

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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Susan Golson
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PERSONAL DATA

Viola Louise Smith Bridgeforth

186 Larkin Court, Stratford

Born: December 17, 1897 - Providence, Rhode Island

Spouse: Edward Everette Bridgeforth

Children: Edward Jr., Joseph, Eugene, Cedilece, Delores,
Shirley

Education: High School

Employment: Matron, Howlands Department Store

Travel: None Listed

Church: Bethel A. M. E.

Organizations: None

"A Study of Bridgeport Neighborhoods:
A Black Perspective, 1900 -- Present"

Interview by: James Johnson
Interview with: Viola Bridgeforth
Date: September

Johnson: Mrs. Bridgeforth, I suppose that we'll start with the place that you were born.

Bridgeforth: I was born in Providence, Rhode Island, December 14, 1897. My parents were Reverend Joseph and Sidalie Smith.

JJ: Were your parents from Providence?

VB: My father was from North Carolina and my mother was from Haiti.

JJ: When did you come to Bridgeport?

VB: I've been here fifty-eight years, 1925.

JJ: You came from Providence. When was that? What year was this?

VB: 1925. I got married to a fellow who lived here in Bridgeport. Then I came here and I've lived here ever since.

JJ: How did you happen to meet him, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: Well, at that time his mother had remarried. She married a man from Providence. She came here and lived awhile but she didn't like it. They moved back here to Bridgeport.

JJ: In 1925 where did you live here in Bridgeport?

VB: When I first came here we lived at the hotel because we didn't have an apartment.

JJ: Hotel?

VB: On Broad Street. I forgot what the name of it is. Used to be a hotel on Broad Street. I lived there until we got an apartment and then I moved out on Railroad Avenue. I stayed there a couple of years. Then I moved out the west end on Dewey Court. From Dewey Court I moved back

to the south end on Main Street. From Main Street we moved back out on the west end again on Pine Street. From Pine Street I came into the projects.

JJ: Did you have any children?

VB: I got six children.

JJ: Six. When were they born, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: My oldest one was born in 1926. The next one was born in 1927. I had three boys and three girls. All the children were born down in the south end except the two oldest ones. They were born when I was down on Dewey Court.

JJ: You were in school then in Providence, Rhode Island. You were a grown lady then when you came here to Bridgeport in 1925. How was your social life during that time?

VB: You mean when I came to Bridgeport?

JJ: When you came to Bridgeport, yes?

VB: I didn't know anybody, only my husband's people, that's all.

JJ: How about transportation and jobs during that time?

VB: Well I didn't go to work until wartime. Then I went to work during wartime in Casco's. Then from Casco's after the war I went to work in Howland's. Those were the only two places I worked.

JJ: What kind of jobs were Blacks doing during the time that you were here back in 1925 when you came to Bridgeport?

VB: I think in 1925 most all the Blacks were doing housework you know.

JJ: And how about transportation?

VB: Bus -- trolleys, rather.

JJ: Was there anything that impressed you about Bridgeport during that time?

VB: No I don't think so. It's so long ago I forgot.

JJ: I see. How about the Depression? You were here during the Depression years? What did you do during that time you and your family?

VB: Well they had that WPA and practically all the men worked on that WPA work program. They had to work so many days a week. They gave each family a food basket. They had food stations open. Used to go every day and get milk and bread. Then on one day a week you got your groceries.

JJ: Did you get a particular salary during that time?

VB: I think they paid fifteen dollars a week.

JJ: Fifteen plus a food basket.

VB: Yes.

JJ: And this would be given each week?

VB: Yes.

JJ: Did that suffice? Were you able to do all right with that?

VB: Yes. They gave you a good food supply. Because every morning they had to go to the food station and get your milk and bread, you know, for the children and stuff. Then whenever the government had surplus stuff they give food to add to of that.

JJ: How about social life? Was there much social life as far as your family is concerned or as far as your community as a whole?

VB: We had social life but I never participated in it. I never went anywhere. I just stayed home with the kids.

