back quite a few years.

BF: Yes. Now, even when we came here there were only twelve Black families in all of this area out here. In there were -- I couldn't say the number; but, I knew most of the families which weren't much more than about twenty. But somebody in Bridgeport could tell you more about that.

FJ: When you came here, your first place of living was in Stratford. Where did you live here?

BF: Fifteen seventy-four Stratford Avenue.

FJ: What did the neighborhood look like then?

BF: There just was a one-way trolley car track and enough room for the -- mostly they were horses and buggies. That was all that was there along that highway. I'm trying to think of anything outstanding. No. There was one store about two blocks this side of the town fair.

FJ: That was the neighborhood store, so to speak.

BF: That was the neighborhood store when we came here. Yes; I remember his name, John Bagiasarrian

FJ: Did you start school in Bridgeport?

BF: No. I walked country roads down South.

FJ: What grade were you in when you came here? You were in elementary school?

BF: Very much so. We didn't have a kindergarten down there. I guess you'd say the first grade because we had what you call a "primer." That was the only book we had -- a primer. I came here and I don't think I started in kindergarten because I was too far advanced. I'm not positive; but, they probably put me in second or third grade.

FJ: You started here in second or third grade and you finished school here?

BF: I finished high school here. And, of course, I went South to go to college.

FJ: What school did you finish?

BF: I spent one year at Winston-Salem Teachers' College.

FJ: I mean what high school.

BF: Oh; Stratford Center. I went to Honeyspot School first. Finally, they transferred us to Stratford Center School.

FJ: Was Stratford High here?

BF: Yes; I finished from Stratford High School.

FJ: Are the schools that you attended in Stratford still there?

BF: Honeyspot School has been re-built; but, that's where I first started. And Stratford Center School is still there.

FJ: Were there many Blacks in school with you?

BF: I can tell you who was in there with us. They belonged to the Black race but, they didn't look Black. One family.

FJ: One family of Blacks. What was the teacher-student relationship like?

BF: As far as I can remember, I had a very good relationship with her. I don't think I ever had any difficulty with any teacher even at Honeyspot nor high school. I went to Stratford Center, also, after I transferred from Honeyspot into Stratford Center School up there by the bank. I never had any difficulties with the teachers.

FJ: What about other students?

BF: I really didn't have too much with the students. I had one run-in with a student that I can recall, one white student. I think the reason for my not having difficulty is because my aunt and uncle had settled for so many years. And he was in business. He knew all of the businessmen in Stratford. He worked for them in a way because he had his own little business. Instead of having rubbish collections the way we do now, there were individuals -- I think he was the only one in Stratford when I came. -- that were collecting rubbish and garbage on his own. In that way, he knew all of the businessmen because he collected theirs every week. And he did individual homes. Being his niece, he felt that people accepted me, because I can't remember there were any times that I had trouble with a teacher in grammar school or high school.

FJ: Did you ever have any kind of interaction with children from the Bridgeport area?

BF: During those days? No; not that I know of.

FJ: What kind of social activities did you have when you were in school?

BF: You mean other than the time that I was spending in school?

FJ: What did you have to do?

BF: Activities: I played basketball with the Y.W.C.A. team in Bridgeport. I played soccer ball. That was in high school. And, basketball in high school, too. You mean during the school time?

FJ: Yes.

BF: I sang with the choir in high school. Being the only Black one there, I didn't have any problem. I was in the annual senior play, "The Mikado."

FJ: Did you have many personal friends?

BF: They were all my friends. Some were closer than others. To be honest about it, all of them were my friends. I can remember when they had class reception. What were they called?

FJ: Reunion?

BF: Yes. That's what I'm going to tell you. I wasn't going. I told my aunt and uncle that I wasn't going. There wasn't any other Black people there or any other dark children. One of the white girls in school father was a friend of my uncle's. Really, there wasn't too much prejudice around here at that time because they knew the few people that were here and worked somewhat together. They didn't have these big halls and big proms at that time. But, this man -- His name was Mr. Porter. And if I had my book, I could remember all of their names, his daughter and all. But, I don't have it right now. So, when they got ready he said, "Well, they can come to my house after graduation and have their party." I told my aunt and uncle that I wasn't going up there if there was a

party, and I had not planned to go; I did not want to go. But, he came on down to my uncle's house and said, "Now, we want Bessie to come to that party." I said, "I'm not going." I had never been to a party with a group of white people. He just saw my uncle and said, "Thomas, you just get her ready. And I'm coming to pick her up." That was when I was living on Stratford Avenue. I told my uncle Thomas that I didn't want to go. "They'd all be dancing and I'd be sitting up in corner." He said, "No. Mr. Porter's going to be here." I got ready and he came and picked me up and took me to the dance. The boys all danced with me and then they brought me back home.

[Laughter]

FJ: Did the Black kids have any dances or not, for themselves?

BF: No; we didn't have anything of our own, for the simple reason we didn't have any place to have them unless we did have them in our home. My uncle had a fairly big home. He had an eight room house with porches in the front and back.

FJ: This is your father's home?

BF: No, my uncle's, my aunt's husband. My father didn't come up here until we were big enough to take care of ourselves.

FJ: What kind of chores did you have to do?

BF: At home? When I was in school?

FJ: Chores, there and anywhere.

BF: I wasn't compelled to do too much. Fortunately, my uncle was able to have someone come in and do my aunt's heaviest work like the laundry. I never had to do any of that. I guess I had to wash the dishes and so forth. I guess as I grew up I assumed more responsibility of helping on the weekends to get



things cleared up for Sunday. But, really, no hard work. Nothing like going outside and having to do anything. And, as I said he had this lady come all the time and do my aunt's laundry. I'm sure she did the mopping of the floors because I didn't.

FJ: Maybe this is why you could spend time with basketball teams and soccer teams.

BF: Yes. And I even played with the Y.W.C.A. team in Bridgeport.

FJ: What about your celebration of holidays? How did you do it?

BF: We used to go places like Seaside Park, Pleasure Beach and Savin Rock. And to us that was a big deal. We would go on Sundays. In those days they didn't think you should go any place but to church. We used to walk all the way down Stratford Avenue. They used to have the nicest little ice cream parlors. We'd take Sunday walks and go down to the park and walk back and have ice cream or something like that. That was all the activity we had. There was a group of people going up to Savin Rock and we rode the open trolleys then. We'd ride up there and stay and play with the things they had up there.

FJ: You had amusement parks?

BF: Yes; it was an amusement park. It was beautiful. I guess they changed the name. It's not like it used to be. It's not

Did you see this big thing down here at the town fair? They had all kinds of things just like that sliding down yourself and all that for children; grown-ups, too. They had some kind of games they used to go and play like rolling a ball and if you hit a certain number or some kind of color,

you'd win something. It was good.

FJ: Good. The church did not have activities other than the regular service for little [children.]

BF: Yes. [But,] not like they do today. The biggest activities we would have, would be an annual dinner or three or four dinners a year. That would be on Thursdays when the people who worked in service like the maids and all. That would be their day off -- Thursday afternoons. But, then it didn't mean much to them because they all got together and came to church and prepared dinners. And all of the people they worked for would end up there that night to buy their dinners because the maids were out. [Laughter] That's what they did. Every Thursday they had dinner at the church. And the people who were off on those days would be the ones who would come there and prepare the dinners. Mostly they would be missionaries. We didn't have any club groups, only the missionary circles and the choirs. That was the way they spent their Thursdays off; and we raised money to help keep the church going. We had good church services.

