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

James H. Sims

849 Chopsey Hill Road, Bridgeport

Born:	September 3, 1912, Asheville, N. C. to William and Mae Bell Sims
Spouse:	Jane Sims
Children:	Fran Baker, Jr., Noel Raynor, Mollie Curtiss
Education:	High School
Employment:	Bus Driver Foreman, Bridgeport Brass
Church:	Messiah Baptist Church, Bridgeport
Organizations:	Elks Masonic Lodge

"A Study of Bridgeport Neighborhoods:

A Black Perspective, 1900 -- Present"

Interview by: James Johnson
Interview with: James Sims
Date: October 10, 1983

JOHNSON: Mr. Sims, I guess a good place for us to start would be for you to tell me something about your early childhood. Where were you born? Tell me something about your family, the number in your family, and so forth.

SIMS: I was born in Asheville, North Carolina. I went to school there and I finished in grade school. Then I came to Bridgeport -- was brought in fact by my family. I was about 15 years of age when I came to Bridgeport.

JJ: What year was this, Mr. Sims?

JS: 1926.

JJ: I see. What did you do when you came to Bridgeport in 1926?

JS: I was quite young. I didn't do any work. I just got little small jobs like setting up pins for bowling and this kind of thing.

JJ: What kind of jobs did your parents have? And relatives -- was it just you and your mother and father or sisters and brothers, or --

JS: Just my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather was here. My dad, I lost him at an early age. So it was just the three of us.

JJ: Now what kind of work did your mother and grandmother do?

JS: My mother, she was a housewife. So was my grandmother. My father worked on construction.

JJ: Did she work when you came here to Bridgeport in 1926?

JS: No, she didn't. My mother worked then. My grandmother was just strictly a housewife.

JJ: I see. What did you --?

JS: At that time, we lived on Bristol Street, in the north end. That's where I had my childhood -- well, pre-teen thing.

JJ: What were some of the things that you did?

JS: I played sports and, like I say, I worked off and on in the bowling alley, which was the main bowling alley down on Main Street -- I'll never forget it.

JJ: What kind of sports?

JS: Well, I played baseball, golf, and at that time, I bowled.

JJ: I see. What else did you do other than participate in sports during your teenage period, Mr. Sims?

JS: During my teen period, I didn't do much of anything. I didn't find any job but what I just told you.

JJ: What about your social life? How was your social life?

JS: Social life was fine. I just go around with the fellas and do the things that teenagers had to do at that point. We used to go to the poolroom and play pool. That was our day. Then go play ball on the Seaside Park.

JJ: How was transportation during that time?

JS: Transportation was very bad. Cars was out of the question. Once in a while a dad or one of the fellas would drive us down to Seaside Park to play. But we had streetcars in those days, so most of us guys, we would walk down to the park. That is the kind of transportation -- we had horses pulling wagons around the place, too, at that time.

JJ: How was the black/white relationship during that time?

JS: It wasn't too good. I mean, you had your section and they had theirs. It wasn't too good, because --

JJ: Section?

JS: We had the South End and the whites had the North End and the fellows on the East Side, they was mixed but they wasn't together

-- we had a section down there too. And the West End was about the same. We had our little clique-like thing. You had to -- it had to be that way.

JJ: How many Blacks were there about at that time?

JS: Oh, at that time if we had two hundred Blacks in Bridgeport, you had a lot. It wasn't too many Blacks.

JJ: I see. Did you have an adjustment to make coming from the South to Bridgeport? Was it much different there than here in Bridgeport?

JS: Well, I was always an easygoing guy and I never had too much of a problem, because like I say, I played a lot of sports and every time the guys would talk to me they were all talking in my favor. I don't know why, but I never had too much of a hard time.

JJ: How about your church affiliation during that time? During your teenage period?

JS: During that time -- teenage -- I used to visit Messiah Baptist Church quite often. That was my church to go to. I hadn't joined at this point, but I would go there. I would be in the class up there. They had the teenage thing. That was my church at that point.

JJ: Do you remember much about the Depression, Mr. Sims -- what you were doing at that time? What were your parents doing at that time?

