

**I:** This is an interview for the Russell Library Oral History Project. My name is Janet Franklin. I'm interviewing Dean Edgar Beckham of Wesleyan University. The interview took place on March 3rd and March 11th, 1976. Today we're interviewing Edgar Beckham in his office, and one of the things I was wondering about is when was it that you came to Middletown? What were your first impressions? What type of things did you encounter when you were first here?

**A:** I first came to Middletown in 1951 as a freshman. Well, actually, I had visited in the previous year on a sub-freshman weekend, but I think you can disregard that. I came in 1951 and I really have to talk about my stay in Middletown in segments because I was here for three years from 1951 to 1954. I left and went into the army for 3 years. I came back in '57 and finished my senior year in '57 and '58. Then I was away for another three years in graduate school. Then I came back in 1961 and started teaching in the German Department. I left again in 1966 and spent a year in Germany and then I came back to Wesleyan in the fall of '67, and I've been here ever since. So it's been an off and on kind of thing. So when you ask about my first impressions of Middletown, I don't know whether to start with my impressions of Middletown when I was a Freshman in college or when I first came as an employee of the University.

**Q:** (Couldn't hear question)

**A:** Let me just go ahead and start on my early impressions of Middletown when I was an undergraduate and I guess what I would say is that I had almost no impression of the town. It seemed to me that there was a very clear distinction between "town and gown" as we refer to it. I didn't have any interaction to speak of with the local community at all and there didn't seem to be very much interest on the part of the community in Wesleyan or in Wesleyan students. There were town-gown problems that one heard about from time-to-time, like Wesleyan students acting up on Main Street or failing to pay their bills, or just general clowning that would annoy the neighbors. But, beyond that, there was very little interaction. I was aware of the black community in Middletown only because of the location of the barbershop. There was one black barber in Middletown. His barbershop was located down at the south end and that's where I got my hair cut. I got to know him and I got to know a couple of other people who frequented the barbershop, but that was about as far as my interaction with the community went when I was an undergraduate.

**Q:** After your Army experiences and when you came back in 1961 to be employed by the university as a teacher, did you find that having been here before, having some background of the community and also having had experience other where and coming back with perhaps other ideas and other perspectives, did that make a difference in the way you looked at Middletown or in the way you interacted with the community here or with the school itself?

**A:** Yes, a number of experiences that I had had made a really profound difference. A lot was going on at that time, but one of the things that happened when I was in graduate school down in New Haven was that I became involved with a voter registration drive conducted in two predominantly black wards of New Haven that was directed at trying to, in effect, capture those wards to win the ward chairmanships and also the aldermatic positions in those two wards. That was really the first really active involvement that I

had had in sort of community action, I guess you could call it. I'd known about it sort of vaguely all my life. My mother was involved with NAACP and all that stuff, but I had never had any real involvement myself. When I came back to Middletown, another thing that occurred was that my peers were also back in Middletown, one of them in particular, namely Willard McRae. Willard McRae was someone that I had met at Boys' State when we were both juniors in high school. He was a junior at Middletown High School and I at Weaver High School up in Hartford. But then I never saw Willard again because while I was here in Middletown, he was off in college somewhere else, you see. But when I got back here, Willard had also returned and was working in the community, so we hooked up immediately and that was really one of the primary routes by which I got involved in the affairs of Middletown. My early involvements included a tutorial program that had a kind of interesting history and Willard can tell you more about the beginning of it than I can because he was actually involved in this project longer. But when I hooked up with it in 1961, it was a project that involved studying the needs of the black community in Middletown. This was one of the very early efforts that focused in a very deliberate way on the black community, studying the needs of the community and simultaneously trying to take action in certain needs areas, Okay? Now one of the areas clearly was education, another was housing and surveys were done on housing problems, employment problems and the like. But the one that I was interested in was education, and one of the outgrowths of that study group was the development of a tutorial program for mainly black kids in--we focused initially on high school students, and I think some junior high school students, and the aim of the program which made use of Wesleyan student tutors, and keep in mind that meant that almost all the tutors were white because almost all the Wesleyan students in the early '60's were white. But the objective was to try to stimulate some of the black youngsters in the high schools to think seriously about college and to try to move them out of the non-college tracts in which they were concentrated into the pre-college tracts and to help those who were already in the pre-college tracts to handle them successfully and to get on to college. That was one of the projects that we organized in the early sixties. One of the early off-shoots of that was the reactivation of the youth council of the NAACP and the way that happened, and I would date it as about, oh, '62 or thereabouts. The tutorial program actually got underway at a meeting in the spring of 1962 which was held in the basement of the Cross Street AME Church and a bunch of young people, high school kids, were there, about 10-14 of them, I think, several of the Wesleyan students who had been recruited to serve as tutors and several of the adults who sort of hovered over the program, and that's how we got it launched. We simply paired a high school youngster and a Wesleyan student and the program was underway. At one point, I guess, it grew to include about in excess of 100 youngsters at one point in its history. Another project the NAACP youth council got underway, when one of the people in the tutorial program, I think she was a junior in high school at the time, said we ought to have a youth council in NAACP and I said, "Well, that's a fine idea and how do we do that?", and we simply proceeded to do it and I served as the adult advisor to the youth council until I left for Germany in 1966. It was at a time when a lot was going on. We were sort of moving in the direction of the high point of the civil rights movement and the young people got very much involved in that. There were some interesting tensions that occurred at that time. I guess you'd have to call it a kind of generation gap. I was a fair amount younger than I am now. I felt very close to the