JJ: Where did Blacks live during that time?

VB: Well alot of Blacks lived in the south end. There was Blacks out in the west end. There was Blacks out in Steuben Street -- whatever you call it -- out in that neighborhood. There was quite a few Blacks that lived in the east side.

JJ: How were your spirits doing during this time, during the Depression? Did you feel optimistic?

VB: We just went along with the times that's all.

JJ: How about the church during that time?

VB: We used to go to Bethel. It was on Broad Street.

JJ: Did people as a whole have much of a difficulty surviving? Where you may have managed all right during the Depression, how were other people doing during that time?

VB: Well we just got used to it and we made the best of everything. There was no jobs. People didn't have no jobs. There was no work.

JJ: Do you recall when things began to get better coming out of the Depression?

VB: It really didn't start coming out of the Depression until war time when the war plants and stuff opened up for workers in the war plants. In the brass shop they

always did have alot of colored and the foundry like that -- men work. But my husband couldn't work in the foundry. He tried it but he used to have nosebleeds so bad that they told him it would be good for him to be out in the air. So that's when he went driving truck.

JJ: How was medical care during that time?

VB: Well medical care was good. They had the clinics and you didn't have to pay to go to the clinics. I look at now when you go to the hospital to have a baby it was only twenty-five dollars. Now look what it is -- a thousand dollars. Stayed three weeks -- then you used to stay two weeks. That's the difference.

JJ: Were there many Black doctors here at the time?

VB: I think about the only colored doctor here was Doctor Bradley. He was about the only colored doctor I think correctly.

JJ: What did you do during World War Two, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: I worked in Casco's. I worked in there.

JJ: What kind of work did you do?

VB: Tester. To test the bullets. I had so many machines I had to oversee. Then I go and put them through this Rockwell tester. That showed the weight of the bullet. If it was below or over I had to tell the foreman. He'd go and adjust the machines to get it back to the right weight.

JJ: Did you notice any large difference in your family life?

VB: Yes, because people had more money then. Wages were very very low until war time. In war time the wages started

going up.

JJ: People were getting more money. How did they spend their money?

VB: Well you begin to live better. There's alot of things you never could afford. You started to get them you know.

JJ: What were some of things that they would buy?

VB: Well I don't know if all of them went for cars but we didn't go for no cars. We went for to bring up the kids. Getting better clothes for them, we got better furniture and like that.

JJ: How many children did you have at that time, in World War Two?

VB: Six.

JJ: Six. I see. How was schooling at that time?

VB: The kids didn't have no trouble in school. There wasn't alot of segregation. Like now there's alot of segregation in school but at that time there was none.

JJ: How do you account for that?

VB: I don't know. Before all this segregation everybody was just one happy family. White people go to your house. You go to their house, you know, just like you was all one color. But now everything is different. I think alot of the colored segregate their own selves I think. Because I've always, even when I was a kid, lived around white people. We lived in the country. In fact, when I was a kid we were the first families out there. Because when my people came

from Haiti and came here my grandfather he bought alot of land and it was country. We were about the first settlers in that part of the city. There was no paved streets or nothing just dirt roads. And then gradually they decided, you know, building houses and stuff.

JJ: Where did you live during World War Two? What street?

VB: I lived in Marina Village on South Avenue

JJ: Was there much change in the Black neighborhood or the neighborhood as a whole with the Depression area and with World War Two, Mrs. Bridgeforth? Or was it pretty much the same?

VB: No, it was alot different. People were still friendly. Everybody got along good the white and the colored. But in Marina Village where I lived they did have two buildings of colored. Of the building I lived in we were the only colored family in that building. And there was a couple of other buildings where there was only one colored family and the whites. They had a playground there. The kids got along with everybody.

JJ: How about after World War Two? How was the living situation then during the postwar years?

