

James M. Davidson - No Introduction - Interviewed 3/24/76.

I came up here in February, 1923. The first job I had was at the Rogers and Hubbard Bone Mill; it was the fertilizer. I worked on a second job, was in the brick yard and I got to making (). That was that. Now the one thing, though, that I probably could () doing that and the second one that was really () and a chemical shop. That's something that I should say when we first went to the chemical shop. That's right down here in East Berlin. Three men on that job receiving their trash and rubbish and stuff like that and this goes into a big tubular boiler that has fire at the bottom and puts all this metal together. At one point it came up on a belt, an elevator, you know, like, elevator-like, and from that we had three men to take care of it and then they cut it down to only one man; then cut that down, and that's the time I got my coat and bucket. I left. This fellow was from Texas; he wanted, you know, to cut down and things like that. So that was the end of that job. Then I went on to the brick yard and naturally that's where all colored and hunkies could get. I worked there about 18 years. It's no use looking into getting a shop job. That's impossible for colored and I listened to some arguments from some of the ones that, those that were working there. Then they say that the colored person they hire, that it would quit, or something like that. So, anyway, any job like construction, like Brazos, or something like that, that's what they called it, the brick yard, or in the foundry were the only jobs that the colored person could get.

Q: Where did you live before you came to Middletown?

A: At a place they called Quincey, Florida. That's 189 miles west of Jacksonville. I was born in Jacksonville, Florida, and we moved to a place called Quincey which was a little farming country--that's my father's home. Jacksonville was my mother's home. So we all moved back when the children come, you know, middle size and all like that. So that's where I came from to Connecticut. And, as I said, the first job I got was at the bone mill and, of course, colored couldn't live anywhere. They had a special place for them to rent.

Q: Houses in which to live?

A: Yes. And that was that. There were some people even here, you know, back in, up until the 30's and 40's. I guess they just couldn't live in certain places, that's all.

Q: Around what part or section of Middletown were blacks supposed to live, or where were the houses in which they were supposed to live?

A: Yes, around the railroad tracks and out and stuff like that's all the space they could put them in.

Q: I wanted to really know, why did you come to Middletown?

A: Why? Well, I feel like that from mostly for better living, more jobs.

Q: Economic?

A: Yes. We had more, a little bit more rights, you know. In that way, at least we think so, anyway. I'd say a little bit more anyway.

Q: Did you see much of an improvement from Florida in Middletown when you first came?

A: As to the wages here? Oh, yes, oh, yes. \$5.00 a day was a lot of money. Just \$5.00 a day we made then. But it's a lot different than \$1.25.

Q: Yes, compared to--

A: \$1.25 a day, or something like that. \$1.25 was pretty good pay in southern states, you know. A dollar here or a dollar there, something like that at that time up until Mr. Roosevelt's time. After Roosevelt everything came up, even in the southern states that came up good. It was the pay then that brought that up. So much for that. An then, of course, as I said, there isn't much more that I can tell you. A colored man wasn't allowed to go into the shop at New Departure until the 1940's, the outbreak of the war, World War II, you know. And then they had to write down to Washington, D.C., for, you know, complaining, and there to see why the Negroes couldn't work on defense work also.

Q: So you think that things got better for Negroes around 1940 in Middletown?

A: Oh, yes, that was a break in 1940, without a doubt, yes, 1940. That was outbreak of war, you know, and that was the time you could go in the shops and that's where I stayed until I retired. There isn't really not much to tell. I don't think so.

Q: Could you probably tell me just a little about the social life before 1940 in Middletown for blacks?

A: Well, you could go different from the southern state and the northern state by social. You could go into a theatre and sit, like, anywhere you wanted to sit and, that way of course, in the southern states you sat in the gallery, up the stairs, or something like that. But up in the northern states you could go right on and sit in the theatre just like, you know, anybody else, like a human being. And, of course, you know the certain places when I came up here.

Q: That you just didn't go?

A: You couldn't go into a restaurant and eat. They'd tell you, "We don't serve colored here." And that's probably here almost; you remember that, I suppose. It hasn't been so long ago. I remember that I'd go and sit down in a restaurant in Philadelphia, sitting up at the counter there and waiting for the lady waitin' on the other people. This was when I was out there, around back in the early, you may say early 20's, and sitting at the counter there waiting to be served. And I'd call the man and say, "I've been sitting here so long"; and the man came back and say, "We don't serve colored here". That's in Philadelphia. Well, I suppose in New York and certain places I never tried. I never had that there.

Q: Experience, yes?

A: But I know that happened in Philadelphia.

Q: What did you see, like, in the area of education as far as blacks going to like Middletown High School or to colleges in this area?

A: Well, that was pretty good in that way, but only after you'd get there you'd find after you make your, should get your good marks, you know, your credit? The teachers then,

that's a fact too, the teachers wouldn't give it to you.

Q: The marks that you deserved?

