

**Cleo Banks - 2/29/76**

**I: Arlene Hammond and Lisa Pittman: We interviewed Mrs. Cleo Banks, located at 31 Orange Road, Middletown, Connecticut.**

**Q: Why don't you tell us something about when your family came to Middletown; how your family came to Middletown?**

A: Well, my uncle came here first from Florida. I don't know the exact time but I believe it was in the early 1900's and he came here to seek employment because, you know, things were bad in Florida. And then he came to Middletown and he worked for the bone mill. I don't know the name of the place now. I don't recall what it's called now but he worked there and he was a minister, of course, and this was to supplement his salary, you know. In the early 1900's things were economically bad and after he stayed here for awhile my father was sick in Georgia which was in ( ). It was the only brother that he had so he sent for him because he felt that he could get better medical attention up here.

**Q: In Connecticut?**

A: Right, in Connecticut; and he wanted to be here and close to him too, so my parents came up here and this is where he settled. And my uncle at one time owned property in Portland, Middletown and Cromwell which was very rare for blacks in those days to own so much property and he, of course, said his daughters whom I've talked about, Dr. (Artese) Banks, Dr. Artese Banks Henry, who is head of education in Liberia (Monrovia). And she's married to Attorney Richard Henry who is the president, not president, Speaker of the House of Liberia and then, like I said, and one time, they didn't allow Negroes to teach here in Middletown and that's why after her education she had to go South to seek a position. And she wasn't satisfied down there. It wasn't exactly what she wanted so that's why she went to Liberia and, what can I say, I have a brother who, Lester Banks, who is in California now, a graduate of Howard University and the University of Chicago, who was one of the first blacks in the United States to be nominated to go to Annapolis.

**Q: Annapolis? Why Annapolis?**

A: This is what he selected, what he selected. He just thought it was a good deal at the time and he didn't go because he felt that Annapolis didn't offer him exactly what he wanted, so he just went out to visit California and he's been there since.

**Q: ( )?**

A: Right, right, right, and he's been out there in California since. And he graduated from Middletown High School. Of course, we're all graduates of Middletown High School. I'm a graduate of Middletown High School. We all went to high school, to college, the University

of Hartford and ( ).

**Q: He said, you know, hang up in Middletown ( )?**

A: Oh, 1928, 1929. That was during the Depression. I was a freshman at the start of 1929 and ( ) and so when he came he started in Middletown High School ( ). Background: She was born here.

**Q: Were you born here?**

A: No, No. I was a child about a year old. I came from South. My parents brought me.

**Q: You were --**

A: But I've been here all my life, yes.

**Q: What were some of the earliest experiences you remember having in Middletown? Your experiences in school.**

A: My experience in school? Well, during those days a lot of black people [background talk], well, excuse me. Well, when I was in grammar school and high school I believe that our family in grammar school were the only blacks there except for the McRaes in grammar school. But after we got to high school, of course, there were, of course, the McRaes again and the McArthurs, who was bussed in from Cromwell because at that time there was only one high school in lower Middlesex County so they had to come in from outlying towns. And there were very, very few blacks. In fact, we saw blacks here, you know, we were amazed as white they were like strangers here in town and the only reason why, like my brother and my cousin and other blacks went to black colleges, was just to get to know their own race because all they ever saw in this area were all whites. Only white, you know. So if you wanted to get acquainted with your own race you had to go to a black college.

**Q: Could they have gone to Wesleyan?**

A: Oh, yes, oh, yes. I'm sure they could have gone, although at that time they had a quota system. It isn't like it is today. It was limited to a certain number of blacks up until 1941 or '44, something like that. I wouldn't know the exact time; you'd have to check that what out. Maybe they'd even be nice enough, maybe they'd be nice enough to tell you blacks were admitted.

**Q: ( ). Did you know any black students at Wesleyan?**

A: At Wesleyan? Well, yes. Walter Jackson and Charles Stone and, of course, there were some blacks that came from Higganum. And then there was another black whom I believe is from Chicago. I don't know but I think his name is Blake, his last name is Blake. But there weren't that many blacks at Wesleyan because they had them limited. They even had a limit

on Catholics and Jews; and blacks, they were limited.

**Q: Any blacks who lived in Middletown and graduated from high school, did they ever ()?**

A: No, no. But, as I say, most of them wanted to go because they wanted to be experienced to know their own limits.

