

## 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.

### AAEA Education Committee Members:

DeMise Foster-Bey  
Susan Golson  
David Hicks  
Gwendolyn Johnson  
James Johnson  
Juanita Wright  
Frances Judson, Chairman

### Consultants:

John Sutherland, Ph. D.  
David Palmquist, Curator

PERSONAL DATA

Esley Brown McGriff

430 Birmingham Street, Bridgeport

Born: May 19, 1913 - Newton, Georgia to Lewis and  
Lovenia Brown

Spouse: John McGriff

Children: None

Education: High School

Profession: Housewife, Cook, Caterer

Travel: Nova Scotia, Canada; Hawaii, Mexico, Puerto  
Rico, Haiti, Virgin Islands

Church: Bethel A. M. E.

Organizations: President, Stewardess Board  
Missionary Society

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

Interview by: Gwendolyn Roberts Johnson  
Interview with: Esley Brown McGriff  
Date: November 4, 1983

JOHNSON: Mrs. McGriff, I want you to tell me something about your early childhood. Where were you born?

McGRIFF: I was born in Newton, Georgia, May 19, 1913. Of course, we only lived in Georgia a short time. I was four years old when we came to Bridgeport.

GJ: What did you -- excuse me, go on.

EM: No, I'll let you ask the questions. I shouldn't lead.

GJ: No, I want you to talk as much as you like.

EM: I was four years old when we came to Bridgeport. Of course I consider Bridgeport my home because I have none of the characteristics of the South -- of Georgia. And, of course, I went to school in Bridgeport and grew up here.

GJ: Where did you live in Bridgeport?

EM: When we first came to Bridgeport, we lived on Housatonic Avenue, just across the street from the Bridgeport Brass Company. We lived there for three or four years. My father was a caster at Bridgeport Brass.

As children -- they wouldn't allow you in there -- but we would go to the gates and peep in and see them casting the brass.

GJ: It must have been interesting.

EM: It was interesting to see that hot, molten lava. And we were little devils, you know. We'd go over and peep in there. They'd have to run us away. Because my daddy worked there, we'd go over there and peep.

We lived there until we were approximately -- I was at school age. I started school there, to kindergarten. It was Columbus School at the time. We moved to 207 Beardsley Street in Bridgeport. My father bought this house. And, from then on, of course we went to Newfield School. Newfield was white predominant at that time. Beardsley Street was quite a beautiful place at the time.

GJ: Yes, I heard that.

EM: From Newfield School, at the time, it went to the sixth grade. Then you'd be transferred to Lincoln School.

GJ: Were there all Blacks in your neighborhood or were there --

EM: No, it was a well-mixed neighborhood. Mostly white. At that time there was very few Blacks.

GJ: Is your school still there? You said you went to what school?

EM: Newfield School is still there. Lincoln School burned down a few years ago.

GJ: Not too long ago.

EM: Yes. But that's where I went until the ninth grade. At that time, you went to the ninth grade. Then Harding High was a brand-new facility at the time and from the ninth grade, you would go to Harding.

GJ: What were the student-teacher relationships like?

EM: It was beautiful. It was very nice, really. As yet, there were all white teachers. All white

teachers, but in fact, in all Bridgeport, I don't think there was but one Black teacher which I know of.

GJ: Who was that?

EM: That was Marian Jennings came in, but that was later years. Not when I was a child, not when I was going at that time.

Then, there was another one -- I can't think of her name right now. Whiting, I think. But they didn't have many Black schoolteachers. No.

But we had a nice relationship between the teachers. Because some of those old teachers -- I think of what they taught me -- Now they were wonderful. Some of the old teachers have just died out -- Miss Mooney, Miss Crockett, all those old teachers. They were just wonderful.

GJ: What about the relationships between the students?

EM: Oh, it was very good because, I tell you -- there wasn't so much of -- you didn't notice Black, white in school. You were just schoolmates. At that time, we didn't have so much friction between the races. But, of course, when you went to school at that time, you had your activities outside the school -- you know the Black activities, and they had theirs. You didn't -- When the school ended, that was it. You went home and you didn't pal around as much as people do today. You didn't mingle as much as they do today. Therefore, you didn't have any -- a lot

of trouble. We didn't.

