

## 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

Robert Alexander Thompson

1033 Black Rock Turnpike, Fairfield

Born: April 28, 1908, Rochester, New York

Spouse: Realand Thompson

Children: None

Education: Post Graduate College

Profession: Former High School Administrator

Travel: Continental United States

Church: Walters Memorial A. M. E. Zion

Organizations: Omega Psi Phi Fraternity

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

Interview by: Juanita Wright  
Interview with: Robert Thompson  
Date: Fall, 1983

WRIGHT: Mr. Thompson, according to our questionnaire that we received from you, you were born in Rochester, New York, April 20, 1908. Could you tell me when you came to Bridgeport?

THOMPSON: My mother and father were separated. We came to Stratford when I was a baby, so I can't exactly tell you how old I was.

JW: But you were an infant when you first came here. Do you remember what your mother did when you were a child -- what kind of work she did?

RT: She did housework. It was a permanent job in one place. She was cook and domestic keeper. In fact, she ran the whole house.

JW: So she was sort of a housekeeper? When did you actually leave Stratford to come to Bridgeport? Do you remember that?

RT: Well, we left -- I roomed with her.

My mother worked for a rich lady, Miss Fairchild. She was a relative of the Fairchild's of Bridgeport. My mother had complete charge of the house -- cooking, cleaning, and all the domestic work in the house.

I resided with -- he was known as Deacon Johnson and his family on Stratford Avenue in Stratford. When I became of school age, I went to Stratford public schools until fourth or fifth grade.

In the meantime, my mother had bought a house

in Stratford and negotiated buying one in Bridgeport. The one in Bridgeport was a two-family house with an unfinished attic. So she received revenues from two-families. She decided to make the room in the attic -- finish the attic off. So I stayed up there.

So, the tenants -- sort of overseers. The first one I can't remember the name. She lived on the second floor. On the first floor for a number of years lived Mr. and Mrs. Harold Carter.

JW: You were alone in the apartment and they just oversaw you while your mother was working? You didn't have any other sisters and brothers? You were the only child?

RT: Only child.

JW: That was an unusual undertaking for your mother during that time, wasn't it -- to buy a house and then buy another house?

RT: Oh, yes. But she would have been very successful. She really got in with it. A new organization was here. The Congregation Developing Corporation. In some way, because I wasn't old enough to realize it at the time, she had means to buy a house in Stratford and they raised the mortgage to a double mortgage. It wasn't much in those days. There was a lot of money in that. She had it paid down to maybe seven or eight hundred dollars. They raised it up to thirteen. I remember the thirteen number. That was a lot

of money for her.

JW: Oh, yes.

RT: Everything was going nicely until she died.

JW: Were you a young man when she died?

RT: I was eighteen, nineteen. But being her only child, she never confided in me about business.

So it went into estate and a lawyer was put in charge as executor. This is off the record.

[Interruption of tape occurs here.]

JW: [Would you] explain some of your school activities for me? Where did you go to school in Bridgeport?

RT: When I came from Stratford, I entered school at Newfield. I went through there to I think it's fifth grade, sixth grade. Seventh and eighth we had at Lincoln School. From Lincoln School I went to Kossuth Street High.

JW: Was that high school on Kossuth Street?

RT: Kolbe. It was a high school for Bridgeport.

JW: Oh, I see.

RT: In the meantime, Harding was being built. So the second year, I went to Harding and I graduated.

JW: Were there many Blacks in school with you when you went to school as a young man?

RT: About thirty or forty.

JW: There were that many?

RT: Yes.

JW: How many of them actually graduated with you?

RT: The one that I remember -- Merv Rivers.

JW: You also mention a Deacon Johnson. Where did he live?

RT: He lived in Stratford, right next to the First Baptist Church. In fact, he was one of the mainstays of the First Baptist Church. He was senior deacon. He owned part of that property which is now -- It goes all the way back along side of the church, all the way back to that road that comes in.

JW: Oh my goodness, on that corner where the Stratford Town Fair is? On that corner there?

RT: No, not that corner. It's straight. What's that street that goes -- South Avenue?

