

**HATTIE WRIGHT (Zion Baptist Church) - Interviewed by Linda Walton - 3/11/76**

**I:** ( ) oral history project. My name is Linda Walton and I'm interviewing Mrs. Hattie Wright at her home at 46 Fisher Road. The date is March 11, 1976; the time is 4:00 o'clock.

**Q: The first question: This is an easy one. Are you from Middletown originally?**

A: No, I'm not. Florida, really.

**Q: Florida? What part of Florida?**

A: (Delightful?), Florida.

**Q: Okay, when did you come to Middletown?**

A: In 1943.

**Q: Did you come up for work? Did you have relatives up here?**

A: No, no. My husband came up first and in about a month, I think, he sent for me.

**Q: He came up for work? Where was he working?**

A: His first place? What's the name of this place down on South Main Street? That factory?

**Q: The factory there?**

A: Oh, gosh, it's been such a long time.

**Q: I can't think of it. A lot of people have told me that's why their families originally, the reason they came here--to work there. Did he have relatives up here? How did he come to Middletown and, you know, just reflect generally about what you thought of Middletown when you first came.**

A: I didn't think I'd be here this long, that's for sure. There wasn't anything to do but work and go to church, Zion, that's all there was to do.

**Q: And when you first came, did you join Zion then?**

A: Shortly after. It was in 1943 and the Zion had just organized when we came up here. They organized in April. I came up here in June, the first of June. They got organized at the home of Reverend Hart. He was living on Center Street then. There's no Center Street now but that's what it was then. He and a few people, I don't know the original people, they got organized there and then they moved to Bridge Street in an old storefront and that's where I joined, there, my husband and myself. And then we stayed there for I don't know how many years. Then we moved to South Street, found a building there on South Street. We stayed there for eighteen years. Then we bought the land that we're on now and we had the ground breaking and, I can't remember the mayor's name, was it Mayor Duke?

**Q: Oh, I think Roth. Was it Roth?**

A: This the history of the church?

**Q: Yes.**

A: That's who he is? Mayor Roth? Maybe so. That's who he was then. You had most all the information.

**Q: Well, yes, but one question I wanted to ask you about, about your property and stuff. Did you all take out, like, bank loans, or did you have a building fund, or how did you, you know--**

A: We might have had a small amount of money, but not too much money, so we had to take out a bank loan to pay for it.

**Q: Did you have any problems with that, like, in here, in Middletown?**

A: No, no. We didn't have any problems. Because, I think, some of the members, about three of them anyway, signed for this loan, you know. They had property. If you had property you could usually do this. I'm not sure of the guys that signed for it (property owners), but we paid that off and we burned the mortgage, and everything and it really should be in there. I wonder if they're corrected or not.

**I. Okay, I know. In my church, I'm from Ohio, most of the people from our church are from Alabama. It's like a lot of people from the same general area. Are there a lot of people from the same general area in Zion?**

A: The majority are from South Carolina. We have a few people from Florida, a few from Georgia and a few from Alabama that I know. I don't know where else, really.

**Q: When you got here, were there any other churches, black churches, in Middletown at that time?**

A. Cross Street. There wasn't any black Baptist churches, I think that's why they organized.

**Q: What kind of organizations do you have in church?**

A: We have senior choir, junior choir, the gospel prayers, inspirations and the (rhythm ). We have the senior usher board, the junior usher board, the missionary. They used to have junior and senior missionary but I think it's just the senior now. And, what else do we have? Trustees and deacons and deaconesses, Pastor A. (Plough?).

**Q: Do you have a lot of youth? How many youth in your church? Do you have a lot of youth organizations?**

A: We haven't at this time. They were supposed to get them all set, you know, the deacon and a few others are supposed to get together and get the young people organized in the church, but I don't know if they have. I'm not as active as I was years ago.