VB: I don't know. I know one thing. People were living better than they did years ago. You didn't have to struggle so hard to achieve anything. Kids went to school. They had better opportunities than like I did and when my kids came up. Just like the children nowadays they have better opportunities in school than what my children did when they were coming. When my kids

was coming up you couldn't afford to send them to no college. They didn't have all these grants and things.

JJ: How long did you work at Casco?

VB: From 1942 to 1945 I think I worked on that.

JJ: What did you do after that?

VB: And then from there I worked in the Howland's Department Store until 1958.

JJ: And after 1958?

VB: I haven't worked.

JJ: You haven't worked I see. How do you reflect or what were your thoughts during the 1960's, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

I have reference to the social upheaval, the demonstrations. How did you react to that? How did you feel about that, during the demonstrations and Martin Luther King, Jessie Jackson?

VB: I always used to follow it up on T.V. and everything about all the actions and what everybody went through and all that stuff. But I think it made a big change.

People started to change you know.

JJ: Did you feel the change was for the better or the worse?

VB: I think it was for the better. Because they started having civil service tests for the people. Before, our kind of people alot of jobs they were qualified for but they could never get them. Then they opened up after they started having this civil service test. If you passed the civil service test whatever color you were and you passed it well you got the job.

JJ: Did you find that Blacks voted more before your time?

How did they react to politics?

VB: There's more Blacks voting now than they did years ago. in my estimation. A lot of times you'd talk "Oh who'd I want to vote for it don't do me no good" or something like that they would say. In late 1960's and 1970's then the Black people began to take more interest because they were getting better jobs, you know, they was uplifting themselves trying to do better.

JJ: Did you notice any significant change in Bridgeport as a result of the 1960's with many demonstrations that took place throughout the country?

VB: I don't know.

JJ: Do you think they participated more?

VB: Oh yes they did in my estimation. They participated in more things.

JJ: What do you think of the role of the church as far as Blacks are concerned, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: Well I know churches are doing better than what they did years ago.

JJ: How's that?

VB: Because it seems like there's more people now taking more interest in church than what they did them days. I think Prohibition time people didn't think about going to church. All they think about having a good time and that stuff. That has changed.

JJ: Do you think there's any one particular thing that happened as to why they go to church more now than they did then?

- VB: I don't know because I always went to church. I couldn't say.
- JJ: How would you compare the youth let's say of today as to the youth of when your children were small?
- VB: Well years ago alot of children used to go to church until they got a certain age and then they'd just drop out and go their way. But they were raised in the church. Then when they got old enough to be on their own they just left the church altogether. But I think now alot of the children stay in the church. I found that out at our church. Alot of the children are still staying in the church.
- JJ: How many pastors or reverends have you had at your particular church?
- VB: I couldn't tell you there's been so many. Reverend Campbell he was one of the pastors. Reverend Collins was one of the pastors at our church. That was years ago when it was on Broad Street. Reverend Drake. I just couldn't tell. I forgot. My memory goes and comes.
- JJ: How about transportation in the early years, Mrs. Bridgeforth? What kind of transportation was there here in Bridgeport?
- VB: Most everybody used the buses. Some people had cars. But the majority of the colored people didn't have cars. They had to depend on the transportation by buses. I think buses came here in 1938 if I'm not mistaken. Before that they had trolley cars. I think it was in 1938 because she was in the hospital when they started the

buses. I still use buses. Thank God.

JJ: You haven't driven with a license?

VB: No.

JJ: Is there anything that you would like to say that I haven't asked, Mrs. Bridgeforth, that you would like to comment on? [Pause]

JJ: Mrs. Bridgeforth, I was talking with Susan Golson the other day when she came out to take your pictures. She was surprised to learn that you knew her mother. How did you know her mother?

VB: We all lived down in the south end and they lived in the project on Main Street. One of my kids used to go down and take care of her two kids for her. Like babysit while she went shopping something like that. That's how I come to know her.

JJ: Did you go to school together?

VB: No. I never went to school. I never knew her until she moved down there. They came from all over Bridgeport when they put them in the projects. They didn't come from just one section they came from all over Bridgeport. You put your name in if you want to go in the project. That project was nice then because they were just being built.