GJ: What grade did you complete, Mrs. McGriff?

EM: The ninth. I was supposed to go to Harding. That was the procedure at that time. But, of course, in my family, there's a great deal of children. It's a big family. Right then you know was the Depression. That was in 19-- , around '27 and '[2]8. That was the Depression then and I had to come and work.

GJ: Were there many Blacks in school with you?

EM: Well, not -- the ratio wasn't like it is today, no. Especially over there. You see, in those days, we had the school system where, if you live in this neighborhood, you go to that school. The neighborhood I lived in was mostly white, so therefore you didn't have many colored -- not too many. That was the way it was then. They called that the neighborhood schools.

GJ: What did you do when you weren't in school?

EM: To tell you the truth, coming from a large family, I had to do a lot of work in helping at home. My mother was a laundress. She did these clothes to help make out. We'd have to help her do. In fact, when I was twelve years old, I could iron a shirt better than I can today. You know those beautiful white Arrow shirts and those things?

GJ: Yes.

EM: Well, I could iron better than I can today because now I don't bother. But then, my mother was very

strict and you had to do it just so. And I had to do an awful lot of work.

GJ: Ironing was an art then.

EM: It was an art. And I had to do quite a bit of work all the way through.

GJ: Did you have many friends?

EM: Yes. We had neighbors' children we grew up with, the children that we grew up with in the neighborhood. All the colored people knew each other. They grew up in the neighborhood -- that sort of thing. Because your mothers' knew them. Yes.

GJ: What did you do for holidays? What kind of celebrations did you have?

EM: We had a nice time, believe it or not, even in those Depression days. You see, my mother being a good cook. It made a difference because she could cook all these lovely things for the holidays -- cakes, pies. She was an excellent cook. Some of the neighbors were also. We would have mostly eats on the holidays. My mother would -- oh, we'd have five or six cakes [laughs] for the holidays and all that sort of thing. Pies, she'd make half a dozen of them, because of the large family. She'd have her pantry just stocked with food like that. Even though it was a Depression, we never -- it didn't bother us like it did some people. You know, saying they didn't have things to eat. We always had plenty because we always worked. The

whole family believe in work, therefore -- You didn't make the money you do today, but it counted up. You could get in those days a pound of pork chops for about twenty cents. Look what you pay for a pound of decent pork chops today.

So you see, it all depends on the management.

Yes.

GJ: What did you do for activities and games? What kind of games did children play?

EM: We had all kinds of dominoes and checkers we'd play. The old standard games, you know, with the family. My father played checkers and my mother played checkers and you'd join in of course.

In those days, the heating situation and all that sort of thing -- We'd all gather in the kitchen. Even if friends come to visit, they'd come to the kitchen. You join in with these games. The family was more important at that time than it is today.

GJ: Yes, I think so. Can you tell me something about courting in those days?

EM: [Laughs.] That was funny. Yes. We'd have -- you know the fellows. You'd meet these young fellows and they'd come visiting. My mother, being strict, they could have certain hours. Certain times you could go out. You could go to a movie occasionally, because movies were ten cents at that time. We'd sit in the living room because at that time, some

times, they'd be cutting back on the heat. Therefore, that living room going to be used when you were entertaining somebody, you see what I mean. So, therefore, that had something to do with it, too. Your house wasn't heated all over like it is today because they had ways of shutting off the registers. It was mostly in the kitchen was where the entertainment centered around that.

We had our courting, you'd have certain days. You couldn't have boys over like people do today. You'd have them on certain days when they'd have the heat and everything [laughs]. But it was really nice.

We had quite a few boyfriends, we girls. We had a lot of fun. In those days, believe it or not, I think they had just as much fun as you do today -- perhaps more.

GJ: Did you attend church?

EM: Yes, religiously. [Laughs.] We had to go to -- we belonged to Zion Church at the time. Of course, my family were Methodists. We went down to A.M.E. Zion. We grew up in Zion Church. Believe it or not, we lived on Beardsley Street and we walked, every Sunday, from the house on Beardsley Street to Zion Church.

GJ: Zion was where it is now?