**Q: Do you remember any, like, anything, say, when the church was first started? Any particular problems, any particular good points, anything that you remember, like, in the early--any problems in actually starting a new church, because you did come when it was just starting? Most people get into churches after they've been, you know, established.**

A: Yes, that's true. Well, we worked hard toward, you know, getting something better

until we got the church we have now. We just put on dinners; we raffled off cars and, I think, television, different things, you know, to raise money in order to accomplish something new or better, something better, really.

**Q: Were there any... Do you know about how big your membership is?**

A: No--at least three or four hundred on the rolls. I don't attend too much. There are about that many or more, quite a few members.

**Q: Do you get people from, like, Cromwell and Berlin and the places close to Middletown, or are mostly members from Middletown?**

A: Most are from here.

**Q: I don't know that much about the other cities or towns around. Do they have, like, as many blacks or comparable percentages as here? Or, I was wondering if they have black churches, but then I was going to ask if they don't have many black people there, I guess they wouldn't?**

A: I don't know. We have a black church in Portland. You know, the Baptist Church. I guess you've interviewed someone for that, True Vine. I don't know, Reverend Woods' church came out from our church. They were members of our churches, at first, the Zion Baptist Church, and they came from one of us. Cross Street has been here for years and years--200 or 300 years.

**Q: Do you know, why did the second Baptist Church break away from Shiloh? Do you know why?**

A: Why they pulled out? Well, you know, if you become dissatisfied with something you might just as well ( ). If you're dissatisfied with something ( ), but we still work together, the churches.

**Q: Do you all, like, participate in each other's, like, does that include, well, no, this is what I was going to ask, do you have extensions between like the Baptist Church not just here in Middletown but, you know, around. Is there anything like that?**

A: Yes. Every fifth Sunday. That's about every three months, I think, every fifth Sunday. They call it the New England Baptist Community. ( ). Anyway, we participate with Reverend ( ), the Mount Hebron Baptist Church in Meriden, and we once participated with the churches, a church, two churches in New Haven, but I've forgotten the name of them. One was St. John's, but I don't remember the name of the other church. But they pulled out and got another ( ). We're still in with the Mount Hebron Baptist Church in Meriden.

**Q: Do you have, like, an active Sunday School? I was just wondering about, I know in a lot of churches it is hard to hold onto the younger people. I know in my own church that's how it is.**

A: It's hard to hold onto them in our church also because we had quite a few youngsters who came into Sunday School, but they dropped out. You know, when they get to a certain age they drop out. The smaller ones come with their parents. They have to bring them so we don't have too many small kids in our Sunday School program. They have

adult class and they have quite a few small young kids there. We have a teacher for them and she usually teaches them when they do show up for Sunday School.

**Q: Does the church have, like, connections with the community organizations that you know of, like, I don't know, one offhand would be some of the NAACP, or something like that? Any other things like that? Or, really, just a general question would be, like, is your church, like, active in community relations and how are they doing?**

A: I think that's slowing down now, the NAACP, and they participate with this popular ( ) rights thing. This scholarship.

**Q: Could you tell me about that? Mrs. (Stiles?) mentioned it in passing but she didn't explain to me, you know, about the scholarship.**

A: They keep it mostly in the community, in the neighborhood, in the South End, you know, where they have a neighborhood office set up there for the people. He worked there with the people. What would you like to know? I don't know, they worked hard there trying to help the people, you know, relocate them and try to find decent places for them to live, and things like that. I didn't go to too many meetings but my husband was there all the time.

**Q: How did you put together the scholarship fund? What exactly does it do? Was it for a specific school or--?**

A: No, for the surrounding schools here in this county, Middlesex County, just this town, really. But after he (the minister?) passed, Mrs. (Rogers?) she worked closely with my husband and Mrs. (Roly?), Rosalie (Roly). They worked closely with him so they came up with this idea to set up the scholarship in his name and the way to do it. I think it made sense. In even years they give it to--it goes out for blacks, odd years it goes out for white or Puerto Ricans, or whatever, and they put the applications in the school every year.