JS: My folks were working on the WPA, this kind of thing. I wasn't doing anything, more or less. Like I say, I was just playing baseball, golf or whatever we could do, shooting pool -- this kind of thing. My grandfather, he was the sole provider for the family at that point, too. We didn't have what we wanted, but we had what we needed, that's for sure.

JJ: Where were you during World War I, Mr. Sims?

JS: I don't know anything about World War I. I can't tell you anything about that because I was still in North Carolina.

JJ: I see. After the Depression, what was your life like then -- about 1932.

JS: 1932. I met my wife. I was at this point shifting weights at The Malleable Lion, I believe. This was a part-time thing for me. And I met my wife.

JJ: Marble?

JS: Malleable Lion. It used to be on the South End. I had a little job down there and I met the wife. And that was the extent of my working at that point.

JJ: You met her in 1932?

JS: Yes.

JJ: When did you get married, Mr. Sims?

JS: '34.

JJ: '34.

JS: No, '33. Yes, '33.

JJ: And you were working at the same place?

JS: Malleable Lion, yes.

JJ: How long were you working there?

JS: Oh, at the Malleable Lion, I worked there until they left -- I'd say about three years -- until they left and went up to Naugatuck. During that time, my girlfriend, now my wife -- we got married just before they left.

JJ: I see.

JS: That was my first job bringing in a paycheck -- when I got married.

JJ: Where did you live during the Depression, Mr. Sims?

JS: I lived on the South End on Whiting Street with my family.

At first. When I got married, I got a rent down on Johnson Street.

JJ: Those were the only two places that you lived during the Depression?

JS: Yes, they were the only two. I left Johnson Street after we were married and World War II was started. I wasn't eligible to go because I had married and I had two children. I was working in a defense plant.

JJ: Which one?

JS: Bridgeport Brass. And we bought a place over on Read Street. In '42. Just when the war started. So, then I stayed at the Brass as long as I could.

JJ: How were jobs during that time -- during World War II?

JS: Jobs were very, very scarce. But it picked up as soon as the war started because everything went on defense. When Pearl Harbor got hit, we worked thirty-one days in a row without stopping. We worked right on through -- making shells and things for the shells and this kind of thing.

JJ: Was it easy for Blacks to get jobs during that time?

JS: During that time, you had only one spot to work -- that was the casting shop. That's the only place a Black face was allowed to work. You go to the employment office and apply for a job -- they would tell you there's an opening in the casting shop.

JJ: Was this the employment office at the Brass, or the local --

JS: At the Brass.

JJ: How was employment in general for Blacks during this time? Do you recall?

JS: Well, all I can speak for is what happened in the Brass because that's the only job I ever had. I mean after I left the Malleable Lion -- after they left me. That's the only one I know about. I

didn't know anything about the general employment office or whatever.

JJ: Well, the Blacks -- let's say, that you knew during that time -- Was it relatively easy or was it rather difficult, that is, for your friends who worked in other places during that time?

JS: I think that in every plant -- this was an industrial place. The plants always had one spot for the Black man. And that was where all the good dirt and the filth and the oil and stuff was and the dust and whatever. That was his job.

JJ: How was recreation during that time, Mr. Sims? During this World War II time, what did you do for recreation?

JS: Recreation -- we would get interdepartmental teams. On the whole it was good because we had a lot of fun. We would play interdepartmental -- different departments would play against each other once a week. Of course on Sunday, we had our Sunday baseball, Saturday baseball, or whatever. But that was all the things we could do.

JJ: How was race relations during this time?

JS: Inside the plant it was fine because we had our little spot and anybody come there -- they would have to go along with what we were doing. But outside it was getting boggy at that point. But it got better after a fashion -- and after we changed presidents at the Brass, that made a difference. Mr. Steinkraus was our president and he made the Brass see the light. He made a statement that if a man can do a job, that man is entitled to that job. That was a turnaround for us. That's when the people start moving around in different departments. If you could do it, you had a chance.

JJ: He was more fair-minded about placing Blacks throughout the plant?

JS: That's right. If you could do the job you had a chance.

JJ: How did the war affect your family?