EM: Right where it is now. It's always been there.

GJ: That's a very old church, isn't it?

EM: It is. It's been there all the time. And we'd walk to the church and walk back.

GJ: Can you remember any of the ministers at that time?

EM: Oh, yes. We had Reverend Watson, Reverend Brown, Reverend Weller -- he was a West Indian minister, he was a lovely man, and we had Reverend -- I can't [remember] because I've been in Bethel so long now

GJ: You've sort of forgotten?

EM: Sort of forgotten. I could if somebody refreshed my memory.

GJ: What kind of recollections do you have about the Depression? I know you were very young then, but I want you to talk about the Depression. What do you remember about the Depression?

EM: It was a time when everybody had to work awfully hard to make ends meet because they just didn't have -- you know. The money was short, jobs were short, and people worked -- they didn't make very much. I remember when I was young, people would work all day as a domestic and slept in and they'd work on and off for twelve, fifteen dollars a week.

GJ: Really?

EM: Yes. Some of them for ten. They'd go out and do day work -- like doing laundry for the day or some housework. They only made -- three dollars was wonderful. Three dollars a day was wonderful. In fact, all of us young girls, up until I was married,

they made three dollars a day and car fare.

GJ: So you just lived with your immediate family. You didn't have any extended family, like grandmother or --

EM: Yes. I could only live with my parents of course, because my grandparents and all were from Georgia. I only knew of them. In fact, my father's father, Jack Brown was a minister. But he died when I was quite young and I didn't know much about him. In fact, there's quite a few ministers in our family but I wasn't around them too much. You see, my parents --

Now, some of my father's people lived in New Jersey. Of course, we saw them because they were close, you see. We could go over and see them. But my grandmother, I saw my grandmother. She came up and visited when I was about twelve years old. My mother's mother -- Mrs. Dunham. She visited us when I was about twelve years old. It was a rare occasion to have. Grandma Dunham was a wonderful cook. She brought in her trunk from down in Georgia. She had made about six cakes of different types. Those Georgia cakes. Let me tell you, you have never eaten fruitcake unless you've eaten a Georgian fruitcake.

GJ: Yes, I'm a Georgian --

EM: Because of butter and everything they made right on the farm. It was just wonderful. She had them

in the trunk, wrapped and wrapped into linen -- wrapped around these cakes and things in her trunk. She brought all these goodies. We kids -- I'll always remember that because I knew she was a wonderful cook. She used to cook down there for the white families. She was a very good cook.

But I don't know too much about them but I do know about my father's people in New Jersey. Now we've seen those aunts and uncles. I have one aunt that was a minister in New Jersey -- my aunt Carrie. She was married to a minister, Reverend Owen, in New Jersey. Then I had another aunt -- my father's sister -- that married another minister, Reverend Coleman. She lived down in Elmwood, New Jersey. So those people I've been around a lot and know them very well -- my Aunt Carrie -- and I have some of their characteristics and all. Then I have my father's oldest sister. She's the oldest one in the family. She's ninety-eight and a half now.

GJ: She's still living?

EM: And living, but she's ill now. But up until she was ninety-seven -- the year her other sister died, my Aunt May Willie died -- and she began to fail. But up until then, if my aunt put on her clothes and walked into a building -- She wore a black wig and she had beautiful clothes. She loved her clothes. She's one of these very dressy-type women. She could pass for fifty-five or sixty years old.

Anyplace. Nobody would ever dream that my aunt -- we call her "Hootie" because she's so stuck-up you know, hoo! -- but her name was Elvia --

GJ: Where does she live now?

EM: She lives in Jersey City, New Jersey, now. If she lives to January 1st, she'll be ninety-nine. She keeps telling when people tell her age, we'll say "ninety-eight" and she'll say "ninety-eight and a half" because she's hoping to reach that hundred. She really trying very hard.

So, I know that side of the family very, very well.

GJ: Can you tell me some of the things people did to try to survive during the Depression period?

EM: The most people could do would work. [Laughs.]

GJ: Did they show any special talents for surviving?