**Q: When you were talking about your husband helping people and relocating them, when did they first begin, like, the whole changeover in the South End, you know, before they started renewal, or whatever? When was that?**

A: I think it started when, you know, I don't think you were here when they had a flood or something. They had something. The people didn't have any place to live or stay. I think it was the flood. The City, the mayor, or someone, I forgot what name it was now, they built tents. They set up tents, I mean for the black people. They didn't try to find them any place to stay, you know. I think it started off from that. I know Reverend Davage was in the picture there, so he went around to a lot of people and churches and whatever and tried to find the people. The people really tore the tents down. That's what really happened. They didn't want to stay there. But I think this is what it started from.

**Q: And then, like, where did most people go after they ( )?**

A: In homes, different homes. Different people were taking them in, the churches, things like that.

**Q: Did Zion have any set kind of program for helping people? Like, say if I was, you know, dislocated, you know, could I just go to the church and tell, you know?**

A: Someone in the church would take you in if you didn't have a place to go.

**Q: Did you, was it like, did you have any kind of things where you helped raise money for people, or anything like that?**

A: We had a church group give different things to raise funds. They did different things. ( ).

**Q: Now, when they started the renewal of the South Side, where did most people, what different areas of the city did they go into after that?**

A: Well, those that couldn't afford to buy, you know, some of them bought their homes, some were old enough to belong to senior citizen's, things like that, and the rest of them found apartments, I don't know the name of all the apartments, and some found homes with relatives, or something.

**Q: I know that Middletown is really bigger than I thought it was. Did people, like, are there any, like--did people get really split up? Because before most everybody, as I understood, lived on the South Side. Did people stay in groups, you know, when they moved, or did you split up?**

A: Did they go into the same community? They split up, most of them; the majority split up. Everybody had to find some place to dwell.

**Q: Did most of the black kids, and stuff, like, go to the same schools, or how were the schools, like, how did, you know, I know before I was talking to people who came from before who were here, like, when they were youngsters, and they didn't particularly like the schools all that well because there weren't that many black people. How about your kids? What did your kids think about the schools?**

A: The only thing I really, actually remember when my daughter first started school at this school right up here, I can't think straight. I can't think of the name of it, it was right up here. She used to come home screaming and crying every day because I never taught her to hate, always love, regardless of what else. Of course, she couldn't understand why those kids would pick at her and call her names and she would come home. So, finally, I had to go to some of the kid's parents and talk with the parents about this matter. So she stopped her kids from doing it. Most of the school, that's Spencer School, that's where she started. My son too, well, they had quite a few blacks in the schools that she went to. She, they went to Central. There were quite a few there, Middletown High. They bus them now. So I guess that makes a difference. There's more over here now than there would have been if they didn't bus them. And, I guess it depends on like Wilson High, like they still have quite a few but they used to have too many, I think, you know, Blacks. They bussed some of them to Middletown High. But they never complained about anything else, that I know of.

**Q: Do you have any other relatives here other than your immediate family?**

A: Brothers, sisters.

**Q: Did they come about the same time as you?**

A: No, they came later.

**Q: A lot of people came here to work. I was wondering, do you work?**

A: Yes, I do.

**Q: Who do you work for?**

A: For the Board of Education.

**Q: How, you know, when you first came, like, were the whites receptive or did they resent, or anything, black people coming in and working, you know, here? I just wondered about that because I know at home whenever, you know, a lot of people come into a certain town, something like that, then its like they are taking jobs. Was it like that or was it different because it was closer to the South than it is here; and I was just wondering if there was a difference up here?**

A: Not to me. Because when I first came here I applied, I went to the Unemployment Office. When I applied there they asked me, "Do you want to do housework?" I said, "No". I said I wanted to do factory work and it's what they looked up for me, so I worked at the Russell Company. That was my first job. Well, I don't know--I was young then. [chuckle], not used to working. I worked good, pretty good. I worked there for ( ). I wasn't satisfied, really, with what I was making. ( ). You know, they're the same everywhere. They are the same. No difference, really; they're just more sneaky up this way than they are other places.