FJ: Did the Sunday school have any programs and things like they do now?

BF: Yes. They would always have their Christmas parties and programs. Afterwards, they would go downstairs and give out something for Christmas and have a little refreshment to serve. At Easter time they would have their program and an Easter Egg Hunt. We didn't have that parking lot or anything then. They would have Sunday School picnics. And we'd go to either Savin Rock or Laurel Beach out in Milford. We hadn't formulated

these clubs that we had either. Our club is the oldest club in the church -- The Loyal Workers Club. The Missionaries -- that's different. It operated just like a regular service.

FJ: How did you celebrate Christmas, let's say, at home?

BF: We always had a tree; but, we didn't have electric lights on it. We used to sew red, green like little ribbons and we'd use those and go out and get some pine cones. We'd decorate with those. We didn't have too many, big, big gifts -- just things I guess we absolutely needed. That was Christmas for us. I never knew what a doll was. I never had a doll in my life, except sometimes, my aunt and my mother used to take those socks and would stuff the toes and tie that up to make the head. And they would put buttons on for the eyes and nose and mouth.

FJ: So, they'd make you a doll.

BF: That's the only way I ever had a doll, made out of a sock.

FJ: Oh!

BF: I'll be seventy-five in November.

FJ: Will you!

BF: Seventy-five years ago we didn't know what to think about all these new things these children have. My little niece next door -- She's nine. -- has enough to fill this whole entire room in there. And every year they empty it out and then the next year they have another truckload to go. That's they way they are. But, we didn't have that.

FJ: During this time you attended First Baptist that was right here in Stratford. Did everybody in your family belong to that church?

BF: Everybody in my family belonged to First Baptist. We grew up right there.

FJ: Were there many Bridgeporters who came from Bridgeport to that church?

BF: Yes; there were. The majority of the Black people who lived in Bridgeport came to the First Baptist Church in Stratford. On Sunday evenings if you didn't get there by seven you didn't get in. That's right. Most of them had just migrated from the South. They enjoyed their old-fashioned hymns and their old-fashioned ways of testifying and so forth. We enjoyed it. We always looked forward to it. The young people had B.Y.P.U. at six o'clock in the afternoon and then about seven thirty people would be coming in for church. And the church would always be packed from the front to the door. But, they lulled on. They didn't have all these different people coming in and singing and this activity breaking into it. We had the B.P.Y.U. and then we had the evening service. We had a good service. Everybody was glad to get there. Sometimes, there would be standing only.

FJ: Do you remember the minister?

BF: Yes. I remember all the ministers that served First Baptist Church, from the ones that came there in 1888. There weren't many. There were only twelve Black families in all of Stratford. I'm working on a history now.

FJ: The history of Stratford Baptist, First Baptist?

BF: Yes. From 1877 up until now. I wrote the first history of the church with the four men that gave the land that gave the money. And they built the church themselves. My uncle was one

of the founders of that church.

FJ: Where were you during World War I? Here?

BF: In Virginia. My oldest brother came back in a casket.

Your oldest brother was in World War I.

BF: He was the oldest one in the family. He died in

That was in 1918 and we came to Bridgeport in 1919. I know that's right because when they brought his body home we never even got the word because telephones were out of the question then. We didn't know anything about it until this man came to the door and told my father that Willie's corpse was at the railroad station in Crewe, Virginia. My mother had gone to work.

FJ: That was how you found out about it?

BF: We didn't know anything about it until then, although his wife had sent a telegram. They lived in New York. She had sent a telegram. We had no phones. And they didn't deliver the telegram. So, when we knew it, my mother was at work and my father was out there somewhere in the garden or what not, when the man came to tell us. And my father asked this man to go and bring the body home. That was it. He went and got my mother.

FJ: Is there anything else that sort of stands out in your mind about World War I?

BF: Yes, indeed. I had an uncle killed.

FJ: So, World War I has really had quite a traumatic effect on your family.

BF: I had an uncle go and I had two first cousins go, my father's nephews. They were all in the service the same time as my

brother.

FJ: Did you have enough food during that time?

BF: We always had enough food because my father had a big farm down there. We had food all through the year. And we'd go to town maybe once a week just to get a fresh loaf of bread. Gee, we thought that was "something wonderful." We always looked forward to that cheese and bread when my father would go to town which was about four or five miles from where we lived.

We didn't have any lavish foods or anything like that. Everything was raised right there on the farm. Molasses was made right there.

At night we used to sit out there. Somebody was helping my father make the molasses. We'd sit and stick our fingers in it. He'd say, "get out of the way." Well, you'd get out of it.

FJ: Did you hear from your loved ones who were in the service? Was there concern about them?

BF: My brother's wife heard from him more than we did. They didn't do much writing then. I didn't understand all of it then. My brother knew that he was going overseas. He came home from Camp Dix in New Jersey and said, "I came home because I think I'll be going there pretty soon. I think I was six years old. He came in and picked me up and put me on his knee and he asked me if I knew how to spell "many." "Do you know how to spell 'many'?" "How many teeth do you have?" And he said the word "many" and I spelled it. And I'd never been to a school in my life. That's the one thing I remember of him. He told ma, "I don't know when we'll

be leaving; but, we're supposed to leave." And that was the last time we saw him. When they brought his body home -- He died at Fort Dix; but, we didn't know it. -- they put his casket in the room downstairs. I got up on that casket and looked over there and started to talk to him. I didn't know what had happened. That's when mama and they were looking for me and they found me standing up on a stool looking over the casket edge. [Laughs] So, that's why I can remember those things so much because they were most unusual.

FJ: How did he die in Fort Dix?

BF: They were drilling him. That's where they got their training before they sent him overseas. It was very, very hot. He had gone to his sergeant and told him that he didn't feel good. He said, "I don't think I can do that today." They drilled and drilled and drilled and walked and walked on hikes and so on. He just told him, "You get on out there. You've got to." And that's where he fell out and that's where he died.

FJ: He was going overseas; but, he never got over there.

BF: No; he didn't get over there. He told them, "I don't think I can drill this morning; I'm too sick." He said, "You have to." And what they say you have to do, you have to. That was the end of him.

FJ: During World War I you came to Bridgeport.

BF: No. The war was over when we came.

FJ: Was there much difference in how people lived here?

BF: Oh, yes. It was different. The war was over when we came. Everybody lived far apart -- not too far apart.

[end of side one, tape one]

FJ: Did all of the Blacks that were in Stratford live right over here on Stratford Avenue?

BF: That's what I'm saying. It was on Stratford Avenue between here and the church. The one that was closest to the city line -- her name was Pauline Saunders. And on up this way there was another person named Jeffries. I don't know what her husband's name was. Mrs. Jeffries was well-known. She did belong to our church. Coming this way, the next neighbors [were] Maria Jefferson Robert Freeman and his family. Let's see Annabelle Johnson whose father was one of the founders of the church. He gave land and money, too. Joseph Chase was the first superintendent of our Sunday school. He lived in a little house that Courtney's has there. That was his homespot.