**Q: Was it just because, did Wesleyan accept any students from the Middletown area?**

A: I believe they would have because I believe the blacks were qualified, but it was just that blacks wanted to get to know their own roots.

**Q: They didn't bother to apply?**

A: They didn't even bother to apply. Then, another thing, economically they couldn't afford Wesleyan at that time; really, they couldn't.

**Q: There wasn't so much financial aid as there is now?**

A: No, there was none, none.

**Q: Were any scholarships offered to blacks?**

A: Well, there were scholarships but not like today. You know, there was an abundance, there was an abundance of, you know, ( ) of whites today. But ever since World War II blacks have made a great influx into Middletown, you know. ( ). Everything is, so to speak, opened up and we never really had any racial problems except in school, but I think they were just minor infractions because children will have their problems anyways, you know. And that's why they didn't have riots and things. We never had anything like that.

**Q: Did they have any racial problems when you were in school? In Middletown?**

A: No, none. Because, as I say, when you're small in number you are no problem. The minute you become large in number you become a problem.

**Q: How about, like, jobs and housing? Could you live anywhere you wanted to live, or did they confine you?**

A: Let me tell you, no, housing wasn't even that opened up, you know, because today you can get housing where you want because it is financed by the Federal Government so ( ) you can live where you want to. But, and jobs after World War II, everything opened up, like, all over the country, you know, because of Federal--

**Q: Aid?**

A: Right, right. The Federal ( ). They didn't even want you to work in factories. They resented that. They didn't want you to work as masons, you know. What do you call those jobs? You know, you know, unskilled, unskilled labor. They didn't want you to belong to the, you know, unions where you could work there when there was employment.

**Q: What kinds of jobs ( ):**

A: Well, like my mother worked in a hotel. She was a chambermaid. And my uncle worked in a lumber firm and he delivered lumber and, I don't know, he was a stock clerk in the Strong and Hale Lumber Company which went out of business. That was his supplemental income because of being a minister he wasn't making that much so he just did this for a supplement to keep him going, you know. The Depression ( ).

**Q: Did the church play an important part in black (social life)?**

A: Yes, yes, very much so. That was, more or less, our entertainment. You'd go to church early in the morning and you stayed there all day. Well, even whites, even whites during this time in the late 30's and 40's, you just enjoyed this all day long. This is where you met your friends. Of course, it was, you know, Depression time. Things were economically bad so you could go to church and sometimes in the afternoon people would bring food and it would be like a potluck thing, everyone sit down and eat around 2-3 o'clock in the afternoon after church services, sit around meet all your friends whom you haven't seen all week long.

**Q: ( )?**

A: As a little girl I remember sitting around; I said, "Come Sunday I'll see so-and-so". We wouldn't have company all week.

**Q: ( )?**

A: This is the Cross Street AME Zion Church I'm referring to where we'd go in the afternoon and have all these meetings and have our potluck lunches and things and this was sort of our entertainment for the week, you know. And then we'd have our youth meetings after we eat and then we'd have our evening services which would end up about eight o'clock. Then we'd go home and that was the end of our big entertainment for the week. And we were definitely, in those days, in the 30's and 40's, late 30's and 40's, you just weren't allowed to go to movies, you know. You never went to the movies; that was like a NO-NO, you know.

**Q: So the only type of entertainment was the church?**

A: Yes, the church, the church, and you weren't allowed to go to the movies on Sunday.

**Q: Not on Sunday?**

A: No, that was a sin, a sin.

**Q: What movie theater would you go to?**

A: Well, the Middlesex Theater and the Palace Theater, they were all open, you know, open. There was no such a thing as Negroes banned from movie theaters. Negroes were welcome because I keep, I have to repeat again, that if you are small in number you're no threat. When you get to be large in number you get to be a threat and it is in just the last ten or fifteen years that they've gotten, you know, funny. They'll even say now to you, "Well, all you blacks are accepted at Wesleyan but we aren't", and so I'll say, "Are you qualified"? I said, "I'm sure you'd be accepted if you were qualified". No, they say the quota is filled. This isn't true. ( ) most of the qualified ( ). This is the excuses being made.

**Q: Why is that, that there aren't enough black people in Middletown qualified to go to Wesleyan? Is it that the level of education is poor?**

A: No, in fact this is supposed to be one of the best cities in the country education-wise. It's just that a lot of blacks just aren't interested in going to college.