EM: Oh, yes. They're born with that. I think they're survival tactics come from back in slavery. Frankly, those people know how to survive. They know how to make ends meet. They knew how to spread a dollar and make it count, make every penny count. They taught us to be very thrifty. Today I'm always out someplace looking for a bargain. Sometimes I waste money, but I'm out looking for a bargain.

So, they really knew how to survive and they knew how to do more than people do today. My mother could sew, cook, do all those things where today people can't sew and embroider and do these

things. Of course you have to pay more if you don't know how to do these things. But if you know how to sew and how to cook and how to manage money, you can get by. You can survive. It's a matter of knowledge -- knowing how to do these little household tasks and chores and how to make and stretch a buck. That's the idea -- stretch the dollar. People today have lost that because they never knew it. They never grew up with it. My mother knew how to take a soup bone and make a pot of soup. She made sure the soup bone had meat on it. She'd make a pot of soup and put little dumplings -- she'd mix them with cornmeal -- and [put] dumplings on the top and all kinds of vegetable in this soup. That was a meal! She could feed her family on that. She would always have a beautiful dessert. That made up for it. You'd have all your -- you see, you had to know -- they knew about nutrition. They knew about that way back. We survived and we were very healthy.

GJ: What about medical care -- childbirth and that type of thing?

EM: In those days -- I know, I've seen people have children -- not actually saw them, but I knew that they did. They would have the doctor or midwife come to the house and the baby was born right in the house. The family was right there and everything. They managed very well. They didn't have the care

that people have today, the nurses and all. Of course they had the visiting nurses. At that time, visiting nurses were very, very busy because people would have the children, even with the midwives, the visiting nurses came in and took care of the baby and helped.

GJ: The babies were born in the home?

EM: Yes, mostly in the homes. Very few in [the hospital].

Because I have brothers and sisters that were born right in the house on Beardsley Street. When my mother was ill, she sent for my father on the job. We'd go get the father and he'd come home and the baby'd -- we'd hear it cry when it was first born.

GJ: That wasn't uncommon for the doctor to make visits --

EM: No. They would come out at ten and twelve o'clock at night. You try to get a doctor today at that time. They'd come out and be with you when you'd birth the baby and sometimes it's a ridiculous hour. That's all they did at that time was house calls. Doctors were more of a friends than they are today. They knew the family and they'd sit and talk until these things happened. It was just like the old stories. You see the old movies of the doctor sitting talking with the family. It's the same idea.

GJ: Now I know you were in Bridgeport during World War II. What can you tell me about that period? What do you remember most about World War II?

EM: World War II. I'll tell you, that World War II was in -- what year was that, 1940 --

GJ: Yes. It started in the '30's but America's involved in the '40's.

EM: It was in the '40's. Of course, at that time I was grown and married. My husband didn't have to go, but he was working. He didn't have to go at the time. You see, this is the second marriage for me. My first husband was working at the time and he didn't have to go at the onset of it.

GJ: So you were married to your first husband during World War II?

EM: I married my first husband in '35. That was just before World War II.

GJ: And you were married to him how long?

EM: In 1940, '39, we were divorced. So you see that's why I said -- he had to -- He went into the Army after that. But the second husband, John McGriff, that I married in 1940 didn't have to go because he had his age. And then my husband had had some illness anyhow. He didn't have to go -- the second husband. He worked in the Brass and the deferred they called that -- on the job defense work. Of course, I went out and did some defense work too during World War II.

It was really World War II prosperity began to come back. All before that it was terrible. When I was married to the first husband, it was awful. He worked at the W.P.A. they called it. Fifteen

dollars a week was all he made. It was hard -- a struggle. Rents were much cheaper. You got a \$18 rent was nice in those days. If it hadn't been for the fact that everything was cheap, I don't know how people would have survived.

But when World War II came in, everything began to skyrocket. Property began to be valued more. You had to pay more taxes, you had to -- Everything escalated a little bit in World War II. Of course you were making the money but you was spending it also because the prices just escalated.

GJ: During that time, Bridgeport was an industrial area. I know that people came from everywhere here.