JJ: Which one?

VB: Marina Village on Broad Street. That's where she lived. I lived in Marina Village on South Avenue.

JJ: Was it difficult for Blacks?

VB: The project where I lived they only had three buildings

that only had one family of colored in. All the rest were white. When I was the first one to move in that building a colored woman in back of me she was the only one in her building. She said they all were coming down there asking "they going to put colored in that building?" [laughter]

JJ: She was concerned.

VB: Yes, they were all concerned. But I was the only colored in that building. It was right on the south end. The first building from the railroad tracks. I was in there. I lived in there from 1941 to 1957. I lived in the Village there where my kids was raised.

JJ: About sixteen years?

VB: And then the next thing I was making too much money had to get out. I've been here ever since.

JJ: What was too much money?

VB: I don't know. They had a top rate, you know, if you made over that amount of money. Of course my kids had started to work. They weren't making that much. They didn't go by the parent's money. They went by all the money that came in the house.

JJ: Total family.

VB: Like I told them the kids don't give you all the money. They pay the room and board and they have to have money for their own selves. But that didn't make no difference. They went by the total that came into the house. Well we had to move because we was making too much money. And that's how I come to be out here. I've been out here

twenty-six years now.

JJ: When you moved here you weren't restricted as to income?

VB: No.

JJ: You just had to have whatever was asked of you in terms of -- did they have downpayments at that time?

VB: Yes. Well you could rent but we didn't rent. My husband bought it. I'm still paying the mortgage but it's better than being in them projects. Because I hate them projects. They're terrible. I was supposed to be finished by the end of 1984. Then they had the evaluation. They went around and evaluated the property and everything. Then they went up on the property. They put another mortgage on it to counteract it. But that other mortgage we were practically all paid up on it. Of course that added together and just made it more. We had to pay a few more years. I like it up here. The funny part of it is when I first come out here it was so quiet I couldn't sleep. [laughter]

JJ: You were used to alot of noise.

VB: Yes because we lived right near the railroad tracks.
[laughter]

JJ: Yes. [laughter]

VB: When I tell people that they laugh at me. I say, "Well, it was too quiet you couldn't sleep." See you got used to the railroad track. The noise didn't bother you. But here everything was so quiet.

JJ: How long did it take you to get used to the quietness?

VB: Oh I don't know. It didn't take you too long after

awhile, maybe four or five months. But I could not sleep. I moved in the Village in 1941. Was it the following year or something the war started? I know I went to work in the factory here in December, 1942.

JJ: Which one?

VB: Casco's. They was making bullets. When I first went there we was -- oh I don't know what you call it -- inspection. They had us doing inspection work where they test the bullet. You didn't test the bullet but you had to see that the bullets were made right. The defective bullets you'd throw out and remelt it again. I guess they'd make it over again. And then from there they put me on the Rockwell machine. Then we had to test so many machines while we go around taking so many bullets from the machine. We test it. They had this meter like. We had to keep a chart. They had to weigh a certain amount. I kind of forgot. But I know if they were over or under we had to get the floor walker. He'd go out and change the machines to get back to the regular weight. I used to like that. I worked on that until the war ended.

JJ: Did you do any other kind of work other than weighing the bullets?

VB: No. Oh I worked in Howland's fifteen years.

JJ: Main Street?

VB: Yes.

JJ: What did you do there?

VB: I was a matron. I had charge of the laundry. I had to order the laundry for the different departments like the kitchen, the women who did the maintenance work. I had to do all that. I had charge of that taking all that in.

JJ: How was the transition of working in the factory to working in Howland's?

VB: Well it was the only thing that you could get. I didn't want no housework. I got that job on my own. They laid everybody off when the war stopped.