**Q: Do you think that they're not encouraged to go?**

A: I believe this, I believe it. Like, I belong to the Board of Education, you know, the foreign language section of the Board of Education, and I insist that it's family. I believe that family plays a great part in a child wanting an education or not wanting an education. I know it played a great part in our family, you know. We were told that the only way you could get ahead was to have an education.

**Q: So all your brothers and sisters--**

A: Well, no, my oldest brother only went to high school. He didn't go to college but he was told that this was what he should have done. But, of course, what are you going to do when a person isn't interested in going? You don't put a gun behind him and say ( ) will if you don't go. That was it. But other than that--

**Q: Did you say that you have quite a few older brothers and sisters?**

A: No, no. I only have one brother living. Willie, he's dead. And then I have a brother out in California, That's it. There's just the three of us.

**Q: Well, what made your older brother go to California? Wasn't there any thing he could do in (Middletown)?**

A: No. He was interested in living in California right after he got out of the University of California. The weather and everything interested him. He never liked cold weather; he never liked it, so he stayed on out there.

**Q: What was behind my question was that there seems to be a great abundance in**

**Middletown of either young people or older people. There aren't any people in between, let's say early 20's and 30's. Why is it that you don't find many black people of that age?**

A: Yes, 30 and 40. Most of them left here to seek better employment. Like my brother left because, as I say, when he went out to California, when he left Chicago, Howard then Chicago, and went to California, he just liked it there. He liked the climate. The climate was warm and, you know, ideal.

**Q: So there aren't just enough job opportunities?**

A: Job opportunities here, right, right. In fact, I don't think there's that many great job opportunities for whites. I really don't. I really do not think so because I have white friends that have, like I have a girlfriend I was talking to this morning, she's a legal secretary. And the only reason why I stay here is because, you know, we own property and stuff. You just can't start getting rid of everything all at once, you know. Of course, I like it here. I've many good friends. I've been here all my life and-- Excuse me, but as I say, she's white and she says the job opportunities are not all that great. Because she's a legal secretary. Now she's a paraprofessional and you don't get too much of that in Middletown. Attorneys don't get that technical in Middletown. It seems like the law is stagnant. A secretary is a secretary and that's it. And it lets you stay in the same old slump and she wanted to advance. And now she's a paraprofessional. She's dealing with foreign government and () but she couldn't find the same opportunity, and she's white. (). The market isn't wide open, or something.

**Q: Are job opportunities handed down through families?**

A: No, no.

**Q: Are there any family businesses here?**

A: Well, I would say predominantly that's it but, I don't know, it seems like most of Middletown industry seems to be in a slump. No, it just doesn't seem to be thriving. Like years ago we had the Russell Company which now is Fenner Manufacturing, and you had, they weren't business things. Of course, the Russell Company, I think, is an offspring of their (China trade). The Russells who practically-- Wesleyan is practically feeding on them today, honors college and all that. At one time three quarters of the high school used to belong to the Russells, you know, and so, but today most of the Russells are dead and turned over to Wesleyan all those big houses and all.

**Q: I'd like to get back to when your uncle first came to Middletown. What type of jobs did he do?**

A: He worked in home (maintenance?).

**Q: In (~):**

A: Right, but I don't know the name of the place. I forget now what the name of that was. It's over there in Portland.

**Q: So how have things changed since he came?**

A: As I say, to repeat, I keep repeating this, I'm afraid it's ( ). As long as you're small in number you're all right. Since I've been here all my life, I don't know if there have been many drastic changes because I've seen changes, you know, that, say for instance, I'm sure that even ten years ago living here at Wesleyan Hills would have been a shock in Middletown. They just couldn't see us living in a nice residential section like this but, otherwise, I've always, you know, been accepted and welcomed in most homes, and things. And in most sections, you know, where I came from is just beginning to go down now. You know, in the last four or five years are run down. But I lived on the north end of town. Most of my family lived on Bridge Street and things have improved for the better but basically, as I said in the beginning of this interview, is that Negroes basically, I believe, get along very well. If there was discrimination it was done in a very subtle way, it was done (in a very subtle way). But things really have improved and I think it's improved for whites too because economically conditions improved for all of us. You know they say there's a recession. But if there is a recession, things are going in a very bad way because those with educations are getting along all right. ( ). That's about all I can say.