JW: I think it is South Avenue.

RT: He owned almost to South Avenue.

JW: Oh my goodness. Now when you were in school, did you participate in any activities in school?

RT: When I went to Harding, I was the first Black football player. And basketball. I was going to play baseball, but that's when my mother died. When I went out for baseball, I went out and she died. By the time I got back, they had the team selected.

JW: So your mother passed while you were in high school, but you went on to finish?

RT: Yes.

JW: How did you manage that in that day and age?

RT: Well, I stayed in with an aunt, Mattie Mebane. She had come to Bridgeport after my mother had

inveigled her to come to Bridgeport. Because she was from North Carolina

So she and her husband came up here and I stayed with them. Let me get this straight now. It's a long time ago.

JW: Yes, you have to think about it.

RT: When I first came to Bridgeport, I stayed in my mother's house on the third floor. As I tell you the lady on the second floor, Mr. and Mrs. Carter had just got married. Then this lady moved out and Mr. and Mrs. Carter, they took the second floor. So they looked after me. Then when my mother had died, I went to stay with my aunt. Then, from there, the daughter of Deacon Johnson had married and gone to Hartford, and they asked me to come up there for a holiday -- Christmas holiday, Thanksgiving. I stayed up there about six months. I had graduated from high school then, but I didn't know how I was going to do anything else. I had been out of high school about three years.

I met Frank Simpson who was the head of the Civil Rights Commission. I used to go to church and he asked me if I was interested in going to school. I said yes. He said, "Well, I can get you into the school I graduated from." I said, "What school is that?" He said, "Tougaloo [College]". I said, "Too goo what?" So he went on to explain

it to me and he made arrangements. I went to Tougaloo College. And there's a story in that, too.

JW: Okay, well let's hear it. I want to hear it all.

RT: Originally he was going to go to this school and take me and there was a Reverend Tillman, the pastor of the A.M.E. Zion Church in Hartford -- his son was going too. He was going to take both of us down. But as he started south, he decided that he wouldn't go because he was going to stop somewhere else. He didn't just put us out, but he asked us could we make it. So we said yes. I got a free education from the time we left him. We went to -- Tillman happened to know the minister -- because his father knew the minister -- from Chattanooga, Tennessee. That's where we stopped. We stayed there all night. So we got our heads together and we shipped our bags to Tougaloo College. We didn't have any money.

JW: I was just about to ask you.

RT: [Laughs.] But we said let's get these bags out of the way. We shipped our bags to Tougaloo College. The next thing, we went and we said, we don't have a lot of money. So we went down where the hobos hopped the trains, we went to Hobo Junction. Now there's a difference between a hobo and a Hobo always has money, always has nice clothes -- he just don't like to stay put. He goes from

place to place, and he'll work anywhere he can work. So we got to this Hobo Junction. They looked for the little money we had. The hobos knew we were [unclear] . One of them took a liking to us and he says, "I'm going to tell you something, if you got any money, don't put it all together. Put some in your shoe, if you got a money belt put some in your money belt, put some in your pocket. Don't put it all together." He said, "Come on over here and eat." They had their fire and we ate. He said, "Tell me something, where are you going?" We said, "We want to go to Mississippi." " [unclear] ."

So, that night, we hopped the train. They told us all about different kinds of trains. There's the local and then there was the Manifest that was the fast one. The Manifest was the merchandise one. [They] said, "Now, at certain spots on the road, the train's going to stop to get water. Get off, because they're going to make their rounds to see if anybody's on the train." So we did, but they didn't tell us that the guy's sometimes makes a second run. So what happened was, we got back on the train. Pretty soon, they saw us. They wouldn't have known anything about it, but some dude in this cattle car where I was lit a cigarette. It shone like everything -- fluorescent light. [Lights.]

