

**Cooper, Anne - Interviewed 3/25/76**

**I: ( ) oral history tape. This interview was conducted on Miss Anne Cooper. She lives at 220 Newfield Street, and I'm Leta Pittman.**

**Q: Miss Cooper, when did you come to Middletown, Connecticut?**

A: I don't know the year, but I just talked to my son. It's been about forty-seven years.

**Q: Uh-huh. And where did you live before you moved to Middletown, Connecticut? Were you in another part of Connecticut?**

A: No, I was in South Carolina.

**Q: Oh, I see.**

A; Columbus, South Carolina.

**Q: And what made you move to Middletown?**

A: Well, I didn't really move. I come up here to work.

**Q: I see.**

A: I had a friend here. She got me a job. And you know the Pierson, the greenhouse?

**Q: Uh-huh.**

A: They sent for me to come up and work.

**Q: So you came.**

A: When I got here, I liked it and when I was goin back but when I got here then all of my friends, my family wanna come up here.

**Q: So your family came up also.**

A: I got one by one up here to be all together.

**Q: How many all together came up with your family?**

A: Well, I had two brothers and two sisters and my brother had three, two children, and my sister had three. And I had one sister, she didn't have any children, and one brother with no children. But I sent for all of them after I got here. ( ).

**Q: Were all of them able to get jobs also?**

A: Not all at once. They stayed with me until they got jobs.

**Q: Was, I know that a lot of people, that said when they came to Middletown, that the wages were very much better than what they could have made down South.**

A: Well, that's one reason I came up here. My mother died, and I was the oldest one in the family, and with three of them want to go to college, and I come up here to work to send money back to get them in college. ( ). I was making, I guess, five dollars a week in the South. I come up here, I made twenty-five.

**Q: Yea, that's a very big difference. And how was it for living conditions? Was it easy for you to find a good place to live in?**

A: Well, I stayed in. I worked right here and I stayed in about two years. And I have one son. And I boarded my son out ( ). And when I left there, I went to another place, and I stayed there. No, I didn't have no trouble getting a place. They was old houses, but there was no trouble getting them and they wasn't expensive. I lived on one floor on Union Street.

**Q: On Union Street?**

A: On Union Street.

**Q: So, in general, for blacks, when you came up, it was pretty good.**

A: Yea, cause you know, it was old houses, it wasn't expensive. I think, I stayed there in that house, with five rooms, for fourteen dollars a month. It was so good. And I lived on a place you call Water Street for fourteen dollars a month. It wasn't expensive.

**Q: And how long did you work for Pierson?**

A: Well, it must have been, I got here the first day in January and I stayed there from then until the next July and I left and went to Millane and I stayed there about five, six years ( ). I can't tell you all the places I worked. Those are the two main places, Millane and Pierson. Pierson sent for me.

**Q: Was it, did you think it was different as far as how whites treated blacks? Do you think it was different as far as how relations were between? Were there many blacks in Middletown?**

A: No, there wasn't too many.

**Q: Not too many at all. When do you think a lot of blacks started coming into Middletown?**

A: Yea, they started coming in from the South.

**Q: And was it was around what time? Around what time?**

A: What'd you say?

**Q: I'm sorry, around what time?**

A: What time?

**Q: Yea, around what year?**

A: When they started comin in?

**Q: Uh-huh**

A: Well, I don't know. I'd guess maybe two or three a year. Since I, well, they been coming, lately they've been coming very recently, families.

**Q: You said that your younger brothers and sisters wanted to go off to college. Were they able to do that?**

A: Yes. If I sent the money to them. I didn't sent the money and they wanted to come where I was.

**Q: How was schooling though, in Middletown? How was the educational system?**

A: Well, they didn't, I have one son. He finished high school. He took two years trade. Of course, one of my brothers was married, school. The rest of them don't get no ( ) the other one go in the service.

**Q: Did he find it difficult, your son, in school? Like, was it much discrimination?**

A: Well no, my sister had three children, my brother had two. They went to the same school. That was different in the South. They had colored school, teachers, college and everything, a colored movie.

**Q: In Middletown, everybody was able to go to the same school?**

A: The same, that's right.

**Q: So there must not have been any in housing or trying to get housing. There wasn't no discrimination.**

A: No, no. You live in one apartment, somebody's in another one, was all the same. In the South, they have a colored section and white one and they ride the bus or the train. Colored people got in the back and white people got in the front. People here ( ).

**Q: So you pretty much find it a very nice group to live in Middletown?**

A: Well, I tell you, we were born and raised there. We didn't know any different. My mother and father were there when we were born and we didn't know any different. We might have

had a colored school and the colored teacher.

**Q: No, I mean, when you came to Middletown, did you, you liked it much better?**

A: Well, it didn't bother me, no. ( ) It sure didn't make much difference.