FJ: Where is that?

BF: Do you know where the little fish thing is there right outside the church. That was his property, Joseph Chase.

FJ: What kind of work did Blacks do after World War I. I know you said your uncle collected rubbish.

BF: He was doing that long before we came up here. So, he evidently was doing it before World War I. They came up here long before we did.

FJ: Were Blacks employed?

BF: Were they employed any other places? Most of them came up here to work for the white people on Academy Hill. Do you know where that is? Those people up there were the ones that wanted them to come. They wanted some of the servants. They



sent for them. Underneath the Episcopal Church up there was an underground tunnel up to Academy Hill. That's where all these supposedly big people were and wanted these servants to come. That's where they went under that tunnel to reach the top of the hill so the people knew where they were. It runs from Main Street from under that Catholic church up to Academy Hill -- the Underground Railroad.

FJ: Is that right! Do you think that living conditions for Blacks were good during this time?

BF: My uncle worked all his life. He did his service as a collector of their rubbish and so forth as the town does now. They didn't have any town service. So, he and the Freemans that lived on Stratford Avenue, too, each had their own little business. They did all the collecting.

FJ: I could tell that you lived quite well if your aunt could afford to have someone to come in

BF: Have you heard of Walter Noblin?

FJ: Yes.

BF: Well, Walter Noblin worked for my uncle when he came here.

FJ: But, did others live as well as you did that they could hire someone?

BF: I'm going to tell you frankly that most of them did -- most of them. Do you know where that big house is up here on the hill between J Jacopians and the Milex place? Do you know there's a big house setting up there?

FJ: Yes.

BF: Their names were Jefferson, too. They were Black. They owned that house. It was beautiful. They were Jeffersons, too; but, his name was Charles. They lived very, very well. She used to take me and keep me for days at a time. She asked my mother and father if she couldn't adopt me. They had two children; but, that's what they asked my mother and father. My father and uncle said, "No indeed!" [Laughter] They were close friends -- all of them. There was Mrs. Summers and Mrs. White you wouldn't know. She lived higher up in Stratford. They were good livers!

FJ: I want to move to the Depression Era now. I noticed that you said you graduated from high school during 1929. And that was during the Depression time, wasn't it. You were still living on Stratford Avenue. How did the Depression effect your family?

BF: Not too much. My father hadn't come here then. He was still down there maintaining our home place in Virginia. My mother was working in service. My father was a carpenter. He did carpentry work there. He had a fall. I had a cousin; my mother's little sister's son and his wife and family lived right near us. They missed my father. Every two or three or four days they used to go over and see about him. All they had to do was go across the railroad track. They went there and found my father had fallen off the ladder doing some work. They didn't know it -- no telephones. When they found him, they started taking care of him and they wrote my mother and told her. Finally, my mother told them when he got so he could get up and ride. the best thing for him to do was to come on up

FJ: It sounds like a vote for the remedies to me.

BF: Yes. That's what they do. They boiled

They used things from the good earth. They used things like

Sloan's Liniment -- those things, old-fashioned

They used to make sassafras tea and castor oil; you name it.

And we didn't have the flu until we got up here.

FJ: When you started going to the doctor, you got the flu.

[Laughter] During the Depression time, by this time, had more Blacks come to the area?

BF: Yes. They were coming constantly.

FJ: Did they all live in this area?

BF: There were no Blacks all the way down south of Main Street

of Stratford. It was nothing but farmland all down that way.

They came and started to move into that area to find places to live.

FJ: Let's talk about your going to school. When did you leave and go to school? Did you leave right after you finished high school?

BF: Yes; 1930. I went to Winston-Salem Teachers' College; but, I didn't like it.

FJ: You didn't. Did you stay there?

BF: One year I stayed there. I told mama when I came home for the summer that I wasn't going back. And I didn't. I had a few cousins up at Virginia State and they asked me, "Bessie, why don't you come on and stay with us and go to school at Virginia State?" So, I did.

FJ: And you liked that better?

BF: Oh, yes. I couldn't stand that school down in Winston-Salem.

There wasn't one boy on the campus -- all girls! [Laughter]  
I did tell my mother. And the president wouldn't let me go home for Christmas because I didn't know I had to have my mother write a letter.

FJ: So, you couldn't come home for Christmas?

BF: No, unless you got a permit -- permission from your parents. Unless the president got it, you couldn't. So, that year I went home with my sister's sister-in-law, her husband's sister. She lived in Hillsborough, North Carolina. Then, I just went on home that summer and told mama that I wasn't going back. So, my cousins -- They live in Atlanta now. -- told me, "Come on, Bessie -- " We grew up in the country together. But, they went one way and we came this way. They had uncles in New York -- my mother's sister's children. They went down to Virginia State. They were already there and then I went down there. I graduated in 1934.

FJ: Did you come back up here immediately after your graduation?

BF: I came home. When I first decided to move here, I didn't get a job. I saw it in the paper in Stratford. I went home to bury my father and got back. I picked up the paper and read it. It said: Wanted: Teachers in Stratford. I went and called her up. I had filled out the application and sent it in. I asked her if she had received my application. I said, "Because I see in the paper you are asking for teachers. I'm now prepared to start work if I can get a job." She said, "Did you enclose your picture with your application." I said, "Yes, I did." When I said that, she said, "We'll let you hear from us." I never did hear from her.

here where we were. He didn't want to leave there at first. Finally, he came on up here. But, we'd been up here a good long time. That's how he came here; but, most of the people have been here for years. And the people they had worked for were very good to them.

FJ: So, you think people were in a pretty good frame of mind because they still had plenty.

BF: Once in a while you'd come across a family that needed help. At the end of the week they used to give my uncle boxes of vegetables and fish from the markets because they couldn't keep it. They didn't have deep freezers. And when Friday evening came, my uncle would have to go to all these stores and pick up what they had. They'd give it to my uncle. My uncle would divide it among those that needed it the most. Yes; we have some of them right up here in church now and some people who didn't have "good-paying" jobs. That's what he used to do.

FJ: What did people do for medical care during the Depression?

BF: We had some good doctors here.

FJ: But, you went to the doctor. You didn't have home remedies?

BF: Oh, yes, we used old-fashioned remedies that we used down South until we knew that we'd better go to the doctor. When they had the flu down there during the war, now, not one in our family had the flu. They had a flu epidemic. None of us had the flu when we were down there. But, after we came up here and they had another flu epidemic, every one of us had it at the same time. They used to give you these old-fashioned medicines. We ate onions

FJ: Do you remember what year this was?

BF: I guess it was 1934 or 1935.

FJ: Did you go back to Virginia then?

BF: Yes. In a little while, not too long, I got a call for a job in King William County. So, I went back to Virginia to teach.

FJ: How long did you stay there teaching?

BF: Eleven years.

FJ: Eleven years. And then you came back to Stratford. What made you come back here then?

BF: I came back because of my mother. I just didn't see her having to go washing clothes and all that kind of stuff all her life and having all the grand-children and great-grand-children there, too, while my sister and my brother had to go to work. The children had to be taken care of. So, we all lived together -- fourteen of us in the house at one time.

FJ: You were still in your uncle's house?

