

Jerome Byrd - No Date

I: My name is Charles James. I'm here with Mr. Jerome Byrd, a businessman and a resident of Middletown. I'm going to be interviewing him as a bicentennial project, his life in Middletown, his business, his relations within the community. I'd like to start off by asking you, how did you first come to Middletown, why you picked Middletown in particular over any other cities that you might have settled in.

A: Well, actually, I didn't pick Middletown from the very beginning because my idea was to get away from the South. I was born in a little town, Arlington, South Carolina. I didn't like the situation there so I decided I'd come North like many other blacks were doing at that time and I left the South and came to New York City. New York City just wasn't the type of thing that I was used to, being born in a small southern country town. In fact, I couldn't get work anyway so I lived there for about two weeks and I left New York and came to Middletown to live with-- actually, a distant relative of mine lived at that point at 15 South Street. When I arrived here I found out that Middletown was more or less like the little town that I was born in, used to living in. It was quiet, didn't seem to have a lot of crime, crimes, hustle and bustle that New York had. New York was just a little too much for me. I came here and started to live with a cousin of mine and it took me a few days to get a job. But once I got a job I felt this was the better place to raise my family.

Q: O.K. Where did you begin working when you came to Middletown?

A: Well, the first job I got in Middletown was in New Britain-- well, I didn't get a job in Middletown. I couldn't find a job at that time in Middletown but there were quite a few guys from Middletown working in New Britain and they got me a job over at North and Judd in New Britain and the first job I got was over there.

Q: What kind of work were you doing?

A: We were working in the foundry, North and Judd was a foundry, and also North and Judd they make metal hardware.

Q: I see. Like what were your original impressions when you came here? I mean, what part of the town did you settle in and--

A: Well, my impression, as I said, was more or less like where I was born and raised. It was a small, quiet town and, of course, there wasn't that many black people in Middletown. I had to get used to that. Where I came from was plenty of black people and in Middletown you didn't see that many black people and this was a little unusual to me, something I had to get used to. I found the people in Middletown was mostly to me foreigners because I found one thing I had to get used to and that's most everybody could speak a different language, a second language other than English, you know, and I wasn't used to that in the South

because everybody spoke English, you know. I had to get used to talking with people and it was hard for me to understand some of the people in which I had to deal with.

Q: O.K. When you first came to town, did you immediately think of going into business for yourself, or were you thinking about staying, keeping your job in the foundry, or, kind of, what led you to seek--?

A: Well, this and that originated later on. Incidentally, I found people here working even harder at factory work than I was ever used to doing in the South. This was a little disappointment to me because in the South we worked hard in season but in certain seasons we'd have a lot of lazy times sometimes, you know. Here it was a hustle and bustle. You had to work EVERY day to try and keep your head above water because another thing I found was amazing when I came here in 1940, the wages wasn't that much different than what it was on some jobs in the South and before I left I was working on a construction company, when I left the South, which had ran out. The job had completely ran out when I left. I left the South making \$1.25 an hour and the first job I got here was at fifty-five cents an hour. That's amazing, isn't it? And, of course, I began to get little better jobs after that, but then what prompted me to change my mind about working in factories was you had to work too steady, too hard. It was too confining and the pay wasn't that good and I thought to myself, I'm trying to raise a family on nothing, really, better my condition because the cost of living was much higher here like rent, for instance, things like that, than it was where I came from. So I said I could work here the rest of my life, because I was a young man of twenty-three years old when I came here, and I could work at least for the rest of my life and I will be just as poor at sixty- five as I am now because I could see the system is set up against the working man, period. And not being able to get an education like I would have liked to have had because I come along during Depression years when you were lucky to finish high school, and college was a rare thing. So any black person at that point, because it was during Depression days, so this prompted me to try to think of something that I could get into that would elevate my standard of living a little better than punching the clock, so to speak, in the factory. So this is when I started to think to try to go into my own business, which turned out to be the barber business.

Q: What kind of processes did you have to go through in order to get into the barber business?