JS: Like I say, I had two little girls at the time and every time I got a greeting card, I'd take it to my boss and I would get exempted. He would take it and says people in the defense factories -- they're exempted because they're working for the war effort. And I had about four of those. Then when the war got over, well then -- everything was all right at that point.

JJ: What were your working hours during the war?

JS: 7 to 3 was my shift.

JJ: Overtime?

JS: Overtime, if you wanted it. But in my case, I didn't work too much overtime because I had the family. I put in my eight hours, seven days a week during this war effort.

JJ: Was there a shortage of food or did you personally experience any shortage of food during World War II?

JS: No, not really. I was able to provide for my family. We always had food on the table. When I went to the Brass, we were making $27 a week.

JJ: What about your social life during that time? Had it changed as opposed to during the time of the Depression or prior to World War II? Or was it pretty much the same?

JS: No, it was just about the same. After the war started, I had more revenue to do the things that I would like to do. We would have more fun this kind of way. But it was pretty much the same.

JJ: Where did most Blacks live during World War II?

JS: Most of them were in the South End, but you had a few on the East Side and a few in the North End. I originally was living in the North End. But when my family decided to move to the South End, that's where I went with them. So, actually I grew up down there.

JJ: Was there a change in Black neighborhoods, let's say from the Depression period -- then after or at the end of World War II? Did you notice a change in Black neighborhoods?

JS: Yes, you could see a change. You could see a change for the better, too.

JJ: In what ways?

JS: Most of the guys were working in the Defense plant. They were getting better housing. They would move to a better place. So I think it was for the better when the war started -- they started to live in better --

JJ: After the war? 1945, '46. How was the situation -- how was work then?

JS: After the war it was much better. Then we had better relationships, too.

JJ: How was that?

JS: With the white and the Black. Because I think the war did something to change the attitude of the people. During the war we all pitched in and did the job. I am pretty sure the war was the turnabout of the relationship between the Black and the white at that point.

JJ: And you would say the same for living conditions? Much better during that time?

JS: Yes, I would say that.

JJ: What about the 60's? How do you reflect as far as the 60's were concerned -- when you had the upheavals, the racial upheavals, the Martin Luther King --

JS: That didn't affect us here in Bridgeport too much because we were still working real good. At that point, I was made a foreman. I was the first Black foreman over there.

JJ: This was when?

JS: This was in '55. I was in that capacity off and on for about eighteen years. Then, because of the way business would reflect -- because I was the youngest foreman -- if you'd come in the last, you'd be the first to go if business got bad. So after the war -- the changeover and whatnot -- the business would get bad, they'd have to cut the force.

JJ: As the first Black foreman, did you have any interesting experiences?

JS: Well, to start off, some of the fellas didn't like the idea of having a Black boss. But that soon rectified. We got together and had a meeting and we talked about the things -- black and white -- and, like I say the war changed the attitude of most of the people so they accepted me. But I had an inside, because I was playing baseball with all of the guys and they knew me and kind of half liked me. So I didn't have any problem.

JJ: What position did you play on the team?

JS: My regular position was third base, but I was somebody who'll play anyplace that they want to put me. I was very agile for my size. That was my base -- third base was mine.

JJ: How do you think the social upheaval in the 60's affected Bridgeport?

JS: How did it affect Bridgeport?

JJ: To a small extent? Large extent? You notice any changes once you had this social upheaval?

JS: I think to a larger extent. I really do because everybody -- we seemed to be getting along right good at that point. Then when Martin Luther King started that march and everything, things began to bloom out. From that point on it's been on uphill.

JJ: Did the Blacks in Bridgeport actively participate? How do you feel about that -- participation on the part of Blacks of Bridgeport during this social upheaval?

JS: Yes, they did their share around here, I would say, because everywhere you went you could hear them discussing it and doing the things that the people in the other cities were doing on the social level. I think it was very, very good.

JJ: As you had the social upheaval in the 60's, and then as you enter the 70's, the social upheaval was subsided somewhat. Did you notice any change as a result of this social upheaval? Did you notice any change in the neighborhoods?