BF: My mother and father bought the house you hear them talk about so much. Do you ever come to the church meeting? Have you heard about this memorial fund they have? This lady made a will and left her home in the care of the president of the bank up there in Stratford. And left a will that as long as she had one son and he lived, the home and all the money she had would belong to him. That he used and when he died, the will stated that her home would be left to the First Baptist Church -- Sarah Collins. My mother and father bought that house. That little money that they're always talking about in the memorial fund is money that came from her house that my mother and father bought. And that money should remain there and grow

and when it was needed for something, used for the church. That's why I'm writing the history for the church now because some people that have just got here think they know everything; but, I have the wills. I have the stuff. When my mother and father bought the house, they were turned over to my mother. The president of the bank -- his son and I went to school together Lovell up in Stratford. And this coming year we will have our fifty-fifth reunion. [Laughs]

FJ: Isn't that something!

BF: I saw Bud about three weeks ago. I said, "Bud, how about it!"

FJ: Let's go back to the time when you came back to stay in Stratford again. And so that meant you were job-hunting again.

BF: I hadn't made up my mind. Wherever I got the job, that's where I meant to stay. It so happens that I went back there because they offered me a job and I went and I stayed there eleven years and then I came back home. I was out working with the head of the Nurses' Association here in Stratford.

FJ: So, when you first came back here, that was your job, working with the Nurses' Association.

BF: Yes. I worked for her and for others, too. It was day work.

FJ: Until you could get a teaching job?

BF: I hadn't applied down in Bridgeport. I had in Stratford. Then I went down to pay some bills for my mother one morning and I looked up at the P.T. Barnum Building downtown -- the museum. I looked up at the window and it said "Board of Education." I said, "I didn't know all that was right here."

I just went on in and Dr. Jeffries was there. He was superintendent. I asked him if there might be a possibility of my getting a job. He asked for my background. He said, "Do you have your certificate?" I said, "No. I can write and get it." I had to go to Hartford and they okayed it. He called me a few days later. I wasn't even home. He told my mother he was calling to see if I could come in and "sub." I didn't go that day because I was already at work. I called him and told him I'd be glad to sub any time he called me. I subbed one day in Waltersville. Then, he said to me a couple days later that one of the teachers had fallen and broken her ankle and wouldn't be back for a year. And he wanted to know if I'd take the job. I said, "Any job is O.K. with me." That's where I started.

FJ: What year was that? Do you remember?

BF: About 1945? Subtract twenty-seven from seventy-three.

FJ: That was 1946. Dr. Jeffries was the superintendent of the schools at that time? Was Waltersville where it is now?

BF: Yes. That's where I started.

FJ: Was it where it is now?

BF: What street is it on?

FJ: It's over in the Village.

BF: Yes. That's where I started.

FJ: Did you stay there the entire time?

BF: No. That was a substitute job for a teacher who wasn't able to come back. He called me before school closed and said that he had a permanent opening for me. And that was at Wheeler School.

FJ: Where is Wheeler School?



BF: Up there by Green's apartments.

FJ: It's not there any longer is it?

BF: No. That was up at the top of Highland Avenue. And from there I went down to Prospect School which is down on the South end.

FJ: Prospect School. That's over on the other side of the expressway, isn't it?

BF: Yes. It's going down toward Seaside Park. Then, I came to McKinley and that's where I quit. After I had to have eye surgery and you see that leg -- I had to have surgery on that leg four times. And at the same time [I had] cataracts.

FJ: Because of your health.

BF: Yes. With my leg like that -- four times I had to have surgery on it. And I said, "I'm going back there?" I just laid there in the bed and the principal kept calling me there in the hospital, "When are you coming back to school, Bessie?" I said, "I don't know. I don't know, Mrs. Maina, when I'm coming back." She worried me so much that the doctor came in one day and I told him that she kept calling me in the hospital and I said I told her whenever you discharge me. He said, "You tell her to write me a letter and I will talk to the superintendent and the Board of Education. I'll let him know. When I discharge you, I will tell her that you will be all ready to come back to school." It's been ten years. I didn't go back any more. [Laughter]

FJ: Before you were hired to teach in Bridgeport you did service jobs?

BF: I used to serve stag parties for the people that we knew around

here. That was almost an all-night party. I used to do that before I went away to college. I used to work to one, two o'clock in the morning and they'd have to take me home. I'd have to get there and get busy and do my homework before I'd go to school the next morning. But, I did it. I was very tired. I even worked in New Jersey in the summertime.

FJ: Did you have a lot of things to work with, with the kids in Bridgeport?

BF: My class was the first class that performed at the P.T. Barnum Festival, my class from Wheeler School. I had taught them a dance. And the first time that they had the Barnum Festival, my class was the class that performed.

FJ: Very good. So, you made history with the Barnum Festival. Now we can go to teachers' stores and get materials and they buy us supplies to work with with the youngsters. Did you have all of that?

BF: Yes. Maybe there were some things that I wanted the children to use that I didn't have. But, as a rule, they furnished practically everything we needed, not the equipment they have today. They didn't have any T.V.'s or whatever you call all these things they have today. No.

FJ: What about the film-strip projectors and film projectors?

BF: No.

FJ: Tape recorders?

BF: No. We had a lot of these old-fashioned Victrolas that you set up on a table and play records for them.

FJ: And that was it. During this time -- back in 1946 -- were there many Black teachers in the city of Bridgeport?

BF: In 1946? No. I don't know about out here. Let's see, there's Thelma; you wouldn't know she was Black because she looks as if she's as white as any white woman. But, she's a Black woman. Her husband is a dentist. Her son is still a dentist. He's the dentist over in that building on the corner of Washington Avenue and Park Avenue. She taught out here. In Bridgeport -- Geraldine Ferrar, Marion Jennings. I can't think of anybody else.

FJ: Do you think they'll come to you later?

BF: I can get the information, I think, from one of the girls I know. But, there weren't many. I don't think there were a half dozen.

FJ: Can you tell me about your relationship with your co-workers?

BF: The teachers? I was their pet. [Laughter] Honest to God -- no problem whatever. With the principal, once. [Laughs] She got herself in "hot water." She's the one they let go. She was a Jew. She had a way of jumping at me in front of other people for no reason at all. She was just mean. Nobody liked her. She didn't like me because I was Black and I was the only Black one there. But, I set her in her place. I was just bringing my children downstairs. It was just beginning to snow. And I stopped at the foot of the steps. I had third grade. The kindergarten children and first and second grade go out first, parents standing out there with their little boots and things for them to put on. I got my children lined up because I was upstairs. I stopped on the first step and the children lined up behind me, no problem with the children. I was just standing there waiting until the little kindergarten children,

the first grade and second grade children got out. And she was over there across the hall. And she started over to me and said, "What are you doing? You know your children don't go onto --" I said, "I have brought them down to the foot of the steps and when their turn comes, I know when to take them out." -- all these parents standing around in the hall waiting for their children with their raincoats and hats. That's where I was standing. I knew when I was supposed to go out and what line to follow. I did it every day. she's, "Well! You need not come in on Monday." I said, "Thank you." So, when I got my children out, I walked all the way down Main Street to that Barnum Museum where Dr. Jeffries was. I walked in and I sat down. He said, "What are you doing down here in all this weather?"