A: Well, really, I took up barbering in the South. I had an uncle that owned a barbershop. I worked for him weekends for quite a few years; in fact, since I was sixteen I used to work for him. He taught me everything I knew. Of course, in Connecticut although I had already been barbering, they wouldn't accept this because I had to have a license to go into my own business and I had to prove to them that I was a barber. They wanted me to start out right, to go to school, and this I protested. I said, "I don't need to go to school". In fact, I started to

school and went for a couple of days. I found out that I knew more than the instructor that was trying to teach me because he knew nothing about cutting black folks' hair. So I said, "Why should I go to school and show this instructor how you're supposed to cut black people's hair, you know"? He didn't know because there wasn't that many black people around. He had no way of knowing it, see? So then I made a suggestion that this training I don't need. I said, "Now if there is some way that you can have me go to school enough to cover the State law to get my license, I could see", but going to school here every day for six months seemed like a waste of time to me for I'd already been cutting hair for 10-15 years, you know. Well, I was cutting since the time I was 16. I was about 23 or 24 years old at that time. Then they fixed it so that I could go to the State school once a week, that is to put in a certain amount of hours which it took me much longer because I went to school for about a year, once a week, and I was able to work and support my family and go to school part-time, see? And when I finished so many hours they'd give me a point and at that point I'd go to the State Capitol to take my examination for a barber's license and I got my barber's license and in 1947, of course, I didn't go into the barber business at that time because it took me awhile to get set financially. It costs a little money to go into business, you know.

Q: Yes, that was something I wanted to go into a little bit. In going into business for yourself, of course you need in your particular line of work, you needed shop, you needed equipment, you know. In fact, you needed a lot of equipment, and how did you go about securing the necessary capital? Did you go through banks or did you take on partners?

A: Well, this is why it took me from '47 to '49 to actually open up a shop. See, this I didn't want--I didn't want, I was afraid to take the gamble. I didn't try to borrow any money whatsoever. I saved the money from the time I got my license. I figured first things first. So I had my license, right? So then I started to save a little money after I done some investigating and finding out what I was up against to go into my own business. I started to lay a few dollars aside so I could get started without starting in the hole, so to speak, if you know what I mean. You see, I had saved a little money and, if I recall, I think I wound up being \$500.00 in debt and the man that set me up, which was the barber supply from New Haven, he took that credit himself and I paid him off later on. This way I avoided trying to get a business loan or anything else. As I said, there were so few blacks here at that time it was really a gamble to even go into the barber business because it cost you quite a few dollars to get started and because you had to go in according to their specifications. State law says you had to have hot and cold running water and a certain type of plumbing and a certain amount of square feet and all this type of thing, you know, that you had to be confronted with and knowing the number of blacks that were in Middletown. In fact, I had some people who discouraged me from wasting my money; "You ain't got enough people here to support you". I said, "Well, I'm still working and I figure once I get the business built

up it should pay off', and it did. But it took awhile, see? I couldn't tell you the work! I think I went in '40; no, I went in '49 and I could tell you the work for two more years in two places that I worked at on the job, and then I worked in the barbershop.

Q: Like, what kind of hours did you work? How did you manage that?

A: Well, I changed my shift. I'd go to work at 11:00 o'clock at night, see? I worked from 11:00 to 7:00 in the morning and I'd come home and grab a couple hours' sleep and then I'd go in the barbershop and work until 6:00 in the evening. Then I'd leave the barbershop. You never got out on time, really, but as quick as I could I'd go home. I'd grab another few hours' sleep and be back to work at night, and it was rough. It's rough!

Q: Yes, definitely. You mentioned that there is a service that, I know that in my experience in Middletown, from my experience anywhere, when I first started going out and trying to secure a haircut that I couldn't just walk into a white barbershop and ask him to cut my hair. Did you find that? Did you get any kind of white clientele even though you had, you were forced to take this kind of training to cut white hair?