**Q: As far as, like, your experiences in Middletown, Middletown was a good place in the North to start.**

A: Well, the only thing that interested me was the money. That's what I came for, the money, and to get the younger children through college and go back home and maybe buy a home down there. And then I went home once and things were different. I come back. I thought I was going to stay but I didn't. I like it here. Me, I can get along with anybody and I don't know much the difference. In the South you cook and you had to eat in the kitchen. You go to the white peoples houses and knock on the back door, you're not supposed to go to the front door, and I come up here I eat at the table with the white people. That was a little difficult for me. And I said, they offer me a plate and I said, no, we all eat together. That's the only thing ( ). I set the table and the food on the table at the side, and I'm supposed to help my plate ( ). We had barbecues, we would have it out on the platform, wasn't cooking inside. We made Kool-Aid, well, it was lemonade by the barrel, five cents a glass. We would dance on this platform, go to a dance, there wasn't no hall there. There was a lot of old empty houses, nobody didn't live in and they would have a lamp or lantern that would lit up that old house and we'd have a party and dance. I don't think we had anything to eat. We just danced and had something to drink. That was all there was to it. There was always something to do. And my mother and father didn't allow us to go out too much at night and there would be a dance and my sister and I used to sleep on the first floor. My older sister and I used to put a chair out the window. And a board that was out the window and we walk five miles and dance till almost sunrise cause my father was a farmer and it didn't make much notice of windows cause he didn't know we was gone. And Thursday it was ladies and gents. They take you to the dance and bring you back to the house. ( ). I loved dancing! You get back and you go to the field the next day on the farm and you so tired and stiff you can hardly work! My father never knowed we did, never know we got out of that room.

**Q: How was it in Middletown? Was there much like that?**

A: Well, I didn't bother since I've been here. I was a lot younger. I was about twenty, twenty-five.

**Q: When you came? You was about twenty when you came over?**

A: ( ). I've been here about half of my life now. I'm eighty-six years old, eighty-five years old. I've been here over forty years. ( ) about half and half, you know, with me. I was about twenty, I suppose, worked all the time. Matter of fact, I was in the church ( ).

**Q: What church was it that you belonged to?**

A: Well, when I was in the church we was a Methodist.

**Q: Oh, was that the one on Court Street?**

A: You mean here? You mean when I first come up here. No, Cross Street, Cross Street. I went there. I lived in Cromwell with the lady I worked for and of course I stayed there. I didn't know where no church was. The lady ( ) she was going to that Cross Street and she took me up there with her. Then I met the, a church in Portland, that's where Barbara Ann found me, and that became my church. So when I found them, and I've been going there ever since.

**Q: And that's the Methodist?**

**Q: Were there many blacks in the church at that time?**

A: Yes, there were quite a few there. There was a nice chorus. When I came up here they had a brick yard, they call it. There was a lot of people. That's why there was so many people, working in the brick yard. ( ). Most of them people belonged to this church. ( ).

**Q: Since you've been in Middletown, have you seen any blacks in politics or on social committees or councils in Middletown?**

A: Well, yes, a few of them. You know Rev. Babbidge? He was a pastor there. He died and a friend of mine, of course I call him my nephew, his mother is the one sent for me up here, (Sneed), he took his place.

**Q: What position is it that he holds now?**

A: Well, now, I can't tell you. That's something I don't know. But I think he took Rev. Babbidge's place. ( ) Some of the colored girls work in the bank. And you couldn't hardly march in the bank in the South. And I have some friends work in the bank ( ). But I can't just remember now. ( ) one by one had opportunities.

**Q: Even in Middletown, do you notice a change? Isn't it much better now from what it was?**

A: Well, I guess, maybe the living is better but the peoples are worse. So I guess it's like that everywhere, the peoples are worse. I guess it's like that in the South, so everybody says, mean to one another, do mean things, kill each other, that's the only thing that I can see. And people used to be so nice and friendly! But I don't think they're friendly. ( ) They're mean to one another. They hate to see somebody have a little more than they do.

**Q: Were there, did you see any blacks going to school in Wesleyan?**

A: No, no there was not. I don't remember if ( )

**Q: You mentioned before that you lived in a project. About how long did you live in this project?**

A: Well, I lived in the project, must have been sixteen-seventeen years. They had a place they call the Veteran's Terrace, no, they built them for the veteran, little shacks, and they tore down my house on Water Street to make the road go to Hartford, and we had to move. And there weren't enough houses over there. So over by the harbor they built houses for the veterans and they put them up real cheap. And then, before they tore them down they let us live there until we got enough room in the project. So I must have stayed up in the little Veteran's Terrace about two years. And we moved out to the Village.

**Q: The Village? And how's living out in the Village? Did you like it?**

A: Well I liked it better. In the Village you didn't pay anything, just your telephone. And where we lived up there the gas, we had to pay our light and buy our oil. ( ) So we went down there we didn't have to pay, no lights, no gas. I liked it better in the house. In those shacks it was very cold. The project was warm and I lived on the second floor.

**Q: Do all your brothers and sisters still live in Middletown?**

A: Yes, well, yes, I got one brother live right up near Professor Snow, one brother live right back there. And the other one, I don't know where he is, but he went somewhere and bought a home, but I can't tell you where. He live I don't know where. But my brother, David, he live right over there up the street. They are the only two brothers I have. And my sister live in the other, you know, Sbona Towers. She lives in Sbona Towers, my other sister, Matty. There were only four of us, two girls and two boys. My brother David, he got three boys and two girls, he got five children. My brother, Arthur, don't have any children, just a little step-son, and my sister, Matty, got three children, and I can't count the grandchildren. But she lives in Sbona Towers. Her son lives in Bloomfield. She's got one son, and he bought a home in Bloomfield.