I said, "I'll tell you what happened and what I was told to do, or not to do." And I told him just what had happened. He said, "What?" I said, "She told me not to come back on Monday." And he said, "I'll tell you what to do. I do the hiring. I do the firing. You go right back to your classroom on Monday. And before you go to your class, you go to the office and tell her, that Dr. Jeffries said, "I do the hiring and I do the firing." I went back to school and went in my classroom and didn't say a word to her because she was so nasty. All the other teachers were white. I was the only Black one in the building. They'd be telling me, "Bessie, you watch her." They sure would. If she said anything in their presence about me, they'd come and tell me. Or when I got home, they'd sure call me. They'd say, "Bessie, so and so." I didn't tell her

anything. Sooner or later here comes the assistant superintendent, Miss Mendel was her name. She came in and said, "How are you doing, Bessie?" "Oh, I'm doing O. K." She said, "But, you didn't do what Dr. Jeffries told you to do." I said, "What is there he told me to do that I didn't do?" -- like that. He told you when you came back Monday morning to go in and tell her "that he did the hiring and he'd do the firing. You didn't do that. The only reason why I'm here today [is] that I came to tell her. And who got fired? She!

FJ: What about your relationship with your parents of the children you taught?

BF: Never had but one [problem] and she was a Black one. [Laughter] Only time in all those eleven years. And she came because the boy wouldn't get his work and was doing badly and

I had kept him, I guess, for a couple of days. He asked me and I said, "You didn't do your work during school time. Now you do your work.

I have work to do, too. So, while I'm doing mine, you do yours."

He only lived about two blocks away. His mother came up there and I said, "I'm sorry. I'm doing my job. I don't know what you're doing at home because you ought to teach him that he comes to school to study and not to play school.

FJ: It was just because you were keeping the kid after school to do his work.

BF: To do what he was supposed to have done.

FJ: Yes. He was mis-behaving.

BF: I had another one, too, at Prospect.

[end of side two, tape one]

FJ: We're going to begin the questioning again with World War II. World War II you were back in Stratford. You were teaching in Bridgeport. Did anybody in your family participate in World War II?

BF: What were the areas that they were located in when they were in World War II?

FJ: In Europe -- Italy, Germany, England.

BF: My brother Alonzo was located in France.

FJ: That would be World War II.

BF: Willie and Alonzo were in World War I. And then Roy was in World War II. Of course, my brother Willie I told you about yesterday that didn't come back home. So, that was the four that were in service all together. You're speaking of the Depression Age?

FJ: It was after the Depression during the presidency of Roosevelt where they had rationing.

BF: Yes. I understand. I must have been teaching then.

FJ: You were.

BF: I was -- because they had the U.S.O. centers. What did they call the girls or the ladies that went in to help entertain the boys at these centers? I was in Bowling Green, Virginia, at Union High School. And the U.S.O. center was on a parcel of land adjoining our campus. On weekends we'd go over and help entertain the boys. We didn't have to do anything as far as food was concerned because they furnished their own food.

FJ: In effect now, you had two brothers in the service and then you participated by being a member of the U.S.O. Is there anything that stands out in your mind about the period of World War II?

BF: Yes. I took a course in auto mechanics for women. Women were taught to repair their own cars. I had a car that I drove back and forth from here to Virginia. I took the course. And I used to change my own tires, sparkplugs, and so forth in the car. [Laughter] That's what we did. They had women being trained for mechanics because so many of the men were going away they didn't have men to do the service that they would need.

FJ: Is there any particular way that the war affected your family like the shortage of food or anxiety over your brothers that were in there?

BF: Because of each one of my brothers that went into the service they made an allotment to my mother, a monthly allotment. To tell the truth we didn't suffer hardship as far as food because my mother received help from my brothers as well as she worked. She had little ironing jobs, not steady jobs. You know how they used to take in washings and such. She'd do that. She didn't go away from home too much to work. They were bringing the clothes to her and she washed them and ironed them. The little money they got wasn't much; but, it was helpful.

FJ: You moved back to Bridgeport during the war period? It was World War II because it was '45.

BF: Yes, I did, because I'll never forget my brother Roy wrote my

mother a letter every day. Every day he mailed my mother a letter. And he was always hoping and praying that he would get back home. If I had an opportunity and had gone through my mother's things, they may still be over next door or even in some of the boxes and things I might have brought when I came. I'd probably find some cards and I'd find the letters that he wrote her every blessed day, praying that he'd get home safe. That's what he said to my mother in the letters, "If I ever come home, I'm not coming back." Of course, he suffered from the war. He was shell-shocked when he came home. And every time he heard a car back-fire, he would jump out of the bed. He brought his little, wooden trunk home; and he'd jump out of bed and say, "Go get 'em! Go get them!" That's the way he talked. It disturbed him so much until we finally had to have him see the doctor so he could give him something for his nerves. He wasn't alone because we had another friend who was the same way. They both ended up eventually in the Veteran's Hospital in New Haven.

FJ: Did they get well?

BF: He got well enough to come home and stay; but, he couldn't go back to work or anything like that because he had a bad leg from injuries he got over there. Eventually, his leg was amputated. And he stayed with me then until he died. He stayed right here with me.

FJ: All in all, World War II had quite an impact on your family. Now, let's talk about things that took place in Bridgeport. How did World War II affect Bridgeport? Were there more jobs?

BF: I think the boys who did come home had the privilege of getting



better jobs. I think they did because many of them had jobs in the factories and industries. And one of my brothers worked where they make the guns -- Remington Arms over on Barnum Avenue. One of them worked there for quite a few years after.

FJ: So, you think this was a result of World War II -- more jobs opening up.

BF: My youngest brother didn't go to war; he worked for the tile roofing company up until he retired about five years ago. Of course, he's gone, too.

FJ: I was just thinking usually wars initiate social change and changes in people's attitudes. So, that's what I'm talking about. As a result of the war, did more jobs open up for Blacks?

BF: Yes, because before that there weren't many Blacks who were in these industries. Down on Connecticut Avenue -- What's that big place? -- that's where they hired many of the young Black men. And the United Illuminating Company down by Seaside Park began hiring more Blacks because my husband's brother and my husband came up here and got jobs down there. My husband was in Italy [during World War II] because he can speak Italian just as well as any Italian you want to meet.

FJ: Do you think that after World War II more Blacks were able to buy homes?

BF: Ever since World War II it seems as though there are ten times more Blacks over there than there ever was. There weren't many Black people around in this area. They were mostly Italians, even going beyond South Avenue going down towards Lordship they were building homes down there. And down in that area

there are as many Blacks as there are whites. They were very

The population has almost doubled  
around the whole area since World War II.

FJ: Do you think that they had more money after?

BF: More jobs were open for them. The engineer down at Sikorsky's is a Black man, a very dear friend of ours. And they never before had any [Blacks.] He's the engineer down there. And many of them [Blacks] work down there that never worked there before.

FJ: Do you think World War II caused Black neighborhoods to change as such or to develop?

BF: I'm sure because in the last, I'd say, fifteen or twenty years the population has tripled in all of this area of Stratford down to Lordship as far as down here to the Housatonic and as far back as you can go and all up as far as Stratford Avenue. All in this area -- I'm pretty sure it has tripled.