A: Well, yes. Well, this is something good for me too that I didn't mention, see? At the time when I came to Middletown I was more or less trained to cut black's hair because in the South, you know, this was a No-No. You didn't get a chance to. Oh, I had cut a few white peoples' hair but it would be around either at their house or my house. There was never any barbershops, see? But I would do it out in the country with people, this is in the South, you know, just to get the training, see, on white peoples' hair, and I had a general idea. But by me, but putting in these hours in the State school I was cutting a few blacks and mostly whites, see, and by the time I went in business I could cut (both black's and white's) hair. Already I knew how to cut black's but I did get some training by doing this on white peoples' hair, see, and it wasn't enough. When I first went in business I got a lot of white trade but as the years went by, when I began to get more and more and more black trade, the white people started to kind of move off. It's a funny thing, I imagine they have different conversations in the barbershop and the barbershop is the place, I guess, where blacks like to talk freely.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I think whites feel the same. And oftentimes when you have a couple of whites sitting here and five or six blacks, somebody going to slip out something ().

Q: Soul fish, soul fish, that's seasonal in Middletown.

A: They might have come to () too.

Q: Air conditioning?

A: No, the fish tank. I see sometimes certain fish, or some kind of fish that's been there a long time. Anyhow, let's see, what I--oh, yeah, about the mixing up in the barbershop. It seemed like a thing it's hard for blacks and whites to sit down and hold a conversation, be comfortable between the two races in a barbershop. And eventually, I still even to this day have a feeling that the old Italians that was coming in my shop, the white, still a few left, and they still coming; but the most of them, especially as my business grows from the black community, whites began to drop out little by little. Of course they had plenty of barbershops but, I guess, by then, knowing me in this community in which I live and not that I just came in there, I think they were coming anyway just to try to see me get started. See, I was so determined. They kind of patronized me back in those days.

Q: Yeah, that's definitely an important thing I wanted to touch on. I know when I was growing up that a barbershop was more than just a place that you got your hair cut. It was more or less a community center, you know.

A: Right.

Q: For at the time you went in I know that in most of the barbershops, most black barbershops, that there were people who might come in every day.

A: Right.

Q: You know, especially retired, old retired people who were unemployed would come in and talk, you know, that type of thing. And younger kids would come in, you know, to get their hair cut, and you really learned a lot. It was like going to school, the barbershop.

A: That's right.

Q: You learned about whites, you know, what happened years and years ago; and you learned about, you know, what it was that black people were feeling, you know. You learned a lot about racism, you know, and you learned a lot about just what you had to do in this world to get into politics.

A: Politics? You learned how people feel about their life in general.

Q: Like you say, there's a place where you like to speak freely and people are not afraid to express themselves; people like to express themselves.

A: Right. And this way, believe it or not, it would take very little training for me to be a psychiatrist.

Q: Yeah. [Chuckle]

A: That's how much I know about people. You know it's just like if you're driving your car. Then eventually you get very used to that car and you know every--I can almost look at a person

before he comes in the door, if I never seen him before, and tell what kind of personality he has, believe that?

Q: Yeah, I believe that.

A: Because you can't always judge a book by it's cover but you can get where you can pretty well--if you look at the back cover you can probably tell just about what this book is going to be telling you. Right? After a while.

Q: You kind of lost track of--we were talking about, we never really got to talk about, that is to say, about your family. You say you came here by yourself, or did you have to bring your family with you?

A: Yeah, I was all alone. I left my family and my wife and three kids in the South at the time that I left. As I forestated, I had ran out of a job and to me farming, there was plenty of farming in the section that I came from, farming just was NOT my thing because I was raised on a farm and I discovered though that that I would NOT live and die on a farm like my parents had done, see? Farming just was not my thing and, like I said, I wasn't able to get an education back in those days because you were lucky to finish high school back in those days and college was a rarity for a black because nobody had no money to send a kid to college, you see.

Q: And even if he did, where was he going to go?

A: Right. Well, he had to go to some other black college. There were a few around.

Q: Yeah.