[Laughs.] So that guy opened that door, he says, "Everyone of you so-and-sos come out of there." Two or three came out of there and he whacked them. I said, man, they're going to whack me. Somebody went out the other side and, man, I think I was the second one out. Running down the road in the south, didn't know where I was. We ran, I ran, followed some of them guys who knew what they were doing. One fellow went up to a man, one of these convicts, was out on the road, going to repair. Don't you know the guy followed him up there and beat him up. But I was way over somewhere else. So says, "Now, they have told us, don't go right away -- wait 'til the train stops, then go and get it." So we waited, I don't know how many hours. I was between a box car and a coal car going south. [Laughs.]

JW: My God, you all could have gotten killed.

RT: We were young. It didn't phase us. So we got to Alabama. We had to wait over. That night we slept on a lumber pile and we saw [unclear].

JW: Oh, my goodness.

RT: That sounds horrible.

JW: I know it. My goodness.

RT: The next day we got some food and we found this other train. We got on the train. I happened to look out and saw "Scottsboro, Alabama." I said, "Oh, Lord, look at this, this is where the girl

claimed the colored folks raped her." I said, "I hope we get through this." But the train slowed down. I said, "Bill, we got to get off this train." He said, "Man, this is Scottsboro." So, they had these cobblestones along. The hoboes had told us put your foot down, if it pulls it too fast, don't get off. Wait until it goes up a grade and it'll slow down. We waited and I put my foot down and pulled it up. I said, "You'd get killed this way." It went up a grade and finally, we tried to get off a little too quick. I must have run from here to my backyard to keep from falling. Those little cobblestones looked at me right in my face. But I didn't fall. Then we went to a country store and we bought some bologna and hard rolls. We just wanted to fly away.

Finally, we got to Meridian, Mississippi. We were almost there, but we were still about seventy miles away from Jackson. Must have been more because it costs us, I can remember for the two of us -- we got two tickets. I wouldn't let Tillman handle the money because he was crazy. So I handled the money. So when we got through paying the fares, I had fifty cents left.

JW: Oh my goodness. [Laughs.]

RT: Fifty cents. So we got on the bus, and of course we had to sit in the back seat. And don't you know when I got off that bus somebody had rolled

me for that fifty cents.

JW: For the fifty cents!

RT: I had the bus driver come back there and tear up all the back seats [laughs] looking for my fifty cents. So -- couldn't find it. I said, "Where are we going to stay now?" So you know what we did? We did the unforbidden. We went and stayed in the Jackson, Mississippi, railroad station all night long. No stragglers are supposed to be in there. Don't you know we stayed there and nobody bothered us. I said the Good Lord sure was with us.

JW: He was watching over your shoulders.

RT: We stayed all night. I guess we slept most of the time. That morning we got up. I guess we had a few rolls and bologna left. We asked somebody, "Where is Tougaloo? How far is Tougaloo?" "Seven miles."

So, we started walking to there. And that was the longest seven miles. [Laughs.]

JW: Did you walk the full way?

RT: Yes, how [else] we going to get there?

JW: I thought somebody might have picked you up.

RT: No, people were going by but they didn't pick us up. What happened was that the -- I think one of the coaches was going to town. He must have said, "When I come back and I see you, I'll pick you up" or something like that. But he was

in a hurry. He was going to town. But we got -- it was Tougaloo. Pretty soon, we saw a big iron gate -- Tougaloo College. Oh boy. But you know after we saw that gate, we had to walk from here up to Frederick's I guess before we got to the campus. [Laughs.]

We get to the campus -- "who are you?" They didn't expect us.

JW: They wasn't looking for you?

RT: They were looking for us, but they weren't looking for us that early. Certain times the building grounds always had someone, some of the youngsters -- especially fellows, girls too -- they used to come in early. Of course, they'd put what work they'd do on their account. Here we are, two strangers coming in, no money, and we're going to work. Well, we're cutting somebody else out. I don't know how it was resolved, but anyhow, we went to work.

Then, some of the kids was coming in, you know -- trickling in. We went down the truck and got their bags, put them on, put them off. That was fine. We got meals and a place to stay. I said, "Well, if you never played football, you're going to play football now." I had played football but I said, you're going to play some football this fall.

JW: You got to stay in school.

RT: You'd better stay in school. But I had never heard

of [unclear].