FJ: What about the population of Black teachers in the city of Bridgeport after World War II? Did that increase?

BF: Oh, yes. It certainly did. We had more coming from the South.

FJ: More teachers?

BF: Yes. In fact, most of the Black teachers in Bridgeport came from the South.

FJ: Do you think there was a great influx of them at that period after World War II?

BF: I think so. After they found that they could get jobs up here, that's when they began to come this way because they didn't really know -- And I didn't know myself.

One white lady asked my mother, "Why are you sending her to college for if she can't get any job up here?" That was before I went. My mother was working for her. After I finished high school, she asked my mother what was I going to do. And my mother said, "She wants to go away to college because she wants to be a teacher." She said, "Well, what is she going to do? What are you sending her to college for? She can't get a job up here." And my mother's standing there in the kitchen.

FJ: That's a lot of nerve!

BF: But, I went. And I came back. I said, "Mama, when I finish and I get a job, you come out of her kitchen." And my mother came out of her kitchen.

FJ: Did you get married after this time, after World War II?

BF: Oh, no. How long did I go? I got married in 1952. I can't even remember the day I got married.

FJ: That's good. That was a good while after.

BF: I wasn't any "chippie," either. I'll tell you that.

[Laughter] I was up to my thirties and I didn't have marriage on my mind.

FJ: This is really unusual.

BF: I could have gotten married when I was down there in school if I wanted to; but, I wasn't ready to be married.

FJ: Now, after World War II, do you think the role of the church in people's lives had changed by this time?

BF: Would you mean in population or activity?

FJ: Yes. And the kinds of activities it provides for the Black community.

BF: Yes. There was a big influx of newcomers, people who settled

in the area -- Bridgeport and Stratford. As more people came they made a choice for the church they wanted to. The church began to provide more activities. They provided more opportunities for the younger people by getting them into the opportunities that the white children had. They can go to any Y.W.C.A. they want to now; before they couldn't. They can go to any of the recreational centers and places of improvement in their activities. There's no color barrier, not in the last, I should say, fifteen or twenty years.

FJ: Had that happened before -- the social upheaval of the sixties?

BF: Not to a great extent, no. The person that integrated the Y.M.C.A. was a minister, a Black minister. He integrated the Black and the white; so, the Y.M.C.A. is the Y.M.C.A. for Black and white. That's been [that way] at least thirty-five or thirty-six years, because I've been married thirty-one years. And he married us. I was down there last week. I just drove down there to see his wife in New Jersey. He has a stack of awards. They're just wonderful! I didn't know that much about him when he was here. I am responsible for him coming to First Baptist Church to serve us when we needed a pastor.

FJ: He was serving as minister of First Baptist when he did all this?

BF: When he integrated [the "Y"] -- he did that before he became a minister. He gave up his job at the Y.M.C.A. when we needed a minister. And being a friend of mine -- I approached him one day. I was chairman of the Trustee Board in our church. When I came out of school -- I was at Wheeler School. -- his house was three doors from my school. I always stopped by or

went in at noon hour. We talked about different things. He was a wonderful man. He was realistic.

FJ: What was his name?

BF: Homer J. Tucker. When we needed a pastor and I was talking to him -- I don't know if I knew then he was minister. At that time he was not serving any church. He was working at the Y.M.C.A. I said, "Gee, we need a pastor. Since you're a minister, how about coming and helping us out until we can get one?" He thought it over and I brought it to the church. And he came to us and he was wonderful. He really was wonderful. We had more people going and coming. To him, he was just a human being. He didn't give up everything among the people that he had worked with -- the white people -- just for us. He brought more of them into us by coming himself. And they followed him. He was a wonderful man, believe me. Then somebody else wanted him because they needed one, too. He helped us secure the minister we have. I told him, "We have to get a pastor, Reverend Tucker, I don't know which way were going yet. But, we will know in a few days." I said, "If you know of any you think we might be interested in or you think would be good for us, please let us know so we can get a minister." He told us about Reverend Johnson that he would be good for us and to give him a chance. And we did. From then on Reverend Johnson has been our minister. Our membership has grown so that we have to keep expanding the church. Of course, they had a fire. That was way back, the day of my aunt's funeral. We remodeled the church then. But since then, we've remodeled it twice. We built it because

it was so small. And it looks like we are getting ready to re-build it again. It's because so many people came this way to get jobs. They were successful getting jobs. They were tired of working in

FJ: Doing service jobs.

BF: Right. We had an influx of them.

FJ: What role do you think the N.A.A.C.P. played in the social changes that took place in the forties and fifties? You worked with them, didn't you?

BF: I certainly did. I was on the Executive Board. I was the organizer in my aunt's house.

FJ: This is the uncle that had his business here. So he helped to found First Baptist and he helped to organize the first N.A.A.C.P. in this area?

BF: That's right. I was right there in that house. I became a member of that N.A.A.C.P. I served on that Executive Board.

FJ: Did they have any "walk-ins" or "sit-ins" or stuff that you participated in to get things going here?

BF: They had them; but, unfortunately, even before I got married -- But, I didn't know I had arthritis because I've never had the pain. I'd give way in my knees and I'd kind of fall; but, they've never pained me. I couldn't understand it. I had a (What was I going to say? Oh!) After a while my hands began to pain me. They'd double up; they pained so badly. One Sunday morning another young minister's father was here from Florida; so, they were courteous enough to give him an opportunity to speak. And Alpheus didn't know why I wasn't at church because I was the secretary of the church. I was

financial secretary and he was the --

FJ: Treasurer.

BF: Yes. But, we switched around because he said I could speak better than he did. Anyway, to make a long story short, when his father came up and I wasn't in church, he knew something was wrong because he knew I never missed church. He and I were "just like that." We'd get together things for church. He came and brought his father who was a minister to my mother's house. These hands were oh, so severely painful and it was the first time it had happened to me. He said, "I knew something was wrong because Bessie didn't come to church this morning." My mother said, "She couldn't do anything because her hands are so painful." His father spoke up and said, "Well, what are you doing about it?" "Just putting some liniment on it. That's it." He said, "I think you'd better take her up to the hospital, up to the emergency." Now, mind you, he and his son went to take me because my sister wasn't here then. She was working and away. There was nobody there to drive. He took me. And that's when they kept me there until they found out what it was. Ever since then I've had it. That was before I got married. Then I got it so bad in my knees and feet. They were just practical doctors, not a specialist. I was taking just pills to kill the pain but it wasn't treating my joints. So, that's why it got to be so bad and I've had it ever since.

FJ: So, that kept you from participating in the marches and things that the N.A.A.C.P. had.

BF: Yes. But, it didn't stop me from going until it became so bad

that I just decided I'd give up and not even try to teach because of this cataract and also that. And I know how children are.

FJ: Why was the N.A.A.C.P. marching?

BF: Why were they marching -- was it for food?

FJ: Jobs?

BF: I'm trying to think now. It's been so long.

FJ: Did they have to integrate places during this time?

BF: I think they were trying to get --

FJ: More public places open to you?

BF: Yes. I'm sure that was one of the reasons. I think it was more or less for the purpose of seeing that more jobs were open for the Black people. I'm pretty sure that was the biggest thing. That must have been the major purpose of having these walk-a-thons.