[end of side one]

VB: At that time the unemployment [office] was on Main Street. It looked like about a thousand steps you had to go up to get up to the room. So you had to report every week. They give you a paper. They send you different places. Well this time I really got fed up. Everywhere you go they weren't hiring colored, you know. They would say that they didn't need any more. We went to this place it was a factory, I don't remember what it was. So they took all the white ones first. I was the last one. They let me fill the application and everything. He said "we don't need any more right now but we'll keep you in mind and let you know". You know what that meant. So the next week I went to the unemployment. I said "you stop sending me to places where they don't take colored". "You going to have conflict because all different places in the city". And I says "you sent me to this place and they told me that they hired all the white ones but they

didn't hire me and told me that they didn't need any more". Just like that. So she says "well they still got here for help". I said "yes because they don't hire colored". So she called. She said "I must have misunderstood them". I said "I didn't misunderstand them. I know what they said to me". So she called the place. Every night that ad was still in the paper for help. And they had it on there that they hadn't canceled. That they still needed help then. So she called. "Oh, I see, I see, I see". Then she hung up. She said "well the best thing for you to do is do housework. That's the best kind of thing for your kind of people to do". I said "I don't do my own housework. I ain't going to do your housework". I was mad. You know she didn't like that. But you know every week you go, go, go. They hire all the white ones. It's obvious to see they don't want colored. You go with four or five of us going together. They take all the white ones. When it come to the colored ones they're filled up. Now see they told me that when I told her they said they didn't need any more help, they had enough. She looked over and she said "they didn't cancel it with us. I must have misunderstood them". I said "I didn't misunderstand them". Then she called. She called my name and everything. They have to sign a thing and send it into the office or something. To see that you had been there. You had to leave the slip there. I said "you stop sending me where they don't take colored".

Just like that.

JJ: What was her response?

VB: Well I don't know what they said to her. She said "oh yes, I see". Then she come out and tell me "the best thing for your kind of people is housework". Yes, that's what she told me. It was so funny. I came out and I came downtown. King Cole's used to be right across from Howland's. I went in there. Do you remember that?

JJ: No, I don't.

VB: No. Well King Cole's used to be right across from Howland's. I went in the market and I came out and they had this big sign in the window -- help wanted, non-experience -- like that. So I went in there. I talked to the lady. She said "well you know what -- ". I said "I know what it is. I know what a maintenance job is". But I wanted to work. We had brought up some bills and everything. We just had to work. So I went in there and they hired me right away. I stayed there fifteen years.

JJ: I see.

VB: I got that on my own. I didn't get that through the unemployment [office].

JJ: How was race relations the fifteen years you worked at Howland's?

VB: In Howland's? It was nice because they had different classes that you could go to. You sign up. They didn't have too many colored when I first started. But afterward they started hiring more and more colored. It was nice.

Everybody treated you nice. There was no segregation or nothing. Right now there's so much segregation. They don't want to give the colored person what's due them. A lot of people have good education and everything and it's hard to get a job.

Another thing that I can't understand. The kids come up with these grants and they go and take up these courses. They say they'll get you a job. I know they did it to my grandkids, so I know what I'm talking about. Get them a job when they get through. Well they put them in a job. You know how long that job lasts?

JJ: How long?

VB: A month. Then they lay them off.

JJ: What kind of job was this?

VB: Clerical work and stuff like that.

JJ: Where did they go to school?

VB: It was a grant. They went to different places where they want. Like sometimes they go to the high school. They'll take up a course there, on this grant or whatever it is. But it's just a racket. They're getting the money. They get you a job, yes. They do what they say they'll do. They put you in a job. They put you in a job but these jobs they must be made just for them. Because that's clear and that's good that they give you a job. Well they do. They give you a job but it don't last. One of my grandchildren, my daughter's children, they give her a job at the courthouse. I don't know what she was doing. She last a month. The other one she was

working, her and her mother, both in social security. That was when it was on Lafayette Street. It only lasted a month and they laid her off. Well at least they say they get you a job. They get you a job. That's it. But those jobs are just temporary. They're not steady.