A: You didn't have money for that, see? You were lucky back then in my age, in that day in time, you were lucky if you could finish high school because your parents, you know--in fact, to tell you the truth, I was pulled out of school in the 8th grade to go to work. This really was damaging to my mind and my thoughts because I was always able to learn and I was doing well, but back in those days you were, believe it or not, there was nothing compulsory that you had to go to school a DAY. It's amazing but it's a fact. There was no compulsion. Now a kid has to go to school until he gets sixteen. He doesn't have to send his kid to school a day, but my father was determined to say he wanted to get all his kids get some education because he didn't want them to come up like he had to come, see? And so I think that's relative for all parents with their kids. But I was the unfortunate one because I was the oldest boy, see? My brother, he finished high school and went to college and, in fact, he's teaching school right now in the Middletown system here--Milton Byrd. My sister graduated high school. She was the oldest. There were only four of us in my family and, of course, my baby sister finished high school. Girls mostly was able to get more education back in those days than the boys because the boys, you know, would make a good work hand. This is an unfortunate thing that happened to me but it did do one thing. It

made me work just a little bit harder than the average person, you see. And I've done quite a bit of studying since I was pulled out of school because I was, like I said, determined not to be a complete failure, you know, and I always had this in mind. I don't know if I should put all this on the tape. It might not be interesting but I will say it anyway. I've always figured if a man had a brain in his head, in fact what I'm trying to say is, actually, if that man over there can do something, what's wrong with me, why can't I? You know? And this made me kind of work ten times as hard as somebody else that had an education, see? But I was determined. I'm determined right now. I won't even--I'll attempt anything you do after you get out of college. I'll attempt it whether I fail or not. (...for trying, isn't it...?) and, you know, I've made out pretty good with this attitude, see?

Q: We find out that there are ways; you don't have to always sit in a classroom to learn things, you know. There are a lot of people you will encounter who come from schools who think that because they have sat in this classroom that they know everything. You find out that there are a lot of ways to learn any given subject, you know. You can learn--

A: Well, I thought of another thing, you see. I found this out recently. I've been working now pretty near three years as security guard at Wesleyan and I know, I'm not trying to throw out education because I think every human being needs all he can get, especially in this day and age, and then it's not doing you that much good, but if you send a fool to college you gonna get a fool out of college. The only difference is you gonna get an educated one and that's dangerous.

Q: That's what my Mom has always told me.

A: You know that?

Q: Yeah.

A: So then you got to have good common sense to begin with and another thing, you gotta have feelings for other people and that comes within your heart. If you get all the education and get in the high places you could turn out to be another Nixon [chuckles]. You understand what I'm trying to explain? And I look at a lot of people. In fact, in a secret way I interview a lot of students out there. I sit down and talk to them. It might seem dumb to them but this is an education to me, see? I don't even know how other people think and I learn from them and analyze him and wonder what he'll amount to when he finished the course which he has taken. And I've warned a lot of students up there now down in Clark's Hall. And I started to talk to one guy and when I got through talking to him I had about thirty students which I didn't know was sitting and standing around in the back of us, and I got a little embarrassed when I looked around [chuckles] some of the students, you know. I said, "Jesus Christ, what am I saying to arrest this many people?", because I didn't know they were in the room. But I can't think of the incident. This student and I was sitting and watching TV and some remarks that Mr. Ford had made about

his budget, or something like that, and he made the remark. I wish I could think of the answer to that but I can't. I didn't interrupt him but later on I asked him why did he make that statement. It was something about tight money, interest rates or something like that and I asked him why did he make that statement. Well, it was something about tax. I don't know what it was. He was going to give you some kind of a tax break and they said he shouldn't do that. And I asked him why did he make that statement. He said, "Well, you talk about curbing inflation and doing something about the economy, you can't do it that way. You've got to tighten up somewhere". And I said, "Well, to me, this is just the opposite way that I think". I said, "The way I think, it takes money. You gotta spend money to make money". And I said, "I've experienced this from my own small way of doing business". I said, "Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin'". I said, "If the government would go all out-and-out on spending and put money in circulation", I said, "that would automatically curb prices; curb controls". He said, "I can't see it". I said, "Why not?" I said, "Competition is the thing what holds prices in line". I said, "Right now all you got is big businesses controlling everything and they can put their prices up any way they want to and these are the people he's talking about helping".

Q: O.K., Mr. Byrd. Getting back to your family, you say that after you became established here in your job that you sent for your family and they came up?