A: Yes, that's true. That's a fact, and the reason? My sister-in-law, she was smart and she was due to have good credit. So after she noticed on her report, you know, she said, "You didn't give me the credit that I'm due here and so-and-so and so-and-so". She (the teacher?) goes out and told them, "We're just not going to give you (credit) up where you'll be equal to the whites". Even when I worked at New Departure and I worked there and--

Q: Around what time was that?

A: This was in '44 and '45. I was the first, like, set-up man there. They didn't want it. First one. New Departure; that's General Motors. [Noise on Tape.] There's a war on and they sent a petition into Washington and then they had to take on a certain--

Q: Number, yes.

A: Of blacks, and so they didn't take on many but there was some anyway. That was the rule, the law, you may say. But I was the first black set-up man there in that place and it made it very rough. You'd have to want to do it or else you were discouraged.

Q: They made it very rough for you to do the job?

A: That's right. That's right, and that's the facts. I'm not just saying it; that's true. I stayed there and that's that. So all of that was in the northern states; that wasn't the south. In the northern states they have a hypercritical way of talking, you know, going around like that, but they're still doing it just the same.

Q: There was just one more question that I wanted to ask. When you came to Middletown, did you come on your own or did your parents come up with you?

A: The way that--the reason, no, well, I came on my own in this way but I had a sister that came before me. She saw an opening and, you know, that I could come up and better myself. My older sister, because that's why she came up in 1918, I believe, something like that, and I came up in 1923. So there's quite a few years, so she sent me my fare. She was all alone up here so it was better, you know. [Voice from background: "What about the Barbershop?"] Oh, yes, I came up and I ran a barber shop and wiped out and cut hair, white and colored and all, and later on I bought, in 1929, my sister ().

Q: That's when you first opened the barber shop?

A: No, that's when I moved out here. That's when I quit the barbershop. At least when I ran a barbershop I worked also at the brick yard when I woke up in the afternoons and Saturdays, part-time you'd say. I had a license. I was a licensed barber but in 1929 I gave up the idea. I didn't like the way that things was going in the city, especially raising children, and that place I didn't think was so nice. So I bought a place out and that was this place to bring up my family, not in the city. So that's when I got rid of the barber shop. I can remember that time little old Mr. Davidson, "Are you going to get out and work like H---", he said "and you don't like it on the farm?" and I said, "Well, I'll take a

chance." So that's what I did, and I ran their farm and worked nights in the brick yard. When in the shop I worked second shift and come home and ran the farm. I had cows and one time I had about seven head of cows, and one time I had about three or two hundred and seventy-five or eighty head of hogs, so I was working right on. I did that.

Q: There was, um, yeah, another question. When you were in Middletown, about how many blacks, were there many blacks in Middletown? In 1923?

A: Well, oh, there were blacks but not near as many as there are now. Not near as many, that you could practically almost count the families in Middletown then. I know when I came here in Middletown that I don't believe there was only about, roughly around twelve families.

Q: Twelve families?

A: Roughly, I don't believe, I think all counted that was about it. Of course, I don't know how many of us had families. Were some that were here that came up a long time before and had married into the white. You'd see them scattered around East Hampton and different places and a lot of them was passing for white after a generation or two. There wasn't many colored people here.

Q: So when did many more start coming? That was after the war also?

A: After the war. Then they started coming. It's like Italian people, Italian people coming here. I remember when there was just a few Italian people around, probably thirty families of Italians, you know. But now they're around in every city around in New England. But I remember around thirty families in Middletown and I think our own street () but there wasn't many colored. Mr. T. J. Smith, he ran a second hand store right on Main Street, you know, where Daniel Fountain's Fish Market is? Well, that's the only colored fish market in Middletown. That's the north end.

Q: North end?

A: That's near the Catholic church at this end. It used to be T. J. Smith.

Q: He was the only black man in business at that time?

A: I believe that is about right. Well, Mr. () had a barber shop at about that time, so I guess that's about the gist of it.

Q: What kind of business did he have?

A: What? (Background: T. J. Smith.)

A: Oh, he ran a second hand furniture store, a big one, a nice one, too, a second hand furniture store. He made many trips. He was connected up somehow with the Salvation Army. He made trips over to England and back. He was going and come back a lot. He was the only colored business man that we had in a business that I can remember now. The first (). I can't remember. In Meriden there was Sam Dickson. He was a barber too. He had a barber shop in Meriden. Oh, and there was another colored fellow, too, Stateman? Mr. Stateman. I used to bowl with his mother-in-law, I believe, Mrs. Clark. I was (single) and he was a little drayman, run a little dray. He'd go and get your trunk or your luggage from the depot, you know. What do they call that--drayman? Drayer or

dravel, whatever you call it. They take your luggage or your trunk to the railroad station and bring it back, any little errands like that. Well, I guess that's about all I can think of.

Q: O.K.

[End of Interview]

t: 5/4/95

msk

DK~