JJ: What do you think needs to be done, or what can we do to improve situations like that, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: Well I guess if somebody just keep on making a fuss, we all get together or something and try to see what can be done. I think it's a shame now. They spent all that time. They go about ten months or something like that.

JJ: Job training kind of a program.

VB: Yes, job training program. Then they get you a job. They get you a job. They fulfill what they say. They'll give you a job. But the job is not lasting.

JJ: Did you have any other experiences that you'd like to talk about, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: I used to be at Model Cities. I was secretary there for the senior citizens. Then I worked on that food program. The program was pretty nice because it got the people out. I don't know what they charge any more or not.

JJ: What do you mean "it got the people out"?

VB: The senior citizens. A lot of people stay in the house. They don't go out. A lot of people the neighbor would come out and they used to deliver the dinners. They used to charge fifty cents. They'd have a well-balanced meal. They'd give you good portions, too.

JJ: Where was this located, the senior citizens?

VB: They had about ten different places where they'd give the meals out. I worked for the model city on Pembroke Street. Bethune, they have it. They have it at Washington, Harbor View. They have one in Marina Village.

JJ: Did they have many on Pembroke where you worked -- senior citizens?

VB: Yellow Mill Village and all around. People used to come from all over. We didn't make no distinction. Then they opened one for the Puerto Ricans in Saint Mary's Church. But that's torn down now I think, on Pembroke Street there.

JJ: How long did you do that?

VB: Well, I was on this program almost four years for the food program. I began to have trouble with my legs. I had to give it up. I couldn't stand.

JJ: Was this part-time?

VB: Yes, four hours a day from ten to two. You go in for ten to two but after you get through cleaning up it's three o'clock, [laughter] They served the meals from twelve to one. Then every day you had to make out the report. They have a log with everybody's name on it. At the end of the month you mark every day they come. At the end of the month you have to add up how many meals each person had. There's alot of work in it.

JJ: You earlier stated that this was sort of an outlet that some of the senior citizens who could go out would come out to get this food. Under ordinary circumstances they did not go out much? It's a rather compact place there.

VB: Well we didn't have the crowd that we should have had with all the senior citizens in that neighborhood. There's alot of senior citizens in that neighborhood but they didn't come out.

JJ: Why?

VB: I don't know. They didn't come out. We had more women come out than we did men. We just had a few men that came to the center. Then they used to go on trips and everything. People that had never been anywhere but just around here, in the senior citizens thing they really opened up for the senior citizens.

JJ: What trips?

VB: Oh, we'd go to different kin of shows. We'd go to the Dutch Country. Then we'd give fashion shows. We'd give Thanksgiving dinners and everything. Our senior citizens we'd used to go to New Haven and then New Haven would come to us. We'd have Thanksgiving dinner and a bunch of senior citizens came to New Haven and had dinner with us. And then we'd go and have dinner and a program. They always had some kind of a program along with it. They had different speakers on one thing or another. It was really nice. I really enjoyed it.

JJ: How do you think the race relationship is now as compared to years ago, Mrs. Bridgeforth? Do you think there are as many oppportunities?

VB: There's more oppportunities now for colored people than there was years ago. Because when I was coming up there was no oppportunities at all for the colored. I was

raised in Rhode Island. Well Rhode Island was always pretty good for colored people there. Because the colored people worked in mills and factories in Rhode Island long before they had them working here in Bridgeport.

JJ: Do you think Blacks take advantage of opportunities that they have?

VB: I think some do and some don't.

JJ: If you were to advise anyone about taking advantage of opportunities what would you tell them, Mrs. Bridgeforth?

VB: I'd tell them to get a good education because that they can't take away from you. Once you got it in you that is something they can't take away from you. The way things look now if you don't have a good education you won't be able to get a good job. That's the way I think.

JJ: The more education you have the better your chances are.

VB: The better your chances are for a good job.

JJ: I want to thank you, Mrs. Bridgeforth, for letting me come into your home and have this interview with you. I've enjoyed it, listening to your experiences. Thank you very much.

End of Interview