A: Yes. After about three months I sent for my family and my wife and the three boys. Of course, the girls, they were born here in Middletown. I've got three daughters and three sons. The sons were born in the South. The youngest boy, well, I guess he was only two weeks old. My wife came up (in August?). My youngest son was born in August. I guess she came August of '40. I guess she came the first of '41.

Q: Have your children remained in Connecticut, in the Middletown area?

A: Every one of them is still around here in the Middletown area.

Q: That's nice to hear. We were talking earlier, when we began the interview, about the job you had taken with the Redevelopment people. The Redevelopment people lied to the Federal Government. Would you tell me something about that, the circumstances leading up to that?

A: Well, I only took the job with the Redevelopment simply, as I stated, because I felt like I wanted to help the community. The community was predominantly black but there was still some white landholders in there that felt like they would like to get rid of any blighted run-down property also, see, and it seemed that Redevelopment was dragging their feet in that area, see? It seemed more or less like they were playing ball in other areas and the people were very unhappy with this and by (New Year?) I had previous meetings with this Family Association Group. I was able to have direct contact with the mayor, which was Mayor Dooley, and having discussions on this redevelopment problem I had made the

suggestion if they didn't have fundings for that area while they was going in other areas, mainly Wesleyan, and I made the suggestion to the mayor about if they didn't have the fundings, and it surely would be funded, why couldn't the City loan them money to get started to ease the tension in the South End? And not knowing that this would amount to anything but, believe it or not, it worked. He loaned an "X" amount of money, a thousand dollars and they began to buy property. And some of this group, the Family Association, later on decided to go. I had an invitation to go back and live in my mother's house. (). He went down with her at that time in New York City and he took about three of these women. I think it was Mrs. Howell and Mrs. Roly and, I think, Mrs. Moses. They went down to New York with the redevelopment people and made their complaints, and they got action. They got a promise at that time that this area would be approved and would be funded for good and they got things moving, like, from that. Not because, myself knowing at the time that I would ever get a job in Redevelopment actually, I didn't need a job; I had a job. I'd been () pretty well at that time but I threw an application in for the simple reason that I figured that if I could get inside the system I could be more help to the community than I would on the outside. So when they started interviewing applicants for the job, it surprised me when they even called me for an interview because I thought there were other people more qualified for the job than I was. But looking back, I know why they hired me, see? The whole thing was a token-ism type of thing because the Planning Relations Group had put pressure on them to hire a black. So when they got through with the interviews, by my surprise they had picked me. And I had to really do some fast thinking of whether I wanted to take a job because I knew by taking a job I would neglect my business which was still in pretty good standing. But I had other help to run my business while I worked for the Redevelopment; so I took the job mainly to help the community. And I think in taking the job I was a big help to the community because I knew the people in that community and they trusted me that I could talk the language to these people, you know. I could bring them direct things that they wanted to hear right out of the horse's mouth, so to speak, see? Of course, this later turned back on me because the redevelopment felt, you remember the staff, "you should be working with us and not the people out there", and I felt just the opposite. I felt that I took the job for this reason. And they put me in training. I was in training up there for six months. They learnt me all the ins and outs of the business before they ever sent me out to talk to people. Well, I figured I was qualified by this time to ask the questions that the people wanted to know. And some of them questions that people would ask me I would explain according to HUD's manual. But there wasn't too much in the line of redevelopment because some things they didn't want the people to know, see?

Q: Well, yeah. Like, you found some positive work for a government agency that the people really lose sight of who they're supposed to be helping?

A: Right.

Q: You start this in-group type thing but the Agency sees itself at war, or kind of like at war, with its clients and--

A: Right.

Q: And that's how you get all this secrecy that results from Watergate.

A: That's right.

Q: And that type of thing.

A: See, certain things, they put a little piece in the paper and many people didn't see that in the paper, you know. They could have discovered the lies as well with what was in the paper, but a lot of people didn't never see this particular paper. And, if you did see it, you say, "This can't be comparing to me. It must be comparing to somebody else". And they'd ask me questions about these kinds of things which I would explain in detail, and a lot of it would really be an eye-opening type of thing for lessons like what they had coming to them. And occasionally (). In one case there was a tenant being evicted. He didn't know what his benefits were and he didn't know what he was supposed to have coming, and these types of things that I was bringing to the people, see? This was a favor to them because some people really was a little skeptical about it, especially home owners, where they might be hurt or helped by the whole situation, see? And I could assure them that there was no way they could be hurt because the whole thing was designed to raise the standard of living, and I don't see why anybody should object to this type of thing.