**Q: I'd like to ask you about dating and courting when you were young.**

A: No, there weren't that many Negroes, as I said before, to even date. You know what I mean. There weren't that many Negroes around. And, to repeat again, that as long as you're small in number ( ).

**Q: If there weren't that many, you had--**

A: At that time you didn't hear about interracial things. This was a "no-no". You just didn't do the interracial thing 25-30 years ago. You just didn't do any interracial thing. That was a "no-no", so to speak. So it was bad among Catholics and Jews and Italians. They frowned on them 25-30 years ago then. So you know they going to frown on it for us--black with white. Oh, my God, no. You just never heard of this.

**Q: Was there any interaction between blacks in Middletown and blacks in Hartford?**

A: Oh, yes, yes. I would go up to Hartford Sundays, you know, like to youth meetings and things, like our church; it was always the church. People back 20-25 years ago, they always, when you were a teenager, they always relied on the church. Basically, all of your social entertainment was based on the church. You would go to church on Sundays with the young people, go to Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury to meetings.

**Q: The meetings were all the attractions?**

A: Right, the church. It was the church, right, right. Even if you went away in summer to camp, or anything, it was church. We went to a camp that was connected to the AME Zion Church. Camp Barbara up there around Massachusetts.

**Q: Were there any other youth organizations out of church? Like, were there things like school-related activities?**

A: No, no. Nothing like that. We had the, I forgot the name of the young peoples' group, the Sunday School (~).

**Q: There wasn't a "Y" or--**

A: You could go to the "Y" but it was interracial. They didn't, there was no such thing as discriminating then. In fact, I think, this is my own personal view, I believe the YMCA at, you know, on a whole, whole general concept of the YMCA has never been prejudiced. I really don't think so. Maybe one hundred years ago, maybe they were prejudiced. But I think the "Y" was really the beginning of integration where Negroes at one time in New York could not even stay in hotels, back 25 years ago. But you could always stay at the "Y" if you needed a decent place to stay. You could always stay at the "Y". No Negroes could stay at the Waldorf Astoria, the Hilton, you know, all those, the Americana. You could always stay at the "Y" and have a decent place to live. In fact, the "Y" is one of the few places where Negroes who majored in Sociology, etc., could always get a job. They could get some type of work.

**Q: I'm just going to ask you this. What if, do you have any political views at all? Like, are you related with any party or--**

A: No, I'm not. I'm a Democrat. I'm, you know, of the Democratic party and, you know, I feel that they are the party right now that is the best party because I don't think Ford is a good candidate, you know.

**Q: Why, I may get myself in trouble, but how do you feel about the elected officials in Middletown? Are they--**

A: Well, now I told you that I'd have to be a personal friend of the mayor or something or I'd get myself in trouble. See, I think he's great because I've known him since he was a kid. It's one of those personal things. I like him. I think Tony Marino is a great person. I hope he doesn't fail me, you know. Later on you may have to retract these statements but right now I think Tony will make a great mayor. Just give him time because you can't say because he's only been in since, what, November? October or November. It's so little time but I think he'll make a good mayor.

**Q: Why is it, do you think, the controversy over the Elks membership came up after**

**the election? It surprised me that--**

A: It should have been brought up sooner because it was a year ago when they passed the ruling where the whites could make up their mind if they wanted blacks to join the Elks or not and I just believe in something that some black became aware of and said, "Why should we go to the Elks when they don't welcome us, you know, nationally?"

**Q: Nationally, not only in Middletown, but nationally?**

A: Right, right, nationally. They just don't want, you know, to welcome us because now in Middletown they haven't accepted membership which I think is very unfortunate. I think it's a very, very unfortunate thing. But I don't believe no blacks have applied. Now, I don't know.

**Q: They have to be asked. The membership ( )**

A: Oh, ( )

**Q: ( )?**

A: See, like in other words, like some sororities or fraternities.

**Q: There's no other organization like that that you know of in Middletown?**

A: No, no. Not that I know of.

**Q: Were there black organizations, for instance, like the NAACP, that kind of thing?**

A: Yes, yes, yes, oh, yes. Sergeant or, you know, Captain Jackson was the president of the NAACP one year in Middletown and then we have the Masons here. I don't know the name of the--they have a name for it, you know, such as a chapter or ( ) or something.

**Q: How long have they been active?**

A: Well, for about 20-25 years I've been here. ( ).

**Q: O. K. Thank you.**

A: I hope I've been helpful. If you want to come again, you know--