I had to go see the treasurer. He said, "Where's your money?" "Somebody's going to send it in a couple weeks." [Laughs.]

JW: Oh my goodness.

RT: We had to have some kind of story. The first day he wouldn't let us go to class. Then the next day he said, "Let them go to class."

They was an acting president -- President Orson -- I never will forget it. He was the acting president of the school. There was another school in New Orleans which finally united with another school down there named Gilbert --

So we were there, football season practice started. I went out there and I played my head off. So I made the team. Then, during the season, this superintendent of building and grounds -- he was going to get even with us in some ways. On a Saturday now, he know we played in the afternoon. All us boys were supposed to rest in the morning. He going to make us work in the morning. So, one day I was out there raking leaves in the morning and the coach says, "Thompson, aren't you going to play football this afternoon?" I said, "Yes, sir." "Well what you doing raking leaves now?" I said, "Mr. Griffin assigned me." "Well, you go to your room and lie down and take your rest and if anybody asked why you did, you tell them

President Orson told you to go sit down." I went in and sat down and everything was fine. I didn't hear nothing more until after football season. Because they hadn't received the first cent except for what we had done about a week or so before school began.

I said, "Well, I have to make the basketball team." [Laughs.] So I went out and made the basketball team.

JW: You made the basketball team, too?

RT: Yes. [Laughs.] So I was in, didn't have to worry --

JW: Did you stay there the whole four years?

RT: That's where -- that's what happened. I put --

[End of side one.]

[Break in taped conversation occurs here -- resumes in mid-sentence.]

RT: -- to stay. The superintendent of buildings and grounds, he didn't want me to stay. He was still mad because I was one of them that came in to work. He didn't like us. He gave me poor ratings. But we had a house mother, Mrs. Tullis. She was from North Dakota. She said, "If I was going to grade Robert, I would give him a straight A." That did it. I stayed all summer. He got fired. They brought a new janitor. But I'd been there all summer and I knew everything about the place then. This new janitor took a liking to me and he said to me, "Where's this?" and I'd tell him,

"Where's that?" and I'd find it for him. Finally came to the time they were doling out jobs. He said, "You've been so good to me, helping me around here. I've got to give you a good job. You want to ring the bell?" I said, "No-oo." Because you had to be on the campus all the time, you had to ring it every hour. "No, I don't want that one." It paid good, but I don't want that. There was another job he talked about. He said, "I don't know what I'm going to do?" Finally he said, "How would you like to be student superintendent of building and grounds?" I said, "That's the job I want. Do you think I can do it?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Yes, I'll try it."

JW: You knew you wanted that job.

RT: They threw brother rabbit in the briar patch because that's just the job I was looking for, see? And oh, did I get a ribbing. They said they gave the worst guy on the campus the keys to all the buildings. They used to kid me all the times.

People would come to me instead of going to the building superintendent because he didn't know where the stuff was. He had to come to me anyway to find out where it was. Because I had been there all summer so I stayed there my sophomore year, my junior year. I was going to stay down there until I graduated. But a nurse and the president's secretary, said, "No, he's been

down here. He needs to go home for a rest." They got together and got some money together and sent me home for the summer. They said, "He'll get a job up there and he'll make a lot more money than he'll make down here." Well, naturally, they were right but it's a matter of getting a job. I was home a week and no job. And then I went to a place -- I don't even remember when it was -- the guy would open up the place and soon close it up. The one thing funny about it was I went to him one day and said, "What kind of pies do you got? The customer wants to know." He said, "Just tell them we got pie."

JW: Just "pie"?

RT: [Laughs.] You see, he was running on a shoestring. That folded up. I was lucky enough to get a job -- What's that place in Westport, it's on the green?

JW: In Westport, on the green?

RT: No. Used to be --

JW: Oh, Putnam Inn.

RT: Yes, Putnam Inn. It used to be in Westport. I got a job there and boy, I started making money.

JW: Really?

RT: Oh, I started making money.

JW: Were you waiting tables?

RT: Yes.

JW: What year was this? Do you remember?