**Q: Were there, I know there was a lot of groups that worked toward better housing because housing was a problem up here. Were any black groups or any community groups helping, like, people with jobs, and stuff like that?**

A: ( ) I always reach out on my own. I tried and I would keep trying. I didn't give up. I had a lot of spunk. I don't have it now. But, I had a lot of spunk and if they tell me, "No", I come back again and try it. That's the way I've always been, but there were others, maybe, they had to be helped. And, if you knew someone, maybe you could help someone you know anyway. Right now the CAGM has taken over and they take care of all these things, the majority of these kinds of things, you know.

**Q: I don't know that much about them. Can you tell me, like, well, not exactly, but as much as you know about what they actually do?**

A: Well, I know they, if someone, you know, has to move they will find them a place to move. They will get furniture. They will even get money for food. They would ask different organizations, and things like this, for money or donations, or whatever, and help with the scholarships, kids that are not able to really pay their way or buy books, and things like that. Maybe they got to have a brain, or something, or some money from someplace else and they just don't have enough to buy their books and some other things they probably need. I know they do a lot of things like that and, actually, they really try. They're supposed to help the poor people--they're really supposed to. That's who it's really for, what they're supposed to be all about, they help the poor people and train them. I don't really know what else. I just know a few little things that they're doing.

**Q: Do you remember anything like that before, you know, like just like you were saying, that some other people they end up the NAACP that isn't active these days as they used to be. What kind of things did they do before?**

A: They moved now to someplace. They never had the time. They had the ad in the paper for jobs. And I went there and applied. And they told me they didn't have an opening, and all that. So what I did, I went to ( ) rights.

**Q: Oh yea, Civil Rights Commission.**

A: Yes, a commission in Hartford. So I think ( ). They had openings but they didn't want to hire. So I stayed there for two years but it was too much for me. I thought I'd have a nervous breakdown. It was just too much pressure, DO, DO, DO; and everybody there was nervous, really, because it was too much. That's the only job I remember having a little problem with but Mr. Johnson straightened that out. He came here and talked with me. Also, that was quite a few years ago, 1950, I think it was. They signed a petition. The white lady of the (family), she came over and told us, Mrs. ( ). They moved now. They lived ( ). Anyway, she told me they had signed a petition for no blacks to come out here.

**Q: When was that? When did you all move here?**

A: 1958. 1958. ( ) Have they bothered you or have you seen anything? I said, "No". After I just heard what they were doing and Mr. Jackson, you know Lt. Jackson? He came out and told us what the ( ). I said, "Yeah, the neighbors told us what they were trying to do". I said, ( ) in this day and age as long as I stay in my house and they're not paying my house off and they're not buying my food and not do anything for it". He said they shouldn't bother you. They had the idea they were "the masters"! They wouldn't speak to you! They would go out in the back yard and be saying all kinds of little silly things. But I didn't pay any attention because I knew they weren't paying my house off. We were doing that so I didn't have that to worry about. And girl, did the signs go up, House for Sale, House for Sale! My girl friend, about three or four doors down, she was the second black family moved out here. And, the day she was moving, her neighbor next door took the sign out, House for Sale. So he asked me, someone came and interviewed me, I don't know who it was now. He said, "You wanna move, you know, around white?" I said, "No, not particularly". He said, "Why did you move?" I said, "Because I was dissatisfied with the place I was living in". And, you know, I said I had become dissatisfied. He said, "Would you buy anyplace else?" I said, "Yes, any place, if you had the money". I said, "Yes, if I had the money I'd buy in these rich neighborhoods". And which I would; but if you don't have the money and after so many blacks moved out here, all those. Now, we had trouble with that real estate guy when we had this house up for sale. The family (moved out) so the family of this house, they told us, "Ask him, do you sell to blacks?" So Mr. (McCoid), I think that was his last name, he said, "I don't care who they are, I don't care what color they are". I think they gave him a hard time after that, that white family, for selling this house to us. They all lived in Portland and the family had to move out of Portland. I don't know where they are now. They gave him a hard time. Anyways, it's rough; it's really rough. But anyway, they tell me, I don't know, I don't know, I don't have the facts, but they tell me that after so may