EM: Came here, and when they did, my husband and I purchased a house over on Linen Avenue. We had girls room. It's so hard for people to find somewhere to go. They had come to our house over on Beardsley Street. When we were first married, we lived on 80 Beardsley Street. My husband bought that house and we had rent -- tenants of course. But we couldn't take in people. People were coming looking for somewhere to stay. So we purchased that house on Lennon Avenue --

GJ: You're talking about you and Mr. McGriff?

EM: Yes. We purchased that house on Lennon Avenue and we had young girls came in. We had nothing but girls in there. We ran that for about five years -- four years.

At the time, I did all the laundry and everything over there. I had twelve, fifteen people staying there.

GJ: Yes. [Rest of statement unclear.]

EM: I had a couple of couples, there to help look after the place because we didn't live there. But I had to do all the laundry and everything. So I used to work. I have worked hard.

GJ: Yes. I understand there was a lot of money flowing around Bridgeport at that time.

EM: It was and we made very good. It was really a -- That's when we got back out of the Depression. That war really brought us out of the Depression. Everything escalated -- the taxes, everything went up.

GJ: Did you notice the change in race relations at that time?

EM: Yes, there was quite a bit of change in race relations when so many people came in here from the South and from various places. Then the racial tension began. I think it brought more of it because, of course, they were flooding out Bridgeport with a lot of colored. You know, bringing them in. I noticed the tension, yes. Very much so.

GJ: Did Black neighborhoods change?

EM: Yes, they did because colored people began to move into predominantly Black neighborhoods. That's what the step -- That's what spoiled the East Side. Before it was well-mixed. Then when the war came,

the white moved out and the Black moved in. That's what changed Beardsley Street and all over in there. Stratford, it was all Jewish and Italians and Irish when I grew up. A few German and a few colored. It was well [mixed]. But then, it became predominantly Black. They came in. That's when tension really came about -- when they made it predominantly Black.

GJ: Now after the war, was work hard to get?

EM: After the war, yes. Because everything began to go down. When things suddenly began to peter off, then that's makes everybody fighting to get in there. Then that's where the tension with Black and white, you see, because the Black was the last one hired, first one fired. Of course, that always prevailed.

GJ: Were living conditions any different from what they had been?

EM: Yes, because after the rooming situation where so many people -- You see, when I grew up in that neighborhood, the houses -- like you have four tenants or a four-family house or it was a three-family house with a three-tenant, three families. That was all in there and they probably have two children or one child. But after the war, they'd gotten so used to piling up so many people. Like some of the Puerto Ricans came, there'd be where there was two people there'd be fifteen. Not in that one flat. So, that's what made all the trouble and made so much -- And that tore the house [up]. The

house was already old and you put ten or fifteen people on one facility where it was for one. Even electricity -- the power wasn't sufficient because they're bringing these ice boxes, bringing in this. See they didn't have all that way back then -- ice boxes and all. Those houses weren't wired for these things. The furnaces, nothing was fixed to carry the load that was required when so many -- [End of side one.]

[Interruption of tape occurs here. Side two begins mid-sentence.]

GJ: Were you aware of the social upheaval during the Sixties? During the demonstrations when the students were demonstrating?

EM: Yes, I was aware of it because that brought out some of the meanness in people. They'd have snide remarks and things like that. Well, things that were going on -- that brought out an awful lot of hostility as well as to bring our point across. It was quite a time, really. The marching -- I think at that time, even the children suffered a little more, trying to integrate, going into places. Now I know myself when children moved to this school over here, Thorne School, it was all white -- the neighborhood school. When they brought those Negro kids over here, I could hear from the neighbors the remarks that weren't very pleasant. "Why did they bring them over here because they

don't know to act, they don't know how to do this and that and the other." They seemed to feel that it would make their race inferior to mingle with the Black children. Some of them took their children out and put them in parochial schools because they said they didn't want associating with Negroes.

GJ: Did you participate in any of the marches or any of the activities?

EM: No, I tell you, I didn't. I was home and working. No, I did not participate in any of those marches.

GJ: Did Bridgeport as a whole?

EM: Bridgeport as a whole didn't do too much.

GJ: You don't know of any groups that went on marches?