RT: 1937. Yes, because I graduated in '38. I almost -- a couple of people were trying to mess me up.

The cook liked me. The reason he did was because I took a customer one night. Nobody was in the dining room. It was a certain guy's customer and he wasn't there. The people wanted to be served and I'm after money. I went on and served him. This waiter went to the boss and told him that he didn't like me. His son was the head of it. The boss says, well, guess we'll have to fire him. The cook heard about it and he said, "You fire him -- you fire me." So that passed on.

When I found out they're going to fire me -- I asked the Good Lord many times to forgive me -- I started stealing -- [laughs] -- I worked overtime and I'd put the order in. I'd come back and pick up the order. I'd never bring none of the money back. I'd put it all in my pocket. That was after I found out they were going to fire me. It wasn't right but I was young then.

JW: You can't help it. You're going back to school.

RT: I'm going back to school. So when I went back to school, I had a new suit -- two new suits. I had a elbow trunk keep things around in.

[unclear]

I went to the treasurer. It was a new treasurer -- she'd been there three years. I went to her and I said I feel good because this is the first time I can give you some money. [Laughs.] I paid my tuition and I graduated in 1938.

JW: Now during the Depression, the Depression started around 1928, 1929. Do you remember anything about the Depression? Could you tell me some of the things that might have happened to you during that time?

RT: You go out and look for a job, you couldn't find it. You have holes in your shoe, you go find a piece of cardboard put it in it. It get wet, you scuffing around. The hole would go through and go get another piece. I used to say, we'd eat  
? meals -- eat one and skip two.

JW: [Laughs.] Did you attend the local church in your young years when you were young?

RT: Yes, A.M.E. Zion.

JW: The same church you're in now, the A.M.E. Zion? That's a long time.

RT: Yes.

JW: Was your mother involved in the church at that time or was she too busy working?

RT: No, she was a member of the A.M.E. Zion at that time, but she -- as she got older -- since she was in Stratford, she started going to Stratford at night. That's where she died. Well, she didn't die, when she had a stroke.

JW: Do you remember anything about World War I at all? You were too young?

RT: All I remember of World War I was when it was over I was at the firehouse. I loved to get on the

fire engine and ring the gong.

JW: [Laughs.] Now after you finished school in 1938, you came back to Bridgeport?

RT: Yes.

JW: Were you able to get a job after your graduation?

RT: I had taken the exam to teach, but I was in the dry cleaning business, what you call it. When they called me, the first time they called me for a substitute job, I was at my place. They called me. I don't remember if I have that or not, I had a book for it.

[Interruption of tape occurs here.]

JW: One thing you just said, you said you were in the dry cleaning business. Where was that?

RT: On Newfield Avenue.

JW: And that was in what -- the early Forties?

RT: Yes. I was in it until I went into the service.

JW: Were you married? Did you get married at that time, early in your life?

RT: No. I didn't marry until I came out of the service.

JW: Do you remember anything about the war period during World War II? Anything dramatic happen or anything happen to you during that time?

RT: Well, mostly Army stuff. I know a bunch of officers came out of Tuskegee -- Black officers. They were assigned to my group. They were Second Lieutenants. They had no more than hit the place when our white Lieutenants were made First Lieutenants.

JW: To put them above them right away. That's par  
for the course.

RT: They could treat them like sergeants. One thing  
to say about and I'll be done with it. A bunch  
of us was going to church one day in Austin, Texas.  
We got up early to go to church. We were wondering  
why there was so much line when we got up to the place.  
The white folks were going to church too, and going  
into town. All of us -- going to church, going  
to town, visit friends, looking for a good time --  
just like anybody else. They were taking all the  
white soldiers first. If there wasn't enough white  
soldiers, if they had enough room in the back seat,  
they let about five or six go in the back. But most  
of the first ones were all whites. By the time  
we got in town, I was mad as a wet hen.

JW: You couldn't get in?