young people in the youth council. They were excited about getting things done and were a little bit resentful of their elders whom they felt were slowing things down, "shucking and jiving", as people sometimes say, and I found myself siding with them more often than not and getting into a bit of trouble with some members of the older adult black community in Middletown. But, we had a lot of fun and I thought of it as just a kind of extra-curricular activity for the young people that was educationally beneficial. It gave me more opportunity to interact with them personally and then I felt that all of that was helpful. There were a couple of other offshoots of the initial tutorial program. One was the development of a summer program that was really a kind of forerunner of Upward Bound. We got some Federal money to run a summer program, I think it was in the summer of either '64 or '65, and we ran it in conjunction with Wesleyan's MAT Program. I believe in that first summer it was held on the Choate School campus in Wallingford and it was an enrichment program that was a combination remedial program and enrichment program. It was supposed to do skilled development in areas where that was necessary and also to enrich the educational experience of people in the middle school, junior high school age group and was part and parcel of the whole move to see if we could get more black youngsters in the Middletown school system moving in the direction of higher education. Another offshoot was the development of a preschool program, and a bunch of Wesleyan students felt that we ought to be doing something at that level. We found a place down in the south end, a back room of a social club, and the owner of the social club allowed us to use it free of charge. We cleared things with the health people. The members of one of the fraternities, Delta Tau Delta, as a matter of fact, came down and fixed the place up. We got old rugs and other equipment from Wesleyan's Physical Plant and fixed the place up and actually ran a preschool program at that location for a while, and this was in advance of the development of the Head Start program. So, it turned out that the things that we were trying to do here in Middletown with very limited resources were very much like the things that then took hold at the national level and were done in a much more sophisticated way when the financial resources started to flow from Washington.

**Q: A lot of the programs that you mentioned you said were dealing with Wesleyan students who were here in the early sixties and as the black population on campus continued to increase, did you notice a change in community involvement? Were these black students more involved with the Middletown community? Were they less involved than would be expected? Or, just your insights as to how this change affected the community, if it did at all.**

A: The changes were really profound and I missed one part of it, namely, the year '66-'67 which I spent in Germany. But I was here in '65 and '66 which was the vanguard year as the year in which the first fairly substantial contingent of black students appeared on the Wesleyan campus. That was also the year in which, for the first time, there was a very significant focus on black consciousness and consciousness-raising, a term that didn't come into the vocabulary until somewhat later, but I think that it's fair to say that that's what it was, primarily among black students, on the Wesleyan campus. Then a very significant thing happened in the summer of '66. That was the first summer in which the Wesleyan Upward Bound Program was run. It was run on the Wesleyan campus in the Butterfield College's Long Avenue dormitories. Most of the tutors in that program