Q: I'd like to get back to your business for a while. We have a few black businesses in Middletown. We have, let's see, Sam and Frank's Gas Station (). I think there's an insurance firm, insurance brokers, I should say. Is the city government really receptive or do they make steps to get increased black business in the city or, in general, is the city government receptive to black people going, coming in and taking a bigger chunk? I think we were talking earlier about how the Federal system, the government system, militates against working people, or wage earners, and they try to keep you in this position. Do people in the city government and outside the city government and the city, are they receptive to black people coming into Middletown and opening up businesses?

A: Well, they're beginning to accept this type of thing, I think more in the later years than they did back in the days when I was going into business. It was kinda rough when I started going into business, because I went into business in 1949, and I can't think of any other black business in town at that particular time. The only one I can think of was the man who did have a restaurant at one time before my time and he didn't make it. I don't know what his problems were but it was a little bit hard at this point to borrow money, if you were a black, to go in business. Whether they were doing this deliberately, whether to keep you from

going in business, or whether they figure that you wouldn't be, well, let's put it this way, many people go in business and they don't make a success and banks is afraid to loan () that they have a guarantee that whatever loan that you might get, of course, later on, you see, they come out with the SBA. This is a business administration that I don't know just what you call the administration that started this boosting minorities. I think it was, I know it was since the time that I went in business, anyhow.

Q: It was during the Johnson Administration?

A: I think it was during the Johnson Administration when they set up the SBA for black business and minority groups. But before that time it wasn't too easy for a black man to get money to go in business.

Q: In the time that you've been in Middletown, have you seen a lot of black people, black men, come into the city, or were in the city already, start businesses that really haven't worked out too well? Or were most of the black businesses that you have seen spring up since the time that you started your business, have they pretty much stayed in good standing?

A: Oh, well. I got to think over that one because there hasn't been too many black businesses have stayed in business as long as I have and I can't say that I altogether blame that on the community. I have to put some of the blame, I don't know how hard it was for him to get started and how he really got started, but in this part of the country I found out that if you don't have a business that blacks almost have to patronize, or a business that white and black can patronize, it's pretty hard for a black to make a success because blacks don't patronize his own people.

Q: Did you find that when you were in business that you had a lot of support from the black community and, if so, was that because yours was a barbershop?

A: They had no choice. They had no choice. I was the only one. This might be a little selfish for me to say but I think it's a true statement because judging and comparing with other businesses. Now for one reason, to make this clear, a few years ago I went into another business, see? I thought I had a real good thing going. Before I opened it up I went and I bought a piece of property after the Redevelopment bought my property in the South End, and I own the property there now, so as to get my hand in the store. () again, I guess. I opened up a restaurant--well, a delicatessen-type, see? I thought it was a thing that we didn't have one in that particular spot in that area and I figured it would be a good thing, see? And there wasn't no other store around that community and I figured it would be a thing. I didn't expect to get rich but I did expect the people in the community to patronize me because a loaf of bread is a loaf of bread, I don't care where you buy it. It's all the same price because the same man leave it at my place gonna leave it at the big supermarkets unless they might

have some brand of their own and can sell it cheap. And it's cheaper and the black community didn't support that and I lost quite a bit of money into that business and I felt like the black community should have supported me in that business.

Q: In light of that, do you think that, O.K., like, the black businesses that exist in Middletown right now are mostly service functions like you have, is it Sam Mcbrien's Gas Station? And we have a few other things, Kitty's. We have the Rib House and those type of things, but do you think there is any room for a black businessman to come in given that he had the proper capital to go into business? Do you think there is room for a black businessman to come in to open up something on a larger scale?