RT: No, because we had to wait until the lines went down.  
Then, I remember one time when I was in Texas. I  
was coming home on a furlough. I was only a PFC  
then. I was in a Jim Crow car. That car was no  
bigger than this room. It was crowded, there was  
no room for [unclear] . So I said to another  
soldier, [unclear] . Here's  
an empty coach right next to us -- nobody's sitting  
in it. Let's sit in there. Ticket collector come  
-- he had to struggle over bags and everything  
else to go. So when next we said no sir, sit

there. Ticket collector and somebody else was way up the end of that coach. [unclear]

So they went out and got an MP. When they came back, he said, "That's the nigger." What did he say that for? I reached out and I was trying to get my hands on him and I was going to hit him. A fellow Marine stopped me before I could grab onto him. Because I was [unclear].

JW: You probably should have.

RT: The fellow says to me -- he happened to be a Northern boy -- and he said, "I know how this is. I don't like it either, but complain any more it could get you in trouble. I could take care. You could lose your furlough, you get demoted. It's not worth it. I don't like it either. I don't blame you for what you wanted to do. But don't do it." I remember that.

JW: After you came back, after the war, you came back home. Did you get married at that time?

RT: In '48.

JW: In '48, you did get married. Did you get a job when you came back home? Was it easy for you to get a job?

RT: I had a job when I came back home. See I had the store at Congress, oh about -- at the beginning of the year before I went in the service. I went to see --

[Interruption of tape occurs here.]

RT: -- Then one night we were in the Philippines. We had just landed in the Philippines. [unclear]

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They had put us in the wrong place. We were only five miles from the front line.

JW: Oh my goodness.

RT: Some of us were starting to run. An officer down the road told us, "Don't you fellows run, I'll shoot." Someone said, "We've got guns back there. Let's go back and get them." We went back and opened those boxes. That's where it came in good to know your gun and could put it together blindfolded. I put every piece of my gun together and got my self about fifty rounds of ammunition. I said, "Well, if I go tonight, somebody's going with me. [Laughs.]

JW: It's good that you knew how to do it and they were there.

RT: Well, we all knew -- we all put [them together]. All night we heard "ping, ping" -- somebody shooting, you know. But we didn't get hit.

JW: That's good you got back home safe. That was good. You didn't get wounded in the service. That was good you got back.

RT: I was in an area that got pretty much shelled, so I got a ribbon for having to be in that area.

JW: But it's good that you didn't get hurt. Now, you

got married when you came back from the service?

RT: Yes.

JW: Did you have any children during that time?

RT: No.

JW: You weren't here during the rationing and that sort--

RT: Yes, I was.

JW: You were here during the rationing?

RT: Before I went in the service, I served on the rationing --

JW: You served on the rationing board?

RT: What happened was I served in the distributing you see. Two things [unclear] and they put me in charge. Everybody came in had to come by me at first. So you know how long those corridors are. A couple of dudes didn't want to face me. They went all the way down the hall and I let them walk.

One guy in particular -- he didn't like to work with me. I didn't have to do what I did, but technically I did. When they come there, I was supposed to see their driver's license and something else they'd get. He was showing it to me. I said, "May I have it?" I took it out the case and --

JW: Was this a Black guy? He didn't want to --

RT: Yes. I just took it and took my time reading it and put it back in the case and said, "Thank you."

He had another one and I said, "May I see that one?" I did that one the same way. I took it out and then put it back, "Thank you." All very nice, I was buttery. And the more buttery I got, the more angry he got. [Laughs.]

JW: Because he didn't want to be bothered with you and you were in charge.

RT: Yes. Then, I told my wife about we had a gal come up here one night and I'm distributing. I had to get all the information like we get. I'm writing the thing -- like hair color, eye color. I said, "What color are your eyes?" She said, "You see, don't you?" I said what's she trying to do? [Laughs.]

JW: She was trying to flirt.

RT: That's right. So she did something extra.

Then, we had another one that didn't speak English. I had just enough Spanish to know what she was talking about. I think it was Miss Hoosit, the one that was Second Superintendent before. Not the Jewish superintendent.

JW: The Assistant Superintendent?