FJ: This was back in the late forties?

BF: Yes. I don't think they put as much emphasis on it as they do now. I really don't put that much emphasis on it; it was more or less in the various areas, not all going to one point at one place. I think it was more or less something that was going on throughout the country wherever there were branches of the N.A.A.C.P. because I think that's the year I went to Nashville when they had it there. And while they were there, they did march.

FJ: What did they do to get more voters?

BF: Generally speaking, that probably was part of it.

FJ: You think that was part of the program, too?

BF: Yes. It was part of the program, too. Yes, because Negroes



didn't vote very much then. What were they voting for then?  
They figured every political office, every city office. It was opened up for the white man. We didn't have any Black man on any of these. The city council now, we have a Black fellow. Newton -- one of my former students.

FJ: Is he!

BF: He was head of the city council in Bridgeport.

FJ: You've got quite a few of them there on it.

[end of side one, tape two]

FJ: So, you say Blacks didn't participate in politics as much.

BF: Not as much. Only in very recent years have they participated as fully as they are doing now because they felt like "what were they voting for? Whom were they voting for?" -- because everybody then was a white man.

FJ: During this time, even though Blacks didn't feel this way, N.A.A.C.P. still had that as a thrust, didn't they?

BF: Yes, that was it. They did. The N.A.A.C.P. said, "We'll have to get them more interested in politics and getting out among the people and seeking out some of the Negroes that were qualified to do these jobs." Even I had the opportunity to just work the polls and they were surprised. [Laughs] And I will be this year at Stratford. And I was the first Black one up there to work the polls in the town of Stratford. I had to give that up because of my condition. But, this year -- I haven't said anything to any of the others about it because believe me, your own people, if they see you doing something that they haven't been able to do, they resent it. When they came in and found that I was at one of the machines, they

walked up and said, "You're getting some more of the taxpayers' money." And you know what I said to them. I said, "Yes. And I'm paying it right back to them, paying taxes for more than one thing -- a home and two cars. You don't own any home and you're not paying any taxes; so, does it disturb you." But, then I had to give up for the same reason I gave up teaching. I expect to (not clear)

There's something else I want to do in the town of Stratford, just not the town of Stratford, in Bridgeport, too. But, unless you just have a lot of time and can get around among people -- My brother-in-law is doing more; he's doing everything he can do and he's not able to hardly do for himself to see that Tisdale gets in. He's been having these fish-fries and raising funds to help him. He did last year. Hopefully, he will win; because I'm sure if he does, my brother-in-law is not a fully-educated man, but, he took a course in welding in Baltimore during World War II. So, he would be excellent at welding and that type of job. You see those black stands up in front of the church where they stand plants on; he made those. And he can do things like that. He's really been out here fighting for Tisdale even though his wife has been sick and he has a bad foot himself. The doctor told him to stay off it. I told him that I hope and pray that Tisdale will get it because then maybe he'll see that he gets some type of job where maybe he won't have to be on that leg so much. He's been worrying about it. But, that's the way they have to fight to get in there and get

these jobs.

FJ: I think we've just about covered World War II and afterwards. What about the sixties?

BF: When I was going to school away from home and I came home for the summer, I always looked for a job. The only job that Blacks got in these stores -- They have clerks in there now. Most any kind of a job that's available they can get. Before that the only thing you could do in D. M. Reads was run an elevator. And that's what I did every summer when I came home to earn some summer money. But, now they've opened up all the doors for them. Whatever they're capable of doing, if they can do it, they get a job if there's an opening. It did open up doors for, even court reporters. I have a friend who I don't know why she decided that's what she wanted to be, went to school for court reporter. One of her sisters is a manager of one the banks. She left Bridgeport and went to New York and she made advancement and she's the bank manager.

FJ: I want to go to the sixties when they were having the marches and sitting in. Were you very much aware of the social upheaval that was happening and the kinds of impacts that they were having on Bridgeport?

BF: In what way?

FJ: Did you participate in them or did your husband?

BF: Practically everything that was open, not just one little area, but, whatever was going on to enhance the city of Bridgeport even as far as industries were concerned or whatever opportunities there were, we all, I think, shared in it, both Stratford and Bridgeport.

FJ: Do you think that Bridgeporters actively participated in these marches and sit-ins -- the residents?

BF: Not as much, I don't think, as they possible could have because I don't think there was enough enthusiasm. Many of them didn't really realize what it was all about. I think that was one of the reasons. I don't think the N.A.A.C.P. reaches the people as much as it used to. I really don't.

FJ: So, you think that that was true during the sixties, too, that they just didn't get to the people?

BF: Perhaps not. It was the older people who were more or less concerned and "hung in" with the N.A.A.C.P. But, now they have more younger people, before they didn't. I was looking at my return card and a letter they sent out a couple of weeks ago. Now they have a certain fee for age groups and the cost for one year. I don't know what I did with that letter. The younger people years ago really weren't brought into it to be active. They really weren't. Now that they have younger people coming in, I think -- I haven't been to a meeting in quite a while; but, I do get the letters and I know what probably is going on. -- there was more spirit into the N.A.A.C.P. during the sixties than there is now. Once they got over the fence they slowed down. Now they need to get over the fence again. And I think more and more of the people are interested and the younger people, too. That's the way I feel about it because they had it so easy in between that gap. They were satisfied. Things were going pretty good for them then. But, now they really need to in order to get things going again.

FJ: So, you think that the sixties did have a positive effect on

Bridgeport.

BF: I think so. I really do.

FJ: Were there changes in neighborhoods?

BF: Oh, yes.

FJ: During the sixties?

BF: This was an all-white area. They built new homes all the way from Stratford Avenue all the way down. There are just as many Black as there are white.

JF: What about the attitudes of Blacks and whites?

BF: They must be all right because you can buy a house next to anybody you want if you've got the money. Anywhere -- you can go down there, you don't know whether Black or white are living in the houses unless you see them. So, that's the way it is now. Before, it wasn't that way.

FJ: What about facilities? Did more of them open during the sixties?

BF: Yes; they did. And one thing about it, we didn't know what it was to have a snow plow come in as soon as it started snowing. And they make no difference in the area you live. Not here. In Bridgeport I can't speak too much about it. But, in Stratford when it starts snowing and if it snows overnight, by mid-morning the snow plows were coming and they clear streets. That's one thing I like about Stratford. You can call them in the middle of the night if something's wrong. And we had no lights at all around here. Last week --

FJ: Transformer.

BF: They came out at ten o'clock at night with their trucks and ladders. All I could see was just up there the

they cut the limbs off the trees and got the transformer going. And then two weeks later it blew again. I was in the house here and didn't know which way to turn. But, they sent the men down and it was late. And so, I think the attitude is far, far better than it used to be; not that the people in Stratford were ugly, but, they just couldn't get themselves to the point where they could accept Black people as they did. They opened the doors of their churches. We have a mixed church. We have mixed churches all over Stratford. Last weekend they had group meetings, if it's a Baptist church or a Methodist church, that's what they do. They get them to come together and have these sessions so that whatever is going on to benefit the people, they all get the same information at the same time. That makes a big difference.

FJ: What do you think about the government programs that were initiated during that time? The poverty programs and subsidies, and all those that began during the sixties?