during that summer were Wesleyan students, black students, who had gone through that consciousness-raising experience during the previous year. The students of the Upward Bound Program were local Middletown-area high school kids and quite a number of them were black. So this was a perfect opportunity for the advanced black students, the Wesleyan students, to interact with the junior students from the high schools and to bring a lot of what the older students had experienced that year to bear on the experience of the younger kids, and they did that. They started reading Malcolm X and a whole lot of other things, and that was the first really significant organized interaction between black students from Wesleyan and black kids from Middletown. Then I left. I worked with the program during that summer but then I was away for a year and when I got back, a number of things had happened. The youth council of the NAACP had folded and it was not just an organizational problem it was also ideological. The focus had shifted completely. Stokely Carmichael had announced that black power was going to be the wave of the future. That had occurred in the summer of '66. That had taken hold and there was this tremendous black consciousness movement that had gotten underway by the time I got back. There had also been some more very significant riots and tension was high. And so the youth council of the NAACP was no longer the kind of vehicle that young people, young black people, in the Middletown community found appropriate to their needs. They wanted things that were more aggressive, that were more militant, that focused on more clearly-defined black goals rather than the traditional goals of integration that the NAACP had stood for. Another thing that had happened was that the tutorial program was having great difficulty getting black students to work with it because black students on the Wesleyan campus identified it as what it had traditionally been, a white program run by the white boys on the Wesleyan campus, and the fact that I was involved in it, and the fact that Willard was involved in it, just wasn't enough to compensate for the fact that virtually all the tutors and the student managers of the program were white. So the more militant black students tended to shy away from it. Other activities then began to develop. One of the primary ones was the development of an organization called TOPS which stood for Teenagers Organized for Productive Services. Now this had gotten going. It was an organization that grew out of the black community of Middletown and it was aimed at trying to find productive things for young people to do, young black people to do, to get them off the street and to get them into activities that would be educationally more rewarding and help their development. It had a board of directors made up of members of the adult community. It was an integrated board, but there was a very strong and active black presence. I got onto the board after the organization had been going for a while, and there was a lot of interaction between the young members of that group and Wesleyan students. The Wesleyan students really got involved in developing programs like the program in African dance, for instance, was one that I remember, and programs in art and other crafts. There was the development of a library and TOPS had a place down on South Main Street [East Main Street ?] near the corner of Union Street, and so it attracted a lot of the young people from the black community in the south end. So that was one involvement that Wesleyan students then had. Another way in which black Wesleyan students were involved was that they invited black youngsters from Middletown to interact with them on the campus. They invited them to the meetings of the various--well, there was a separate development of black student organizations on the Wesleyan campus. The first thing which occurred, while I

was in Germany, but I believe it was called the Afro-American Society, that was set up by black students. Eventually that developed into Ujama and initially the Ujama concept was really just about universal, that is to say, every black person was part of Ujama and that meant that black people from the community were invited to the meetings and urged to participate, especially the young people who shared a lot of the ideology and a lot of the feelings and attitudes that black students at Wesleyan had, so that there was a lot of interaction in the Malcolm X House which was the center of black activity on campus. Some additional programs developed out of that. The Black Panthers, for instance, were somewhat active on the campus for a period of time and there were not only black Wesleyan students but also black younger people from Middletown who were oriented to the Panther movement. I was never that close to the Panthers. I think it's fair to say that the Panthers viewed me more as part of the problem than part of the solution and, as a result, I wasn't privy to the inner workings of the organization, so I didn't know who was really a member and who was not, but it was clear that there was some Panther activity going on and that it involved some of the younger people in the community. Actually, when the Afro-American Institute was developed it became the focus of a new tutorial program which operated out of the institute which involved primarily black Wesleyan students tutoring but which did the same kinds of things with young people from the community that we had been trying to do in the earlier tutorial programs, so that what had shifted was not so much the substance of the program but just its locus--its locus had moved from the white Wesleyan student body to the black Wesleyan student body. Some additional and very imaginative programs were added to it. Some of the things that were brought to it from the TOPS experience, and it's interesting that at one point Farina Ronyatta was a co-director of TOPS and, I believe, she was hired by Wesleyan from that position. So it's not surprising that in the tutorial program there was an African dance group and various kinds of group activities, a very creative group of activities that were part of the tutorial program that Farina organized. So, I guess to summarize, I would say that once black students were on the Wesleyan campus in significant numbers, their activity, their involvement in local black community affairs in Middletown, grew very rapidly and became very substantial. One of the characteristics of it was that there was a very deliberate move on the part of black students on the campus to view these activities as being sponsored and generated and run by black people. That was the key thing, so that at some point it became a little difficult for those of us who were tied into the community in a more integrated way to have as productive relationships with that growing movement as we might have wished because it was a clear shift from the direction that we were going in, from that direction to something new.

**Q: Tell me about Wesleyan's impact on the black community in ways other than student organizations or student groups and student activities. Perhaps, was there interaction and was Wesleyan's impact felt in the black community by faculty or administrative moves or involvement, trustee involvement, something of that sort and, also, was it directed to other segments of the population other than the students, the young people of the black community?**