blacks moved out here the real estate guys were scared of black people out here. They talked to all of us together and the NAACP, put it in the papers they tried to break up, buy in other communities, but they didn't listen. To bring the price down. That was because if the price was down they didn't have to put so much down, you know, made it reasonable, you know, like you don't have so much as most of us. And that was down their alley. So we had quite a few ( ). But I was just hoping that my sister would move back. I said, "Buy in another community". But they wouldn't. They won't listen. They let them move, let them move. We move; we buy and let them move. They go up on the on the moon? [chuckle]. We'll go up there too. [laughter]. Let them go up on the moon and live. They are something, I'm telling you! Two social groups ( ). We don't have them anymore. They had the women's club that was the social group and then we had the Socialites, but they broke up.

**Q: Were any for lack of black participation, or something? People just didn't have time to participate or come in?**

A: Yes, that's what happened.

**Q: How long did they last, very long?**

A: For three or four years, I think, each one. We raised money and tried to buy things for the church and I know the Socialites, they had the park paved for the church, and things like that. But we didn't last too long, three or four years. It was active when my husband was president of the Socialites. It was very active then but after it just went down.

**Q: When you all ( ). What organizations do you belong to?**

A: Oh, yes, the ( ). I became a member the first year it was organized, in 1956, I think it was. When we first got organized we went from home to home to have meetings, and we still do. In between, though, we did have a building, it was (Bustis Pope) building on South Street. He let us use that. We gave him so much, you know, rent, not too much, just a little something, and we would meet there and we would sell ( ) whatever and socialize. We'd give donations to different, what shall I say, we'd give donations to people that need. We give annually to the ( ) Fund. We are a lifetime member of NAACP. Oh, gosh, we've given to the Sickle Cell Anemia. We've given money too to an organization up in Long River Village when they were getting set up out there. We gave them money to buy sewing machines and things like that to help them get set. And we've given to needy families that sometimes would get burned out, some that had a lot of kids and the husband was out of work and they just couldn't afford to, you know, eat properly like they should of and also give them clothes, and we'd go to homes and help clean up, you know, when their wife was sick, or the husband, whichever.

**Q: I see where you have a (giving) at Thanksgiving?**

A: Yes, we would give Thanksgiving baskets out. We give Christmas baskets out sometimes also. We send cards to the shut-ins, people that are shut in and can't get out, old people, you know, shut-ins. We still do that.

**Q: Do you know of any other groups, like the men's groups, here in Middletown?**



A: The Social Gents. What is the name of that other club? It's so new. They're so much alike.

**Q: But there are social groups?**

A: Yes, there are social groups here.

**Q: Do black people here in Middletown have social groups, anything like teenagers, or anything like that? I remember they had a group downtown. I think that was before I came here, but I've heard of it, TOPS. What was that, do you know? Just a place to meet?**

A: To meet, and I think they had seven classes. I think they were teaching them to sew if they so desire because I went there once and I know they had sewing machines and things, whatever, downstairs, and it was mostly just for them to socialize, I think. There was that drill team. Do you think that drill team came out of TOPS? I think they did. They would train them and teach them in the afternoon, most of the afternoon. They were very good. I don't know what happened to them. My children didn't go there too much. They wasn't involved. They had dances. They danced a lot. They didn't charge much, about fifty cents, or something, maybe a dollar at the most. They would serve food and stuff like that. ( ). Valerie could help you there. Do you know Valerie Hopkins?

**A: Hopkins? I don't know ( ).**

A: [Couldn't hear to end of tape].

T: 5/26/95

/msk