BF: Other groups or institutions -- I think more or less they went together to provide either money, food or clothing for those who needed help. That's been one of the things that I think they do annually and especially for the elderly people. They go out and they solicit for clothing and for food. They don't get too much money. They find out what is needed and they usually try to [get that.] as we have over there with the Food Basket in our church about a month ago for people who were out of work and especially elderly people. I think they're going to have one this month. I'm not so sure; but, I believe that they are because they said, "We're going to have another

Food Basket" which means if you have goods or you want to go out and buy goods -- Don't buy too much fresh food. They make sure that they have food that has the proper nutrition in it. They may not have the finest there is; but, it's good food. I know they had a case, (i.e., a situation), at church about one month ago where they felt this poor man was a faithful member of the church, but he can't do anything for himself now. He lives by himself. One of the members had been to see him and she said his condition was so bad and he wasn't eating food regular because he couldn't cook for himself and he didn't have a drop of food in the house. The Missionary Circle decided to use money from the treasury because that's the attitude that most people have when they find out a person is in that condition. They had a committee to go out and buy the type of food that he could put away and not a lot of fresh foods, but nutritious food with meat in it. They do that wherever they find cases that it's necessary. All the races participate.

FJ: What do you think about ABCD and the kind of poverty program that it presents?

BF: I don't care if my pastor is the head of it. I think there's quite a little unfairness in it. Some people do and some people don't. Some need and some don't. Some get right away and some don't. In other words, I think they need a larger committee to determine the needs of the people and what they need. I think that they need a little larger help. I really do.

FJ: Do you think their programs are good?

BF: In some instances they're good and some, I don't think they are.

I don't see where you could take a person whose husband is a professional man -- a doctor, a dentist or a lawyer -- when there are many people out there who need a job; don't have any job -- husband or wife.

FJ: That's who it's supposed to be for -- people who are without jobs.

BF: Well, a doctor's wife is sitting up there with a job -- people that I know. We're not close friends. The doctor's out there and he has a job. And the wife, if she's a good thinking woman -- and there are others out there without a job. I think they should be given consideration no matter who's head of it, no matter who. That's the way I feel. I think if they need a job and they're qualified and nobody perhaps in the family is working, then, I feel that they should be first. I'm not saying it's wrong to give the others a job; but, if a person is qualified for the job, I feel that they should come first.

FJ: I'd like to talk about the Viet Nam War now. Did anybody in your family or friends of yours participate in that conflict? Well, really they sent boys to Korea and to Viet Nam; but, war wasn't declared officially.

BF: If I knew any of them?

FJ: I thought if anyone from your family may have participated in that war or friends of yours.

BF: Not that I know of.

FJ: I'm at the end of the questions that I prepared to ask you. Is there anything else that I didn't ask you about that you think is important that you want to tell me about?

BF: Now this includes Stratford and Bridgeport?



FJ: Mainly Bridgeport.

BF: I know Bridgeport isn't like it used to be. And a lot of the good things that were going on in Bridgeport, can't now because of the conditions in Bridgeport. Nobody seems to really, really want to be in the area where these things are happening. I feel that they are afraid. Even if there was a job available, I know the women wouldn't want it. They wouldn't feel safe. There were a lot of good

barbers and grocery stores. I think that Bridgeport is not the place that anybody would want to go now in certain areas.

To me the Black people as far as business is concerned are breaking down and the white man doesn't want to come in there in the condition that they have. And that has prevented people from getting jobs in that area because they don't want to be around in that condition. That's the way I feel about it. In other words, declining in the condition is one thing that's causing so much poverty because people don't want to have businesses in that area. They should be able to have them. They're afraid. That's the way I feel about it because I didn't use to go downtown. People from Stratford used to go over to the east side. They had nice clothing stores and shoe stores. Almost all of the clothes that I ever wore when I was going to college were bought on the east side because they had some beautiful shops over there then. And they were nice clothes. They weren't just inexpensive clothes. They were expensive clothes. They were very because my uncle always wanted me to have the best. It was O.K. then; but, right now

there isn't much on the east side that anybody would want to.

FJ: Did any Blacks own those businesses?

BF: Yes. We had barber shops. They had nice, clean pool rooms for men who liked to play pool.

FJ: These were Black-owned.

BF: I'm talking about Black. I'm talking about the people that I know. They had about three nice beauty shops; but, they were all closed up. There was a nice eating place, similar to going into a place where you could get beverages and a good meal and a clean place. Not anymore. So, that knocked a lot of the business in the head in that area. Not many people really want to even go through there. So, that's caused a breakdown in Bridgeport.

FJ: When do you think this change began to take place? Was it the fifties or the sixties?

BF: I'd say the seventies; but, not as fast as it has been in the last year or so. But, it began back in the seventies. I really realized that it was declining between 1975 and 1980. But, it was very slowly declining then. Evidently it has just gotten much worse, not with the years; but, as the months go by.

FJ: You worked in McKinley School, right, which was right off Stratford Avenue.

BF: Yes. It wasn't like that when I was at McKinley. Nothing like it is now.

FJ: So, it has changed since 1973.

BF: Yes. That's almost eleven years. There was no fear or anything around there then. Not at all. It was clean. There were nice stores with eating places that at lunchtime if you didn't bring

your lunch you could go out and sit down and eat. But, no more. It has really declined.

FJ: It's unfortunate.

BF: It certainly is. I didn't know what it was to be afraid. I walked from the school all the way over to Connecticut Avenue where they made nice lunches. I don't think they do now at that place. We had so many nice places you didn't have to go to the same place all the time. But, you're afraid to walk the sidewalk now. And they way they drive now. You don't know whether they pay any attention to the lights. We go through there quite often and they won't get out of the street for you. I attribute that to the transportation of "dope."

I think that's the main cause because when people have to go that way, they just hang out of the stores and the street. Girls and boys and then they're cutting up. And the next thing you know, somebody's being killed. I feel like they really need more police. I hate to say too much. I don't want anybody to cut my throat. [Laughter] I don't know whether they get paid off not to do the things that they should do; not to let people get by with the things that they're doing that they should not be doing. Many times when you read the paper, that's what's happening. They demand payment themselves that the guy who's doing the work do it. They do. I know personally so. Some young men that I knew that grew up there [told me.] And it's because they themselves have gotten hurt. They have gotten shot because they have not paid the police. If you read the papers enough or if you know them. I know some of them, if you don't pay them off -- I think

that's what they need more (unclear) pay more attention to. What's been happening with the policemen out there on the street. And why is it that the people that use it don't stand in fear of the policeman any more. They don't. It's because they're paying them off. I think they need to re-vitalize their police force. I really do. I know some by name that have gotten by. And any that they didn't pay off, they ended up in jail.

FJ: That's too bad.

BF: I think the whole city of Bridgeport's government needs to be altered, as they say. I really do. I feel that somewhere down there at city hall they haven't put enough emphasis on what should be done. I'm not bragging about it. I look at Stratford. I've seen things that I don't think we've ever had before happening in Stratford, too. The one thing about is that, if it is happening, they have police cars stationed in various places. They had one down at the town fair during the evening. And they'll have them at various places where the young people hang out. They get them off the street.

FJ: Thank you very much, Mrs. Frye.

End of Interview