A: I think so. I think if a black man come in with the right type of business he could make a go. But I repeat, I think it would have to be a business that he shouldn't have to depend on his own black people. And, I don't know why, I've seen Middletown grow to where it is now in numbers and it's a funny town. You take in the bigger cities I notice black people more prosperous in their business, but it seems as though all black people know each other in this town. It's kind of a shock or amazing to them when you are able to go into this. It seems to be, like, "how did he get this? Well, if he got it he ain't gonna get my support". Because, I don't know, there seems to be too many little ethnic groups, one here, one there, one there, and to me this is what's wrong with Middletown. I know there might be some blacks disagree with this if they hear it on the tape, but it's true. Until the black people group themselves together, they could do a lot of things in this town if they would only get themselves together, but seems like it's a hard thing to get the black people organized and group themselves together in this town. I've seen many things started, organizations that dropped, and at one point I think we gonna have all chiefs and no Indians. You can't do that you know. You got to be a good leader in order to be a good follower. Everybody can't lead, you know, somebody got to follow, you know. Most of all, the person shouldn't want to be the chief who's not qualified to be a leader. And it seems like in the past the leaders that we had was more or less to build up publicity for themselves and own personal gain, and when people find that out they don't like that either. You can't blame them. And, getting back to Redevelopment, this is why I took that job. I've seen others in places where they could help the blacks and seems that after they got themselves pretty well settled they kind of forgot about the rest of the black community. And I said that if I was ever in a position to help the black community I was going to do just that. And I did that. I lost my job on and account of it, but I did that. Of course, today I don't know if the people are (remember that I did help them. But getting back to your question, I'm sure a black man could still, if he opened up the right kind of business here and had the right kind of capital, I think he could make it.

Q: The potential is there?

A: The potential is there, yes. Still, even times it's not quite as good as it used to be because

there's too many people out of work at this point, but I think a black man, if he could open up the right thing, he could make it.

Q: You touched on a lot here. I was wondering, you talk about black community organizations that have come and gone, more or less. Have there been one or two issues which have really got the black people in the community together that we mentioned, South End, urban development, and was there anything else?

A: () Association. I think that all fell apart by now. That was one in particular that I thought had a good thing going for themselves, you know, because, like I say, you got to get yourself together and when it comes to doing something for the community as a whole, a person shouldn't even think of himself, he should think of the good he could do for the organization, see? It's kind of like what Kennedy says, "It's not what the Government can do for you, its what you can do for the Government", see? And I feel that's a pretty true saying because that's what it should be in an organization. When you start thinking, "Well, this thing ain't doing nothing for me, to heck with it", you might be doing something to help some other less fortunate person, see, and this is the way I believe. I don't ever want to be the leader of an organization. I just want to be any kind of help I can be and I've been in several of them and, you know, eventually went out for one reason or another, and I think this is the reason somebody gets to be the top and then nobody wants to follow him and they want no part of it because he couldn't get to the top.

Q: In terms of that, O.K. It's happened among the general black community. But in terms of independent black businessmen in the community, has there been any attempt by them to organize some kind of civic organization or mutual help organization?

A: Not to my knowledge. This is the thing that I've often thought about that the few little black businessmen in this town should have had more communication among themselves, see? And this would have been a big help, see? But you spoke to Sam and Frank. They're doing good, you see? This is what I meant if you go into the right type of business. Sam and Frank, they get a lot of black trade but they get equally as much white trade, and I think they have a pretty good business going. You see what I'm trying to get at now. But when it comes to a thing, I don't think any black man that opens up a business just for blacks, but then it's the thing like a barbershop, a certain type of business that you go into, that blacks ain't going to come. A gas station like Sam and Frank's got, well, Christ, everybody will drive up there and get some gas, you know, as long as you treat the people half-way right, you know, and they seem to be doing good and they have my blessing. I patronize them myself each time I have occasion to do this, and that's most of the time, because my business is not too far from theirs, just right opposite, across on leased land on Main Street Extension. Now we also have another, Top Hat Barbershop, right up the street from me. Now this might seem a little selfish as once when they open up, they're on the north end of town, which is fine. They haven't been in business not too many years. I don't know just when