JS: No, the neighborhood was the same and it was for the better in the 70's. Everybody was liking everybody. Of course, any side of the town you would have your different elements where they was bad. But overall it was all for the better. Everything was good in the 70's, yes.

JJ: The black/white attitude?

JS: Yes, very good. Very good.

JJ: Desegregation of facilities?

JS: No, you go anyplace you want to go as long as you had the funds.

JJ: How about employment and jobs programs?

JS: Employments, they improved too. I basically think that the Brass really took the first step on that -- about if you can do a job, you have your chance to prove it. I really give Mr. Steinkraus credit for that. He really brought that on.

JJ: How about the social aspect? Was that much of a change in social relationship even within the Black population?

JS: No, the social aspect was good. It was good. Everybody was loving everybody at that point because they had more funds to do things with. Everybody had food on the table. So I think it was very good.

JJ: Do you recall what you were doing during the Vietnam War that came a few years after the civil rights [movement]?

JS: I was still working in the Bridgeport Brass.

JJ: You were still a foreman there at the Brass at that time?

JS: Which year was that?

JJ: This was in the '70's. The latter '60's and the '70's.

JS: Yes, I was still a foreman at that point.

JJ: How would you compare the relationships then with earlier years?

JS: Oh, it was beautiful. Everybody was just as happy as a lark -- working, doing their job beautiful. We had no problems during that period. They had molded and jelled right into the workforce and did their things right. They were beautiful. Black and white were working right together. There was no more "you were the Black man in the casting division". Everybody was everywhere. We had 40% white, 50% -- you know, this kind of thing. It was mixed up.

JJ: What brought this about?

JS: I think more or less the war. Because everybody fell right in

there to back up the company because we were in the brass industry -- the copper industry -- and we were making shells and what have you. They all just pitched in and did a beautiful job. We must have gotten about 15 E's.

JJ: E's?

JS: Yes, they were giving us E's for so much production and all this kind of thing. That's what they were doing at the Brass. We had E's all over the place. That's what they were giving out for awards where you're doing your part. And the black and whites -- they really got together and did a beautiful job.

JJ: How do you feel about Bridgeport Blacks in general? Do you feel that they have made as much progress or have taken advantage of the benefits that have come out of the social upheaval?

JS: I think the old-timers have benefitted very good and they have taken hold of whatever they was doing and they're doing a better job and they're getting more out of it and making more out of it than they did before. But it's just the new element that come around that's kind of hard to get squared away.

JJ: Why do you think it's that way?

JS: I really can't put my finger on it but the old-timers -- they knew what Bridgeport was like before. Once they got out of that rut and started climbing, they were getting the things that they really wanted to get, and social standards kind of come up. They knew what it was like. Those are the people I am saying that made their progress out of this. It is the young people that have come around now that don't -- they figure the world owe them a living, this kind of thing. So, what can I tell you? But on the whole, we really grow.

JJ: How did you happen to meet your wife?

JS: I knew my wife's mother. I didn't know she had a daughter at the time. She had some boys and we were friends. The mother finally sent for the daughter to come up and we would go to the old Strand Theater on Main Street. This is where I met my wife. Her brother brought her to the theater to meet me. That was the start of a beautiful relationship. That was kind of weird.

JJ: You said her mother brought her up?

JS: From North Carolina.

JJ: What part?

JS: Hamlet.

JJ: Are there any areas or subjects that you would like to talk about that I have not asked, Mr. Sims?

JS: Well, let's see now. I can't think of anything that I could add to that. Only that I worked forty-three years in the Brass. I retired in '77. At this point, I am just a retired man.

JJ: How about the transition from working to retiring?

JS: It was hard the first year and a half, but I did the things I want to do. I play golf, go for rides and whatever. But I got tired of it after a year and a half, so I got me a part-time job.

JJ: What caused the problem of adjusting, let's say -- that year and a half?

JS: After working five, six days a week for around 43 years, you get used to getting up early and going and making those eight hours. It's just a habit for me. And once you retire you get kind of lonesome for it and especially you miss it. You've got to adjust, that's for sure. I played my part right out to the hilt. I played golf, I did some of everything. But when

wintertime comes --

[Tape ends, voice trails off.]

End of Interview