**Q: What type of work does your brother David do?**

A: My brother David work up at Wesleyan. He go up to Wesleyan. He been up there about thirty years.

**Q: About thirty years?**

A: When they first saw him he be married and got two children.

**Q: And your sister, what type of work did she do?**

A: Well, she retired from the state hospital.

**Q: Well before, when all of them first came up, what type of work was she doing?**

A: Well, she was () by doing days work. Well, I don't know how long she worked. I think she retired, I think, in '67.

**Q: Well, overall then, you pretty much enjoyed your life in Middletown.**

A: Well, I did, I work hard, I had a nice time. My biggest trouble, pleasure was going to church. I go to church Sunday and sometimes during the week and I take good care of myself. By late October I be eighty-six years old. There were twelve of us children, 6 girls and 6 boys, and I'm the oldest one. In (~~) days and I'm here. All of my jobs I had.

**Q: Okay, here.**

A: I worked in a restaurant, I worked on day's work, I worked in a jewelry shop, I worked in Russell's Factory and I worked in New Departure, and I went to the seashore with people during the summer.

**Q: When was it that you worked at the restaurant?**

A: Well, that's been quite a while ago. It was a restaurant on Court Street. Well, let's see, what was that name now? Well let's see, it had a shorthand cook. It had a cook named Harry and he did the cooking' and make the sandwiches and coffee and something like that, what you'd call the shorthand, I did that. Ranch be the restaurant, that's right. I worked there and I guess I would have stayed there because I liked to cook but I went home on vacation and while I was gone the restaurant got burnt down. The ( ) Restaurant on Court Street. I started cooking when I was about six years old and I would get a pot like this and stand up there and make up biscuit dough and from then on I've been working and I done everything, and course I wouldn't tell you everything that I've done. It would take me all night, and just have a book and have my picture in there and my life. I could fill it up. And I have a friend his mother lived there, [Warmester].

**Q: [Art Warmester]. I've heard his name mentioned.**

A: [Art Warmester]. Yea, he went to Wesleyan. He was the first colored boy I know went up there. He used to work for the Hartford Courant and he's a writer and he takes pictures. Well, I wanted Art to write my life. He'd do it now, but I wouldn't bother with it, but I often wanted my life, I could fill it up! FILL IT UP, six years old and we had a fireplace like that and you set little poles in there and you set a pot on there, and that's the way we cooked. And we had a thing you pull out there, we called a () and you put the pot over there and when the stick of wood would break and the pot turned over you made another pot full. Oh, I could write it, I could write it!

**Q: What was the first time you worked for the Russell Company? When was that?**

A: I don't know the year I went to Russell. Russell was a, I had been sick. They wouldn't let me

go in the shop because there was too much dust. They let me work around in the ladies room and take care of the office and I didn't like that cause I did that already, so then I had to go on the third shift, the second shift, and I didn't like that shift. So when I got an opening in New Departure I went there.

**Q: And what was New Departure?**

A: Well, it made things for the Army. And I was an inspector for some of those things, you know, what do you call it, you know, those little round things like a wheel, and I was an inspector. That was 4 to 11 o'clock. I liked that shift. They had a bus going. And I'd go there, I'd sit up to the table on a stool and a man would bring my work and take it away. I ), it was something going to the Army. pick out the good ones from the bad and I liked it and I was so sorry that I didn't retire. I would have been getting a good pension. Some of my friends worked there and they get the pension. But people got to talking and they said the war going to soon cease, quit, and that everybody be running and looking for a job like you're all getting out of school. So then, I got an opportunity for a good job, cooking job, and I quit and went to cooking and I'm so sorry. I hate to talk about it, I didn't get that pension. [ ] father was there and he gets his pension. He retired from there. I didn't retire from there. I stayed there about five years, and then they didn't want you to stop because the war was going on and they needed you. In the meantime, when I had overtime, I never made so much money in my life. Saturday night was the time for liked that. I don't know what you call those ( But that all I had to do was sit on that stool and overtime. And they had the bus going Sunday night (~).

**Q: That New Departure, that was in Middletown?**

A: In Meriden.

**Q: That was in Meriden?**

A: Uh-huh.

**Q: So, a lot of people during the war from Middletown got jobs**

A: Oh, they had a bus, that bus ran every night, and I guess, three times a day, was three buses, one for the seven o'clock in the morning, one for the three o'clock, one for eleven o'clock at night. But the eleven o'clock one I liked because you had all day off, you get to work at eleven and get off at seven. And I'd just go there and sit on that stool and sometime I'd be sitting up there sleeping and the boss would catch me and he wouldn't even touch me, and I would thank the Lord waking me up. And that's the best job I ever had. Barbara Adam's sister just retired from there, Dorothy, her father. I don't think Barbara ever worked there.