they did go into business but this has been a bad thing because for some reason they chose to move on this end of town where I was already, see? And I told the Commissioner, I said, "Now look, competition is all right. I have nothing against competition. I think there's enough people out here for everybody and I'm not thinking in those terms. But I do think you shouldn't have given these people a barber's registration to move one block from where I'm already established". I told the commissioner, I said, "Now you know what this is gonna mean. They won't be able to make a living and neither will I and this is exactly what happened. You see, to me, I would have never moved on the North End where they were because I would stay down here, if I was the last one went in business, to try to build my business up to the (). But I wouldn't want to move next door to him and try to split the business up because people are funny, you know, sometimes a guy will come into the barber shop. I say, "I close at 6:00" and if you've got a couple of customers, maybe you got the door locked, you say, "I can't handle you today but I'll handle you tomorrow". Well, he gets offended by that, see? He's not thinking of the law, he's not thinking that you might have had a hard day and it's time for you to go home to eat your supper. All he's thinking of is getting his hair cut that day and I don't think one more night would make any difference, but he don't feel like that. When he has money to spend, you know, he don't ever want to be turned away. So for that reason I always say this, ever since I been in business, after about seven years, in fact, of being in business, I found out the only way to stay in business is to run your business legitimate. That's another thing that most black people don't do, but I had to learn this. I learned this the hard way because you can make a fast buck and get all kinds of business but you can't last if it's not legitimate because they ain't gonna let you last, see?

Q: They'll catch up to you one of these days?

A: They'll catch up, you see? But one thing that hurt me, I used to let people come in with their bottles. You know how people like to congregate in a barbershop, but the thing got out of hand, see? I would have a group of women and children sitting there and some guys, they come in with a bottle. Of course they go in the back room and they get along O.K., but once they drink that bottle they get awful loud and this offends some lady with three kids sitting there. So I found that I had to cut this thing out and I started to run by business just like the white man that runs his business up street and this has not got approval of a lot of the black people, see, because they like to do their own thing and they figure a barbershop is one of the places that they be able to do it, see? But I don't, damn it, I don't like things for a hangout, see? I don't like that too much because--

Q: It impedes your business?

A: Right. You know, after a while you're going to run your business down to where you're going to have nobody but that group and they ain't spending their money. They drinking wine, you know, if you know what I mean. So I better let you ask me some questions because I could talk all day, you know.

Q: Let me think where I am now. In terms of what we were talking about, if black businessmen in town could get together to establish a greater communication, do you think that that would result in more black businesses coming into town and saying this is the kind of place where not only the people going to be receptive to you but the people you're going to be working with and the case of people who are in similar businesses working against, you know? If these people are gonna, you know, be cordial and think of your interests as well as thinking of their interests, that this would improve the business atmosphere in town?

A: I know it would. If the black people that are in business was to have more communication among themselves I think it would help the whole situation a lot, see, because we would all more or less follow a pattern and because one good satisfied customer, believe me when I'm dead right, and they say the customer is always right, which I disagree in many cases. He couldn't go to that other place and get something illegal, you follow me? He could go. If we had ourselves incorporated together in a way it would make better business and a better community because we would all be thinking in the same terms, because the general public don't care. It's up to you to have a guideline to go by in running your business and that is to stay inside the law if you want to pass and I'm sure with being cooperated together it would make better communication with everybody because they would say, "Well, old Byrd turned me down but I could go up to Top Hat and probably go in there after Seven and the guy will lock the door and do it". Well, then this gives this particular customer to believe that something's wrong with Byrd's. That's not so, see? And if they had more communication together this kind of thing wouldn't happen and people would take you as you are and they wouldn't be expecting these extra favors.

Q: We missed the legal aspect. I don't know, are there any black legal services in Middletown that are allied with businesses that are primarily business legal services? I mean, if you need some legal work done in terms of your business, is there a person or persons in Middletown who can supply that need for you? Or are you--

A: No, not that I know of because once in a while I have to have business letters taken care of and I go up Main Street to the Secretarial Service and I think that would be a thing that, I don't know, the black lawyers in this town, and I don't know--

Q: Accountants?

A: I don't know any black accountants anyplace that you can type of service done and I wish there were. In fact, I'm going to buy a typewriter here for my wife. She does typing. (End of Tape)

t: 9/22/95

/Mk

DK~