EM: No. Of course there was a few people that went down to this march I understand in late years but at time I wasn't aware of it. Some people were active and now I think they belonged to lodges and things. They had groups and they went down. But I never participated in that sort of thing. When it first started and we heard about it and they were trying to integrate some of those little children, I was fearful of it, myself. Because the little children would be the ones to suffer -- go to school where there were the kids [who] didn't want them, boycotted -- and I felt that they were pushing it a little too far.

You see, sometimes even though you are a group and you're really striving for the benefit of the group, sometimes you feel that they go a little far

and things. At that time, that's how I felt -- that I wouldn't send my children off somewhere to be thrown rocks at and all those things. I felt that they were pushing it a little too far.

GJ: Now you have been living in Bridgeport a long time. Can you see where the civil rights movement has made room for changes in Bridgeport? For example, in neighborhoods and attitudes of Blacks, whites, and that kind of thing?

EM: Well, to be frank, no. Not too much. It has helped perhaps in jobs, like having a quota and that sort of thing. It has brought in -- now, in employment it has helped tremendously, like teachers. We didn't have -- this is rare to have so many Black teachers. And for people to -- It helped in that respect.

But in another way, some of it has brought -- you know, I was disappointed in some of it to be frank with you. Because it hasn't progressed as far as I thought it might. It hasn't -- Hatred is deep-seated. You cannot -- you can bring people to the point where they feel -- well, I just will not accept you. They just will not accept. Some people -- white -- it's in them and they will not accept Black as their level, their equal. And a lot of them have that in them. It'd take a lot more to get it out. But it has helped in employment because they have to hire Black and Black has gotten some jobs that I never thought they would have.

Now, for instance, I never thought there'd be a Black mayor of any town, there'd never be Black people in the politics that there are. I never thought so. But that has come about from this change -- from the civil rights movement. It has wrought a lot of changes but then it has also wrought a little bit of upheaval.

GJ: So you think employment has improved?

EM: Yes, tremendously, yes. In factories as well as in every field, employment has [improved]. Even in the government, they have had to bring Black in where they never had them in some responsible positions. Because I know my brother went into the Internal Revenue and look how he's advanced and everything. It's changed. It made a tremendous change.

GJ: How did the Viet Nam conflict affect you? Or did it?

EM: Viet Nam didn't affect me because I have no children, I have no husband that was involved. It didn't affect me very much because I don't have -- in fact, only a few relatives that have young children that were in that. So it hasn't really done too much to affect me, but of course the thoughts of it and it doing to other people affected me mentally. I didn't like it. You don't like to see suffering and things that seem useless and things that you feel could be avoided. You don't like to see that. It gives you a feeling of insecurity.

GJ: I am going to close this interview. I want to ask you is there anything that I have not asked about that you think is important and you would like to tell me.

EM: Well yes. I think that you should know that colored people have a right to learn everything that they can, a right to advance themselves in every way they can -- even if they're grown and old. If you want to do something, I think you should pursue it. You should take lessons if you didn't have the opportunity to finish school. Don't let that stop you. Just go on and take lessons and take little short courses. Go ahead and do the things that you really want to do.

I like to sing and I liked those sort of things. I took up courses and lessons. I went on to advance that. I think anybody should. No matter how old one should get -- [one] should pursue whatever they feel they want to do.

GJ: Did you take piano lessons too?

EM: No. I took singing but my teacher taught me some of piano. I didn't take the -- that is to say, go to a piano teacher, no. That is one thing I am going to do.

GJ: But you do play, don't you?

EM: I know, but at seventy I am going to start taking lessons in piano. Yes, I will. Because you see, after your voice goes, you can still play.

GJ: Yes.

EM: Anything I want -- I take sewing lessons, I take all kinds of things. Anything I wanted to do -- I took it. I took interior decorating, anything I liked, I did it. And those little short courses -- I enjoyed it. It was like a lark for me, really, to go out and to socialize with people for that short period that I've taken these course, twenty or thirty weeks. It was nice and I enjoyed it. At seventy, I feel that I am going to still take music.

GJ: That's wonderful.

EM: I'm going to go on.

GJ: That's wonderful. I want to thank you so very much. This has been a wonderful interview.

EM: I am very grateful that you asked me to do it, I was happy to do it.

[End of Interview.]