**A:** Yes, there has been a good deal of impact, I think, of Wesleyan on the black community, some of it positive and some of it negative. A lot of it is sort of really deeply buried in Wesleyan-Middletown history and it hasn't been dredged up yet, and it really

ought to be, and I think that maybe this project may help. So I probably am going to be raising more questions than I'll be answering. I think it's interesting to remember that Wesleyan had its first black student back in about 1833 or 1835, or thereabouts, in its very early days. His name was [Beaman]. He was the son of the minister of the forerunner Church of Cross Street. I don't remember whether it was called Cross Street at that time, but he was driven out of the university by his fellow white students who didn't appreciate that black presence in their midst. That's a bit of Wesleyan history and a bit of black Middletown history that I think is significant and, of course, it's a very negative bit, but I don't think it should be ignored. It's also the case that, at least in recent years, let me just raise the question: I think it would be interesting to look into the employment history of blacks at Wesleyan. Now, I was the first black person hired on the faculty and that was in 1961. Barbara Davidson was the first black person hired under the secretarial-clerical staff and that was at about the same time, Barbara and I, that's one of the things we share. Before that there were black people who worked at Wesleyan. David Cooper, Sr., had worked at Wesleyan when I was a freshman. I knew him. He worked in the Downey House Grille. He now has responsibility for certain aspects of the custodial work at Wesleyan. There are other people working on the custodial staff and I don't remember coming in contact with black custodians when I was an undergraduate, and that may be significant because back in those days the custodial staff cleaned the student rooms, but my recollection is that the people who cleaned my room were white. That was in the early '50's. But now my impression is there is a fair number of black people who are involved in custodial work at Wesleyan. I think another aspect--now one can look at that in two different ways--that it's an employment opportunity, right? On the other hand, that is about the lowest level employment opportunity that is offered at Wesleyan. So it's a situation about which I have mixed feelings. If one looks at Physical Plant, I think it's fair to say that the Physical Plant force at Wesleyan over the last ten to fifteen years has not had very much of a black presence. Now I don't know anything about the numbers, but this is something that one could look into but, it seems to me, it's certainly my impression, that it's been rather difficult to get black people onto the Physical Plant workforce. So I think that one can probably raise some questions about whether Wesleyan's economic impact on the black community of Middletown has been positive or negative. My guess would be one would have to conclude that over the years Wesleyan, like most other predominantly white institutions in Middletown, has had a negative and depressing economic effect on the black community in that it has done all the traditional things but been very, very slow in getting black people into higher level positions while making some very low level positions available to them, and that combination, of course, would tend to depress the economic level in the black community. So without really knowing, I would guess that in the employment area, at least, Wesleyan has been like other institutions. Of course, in recent years Wesleyan has made much more substantial effort in Affirmative Action, but let's keep in mind that Affirmative Action is new and you can't wipe out a hundred and forty years of Wesleyan history just because the last few years we've had an Affirmative Action plan. I think that would be a very serious historical distortion if we were to forget about the past.

**Q: Throughout the community, has Wesleyan's financial impact made a difference?**

A: Well, I think the financial impact has been felt recently. I'm not aware of anything in the early days of Wesleyan's history in the way of financial impact. But recently, Wesleyan has done a number of things that have had a financial impact on the community. One has been the establishment, several years ago, [of] a revolving loan fund. I think it's a million dollar fund that Wesleyan established a number of years ago and has been made available to various community groups for a variety of building projects, some in the area of housing and at least one loan was given to the YMCA for the expansion of its' facilities. So those are ways in which there's been an impact. Another financial venture of Wesleyan's has had, I think, a subtle impact on the community and that is the Wesleyan Hills project, a housing complex that was done by the Hill Development Corporation and which is wholly owned by Wesleyan. That project has helped, I think, to attract young black professionals. That and other housing development activities in the community have helped to attract some young black professionals to the community that is beginning to change the black community of Middletown in what I think are very positive ways. It's beginning to expand; it's more diversified; it has more skills, and so forth, so I think that's another way in which there has been an impact. A third one has been a loan to Shiloh Baptist Church for its rebuilding project. The church burned down a couple of years ago and they have now rebuilt on another lot, and Wesleyan made funds available to them through a loan for that purpose. So in recent years there has been some financial impact, but I'm just not aware of any in earlier years.

**Q: Has Wesleyan also made any cultural impacts on the community at large or in the Middletown area, the black community in particular?**

A: Yes, I really think that that's an area in which Wesleyan has had quite a profound impact through the whole period from about the mid '60's to now, say over the last ten years, Wesleyan has been the place where black cultural events have occurred. Speakers and a whole variety of programs that have brought black cultural life to Middletown and many members of the black community in Middletown not associated with the university have participated in those events and I have, I think, profited from them, and even people who weren't in the audience, I think, have profited in an indirect way in that they were aware that Voices, Incorporated, was at Wesleyan or that Martin Luther King was speaking here or that Malcolm X was here, that Vinie Burrows was here. Whatever it was, it gave them a heightened awareness of the existence of these people and of these cultural opportunities. So, I think that's one respect in which there has been a very substantial impact, and I'd be curious about what Middletown citizens not associated with Wesleyan would say about that. I think that's really a question that you ought to ask them to see what they think about that impact. But, from my admittedly biased Wesleyan view, I think that that is an area of substantial impact.