RT: No. I guess you weren't here. Anyhow, she was there and she says, "Mr. Thompson, can you speak a little Spanish?" I said, "Yes." She says, "Can you read it?" I said, "Yes, I can read it better than I can speak it." [unclear]

That girl was sick.

JW: I'm sure she was. Did you notice any difference

between the living patterns after World War II and after World War I? Was there a difference between the two for Blacks in Bridgeport?

RT: World War I, I wouldn't know. But now from World War I to World War II, I think there was a better feeling among all groups than there is now. Because on Beardsley Street, it was a mixed street. We kids used to go in the whites' houses, and the whites used to come over [to ours]. We'd eat out their pot and they ate out our pot. We had an all-nation baseball team. A couple of Polish kids, a couple of Jewish kids, a couple of Italian kids, and Negroes -- they all played together.

JW: Do you think it was because there is more Blacks now than it was during that particular time?

RT: No. I have to say this because it bothers me. People keep talking about the Jewish community, the Black community, the white community. Too much emphasis is put on that. We're minorities, yes. We want to keep our identity as a Negro, that's true. And we have certain things that we want to uphold. But don't be saying "the Black community", "the white community", "the Jewish community" because to me, all that does is polarize. The more they do it, it seems like the more we get away from each other.

JW: Get more pulled apart, yes. Do you remember the Sixties and the Civil Rights Movement?

RT: Oh, yes, do I.

JW: Did anything in particular happen in Bridgeport that might have impressed you or anything?

RT: Well, that was the beginning of what we call "Black pride." Like anything, when you start it, there's a lot of enthusiasm. Sometimes, it goes too extremes. What happened was in some cases -- kids would get it from their parents. The kid would be absolutely wrong. But because it happened, it was racism. In some cases, it was racism. But in other cases, there wasn't any racism, it was just a matter of controlling that kid.

I had two incidents. One instance, where somebody didn't want to bother with me because I was white.

JW: You were white?

RT: This guy went to -- he was a head of a social group -- and went to New Haven to study. Anyhow, he told me about it. He said, "Bob told them to go up and see you." Oh, man, he's white, I can't talk to him. [Laughs.]

JW: Do you think they were not identifying you as a Black or were they just identifying you as --

RT: As white. Some of them didn't even know who I was.

JW: They had never seen you?

RT: They had never seen me. They didn't know me. Then, there was others that knew me and they thought I was an Uncle Tom.

JW: That's the identification --

RT: There's was two identifications. It never bothered me because I was treasurer there at the N.A.A.C.P. for twelve years. The N.A.A.C.P. did something one day. At Harding, two Black girls got to fighting in the lobby and I separated [them] and took one one way and one the other. No, I sent one home and held the other one. The next day, a committee from the N.A.A.C.P came up. No, the next day they had a meeting at the East End Baptist Tabernacle. They had all the Black kids they could get there and members of the N.A.A.C.P. I'm the treasurer and don't even tell me they were having the meeting.

JW: You were the treasurer at this time?

RT: Yes. Plus the fact that I'm assistant principal at Harding.

When the whole thing blew over and it got down to the grass roots, they found out that over half the kids that was at the meeting didn't even go to Harding and most of them were drop-outs.

The committee went up to see the principal, Mr. McKeon. They were in to it. Right after the meeting, he called me and said, "I'll tell you what went on." And he told me. They put up something in the paper about it -- he was prejudiced and so and so. I wrote a [unclear] and got all the Black teachers at Harding -- except one, he was a minister. He was substituting for a teacher

for a teacher who had a church down in Norwalk. He wouldn't sign. Every Black up there except him signed it. That McKeon was as fair as he could be. I put it in the paper. I go to an N.A.A.C.P meeting and they tell me that Reverend Peters was the big shot now. If it gets too hot in the kitchen, I have to get out. I said, "No way, people. The point is that meeting should never have been held in the first place. Second place, if you're going to invite the officers up there of the N.A.A.C.P., I'm your treasurer and been treasurer for twelve years. I was treasurer before you got here. I wasn't even told about it. I said that looks like some hanky panky going on.

[End of side two.]

[End of interview.]