

Mr. & Mrs. John Davis. Mr. Davis Aged 63. Interviewer: Valerie Hazelton.

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A: (H)- Well, back in those days there wasn't, no, the state was dry. The country was dry, anyway. There wasn't no liquor, no bars. This was in the 30's, you know.

A: (W)- But you had wine, didn't you? They made their own wine.

A: (H)- Not for the club. That's the one we're speaking about. But, you could go in a bootlegging place and get whatever you wanted to drink.

Q: So, this was during prohibition?

A: (H)- Yeah. [chuckles] Then we had home brew. God bless my mother, she used to make us home brew.

Q: What's that, beer? Home brew?

A: (H)- Yes.

A: (W)- Home brew was beer? Did you ever make any?

A: (H)- I used to cap it. There was a few bootleggers but the big ones were tied into the ()

A: (W)- () they were all used amongst themselves. I don't think they sold wholesale. So, I think, didn't they buy just among themselves?

A: (H)- They used to sell it if they could.

A: (W)-----and nothing, I don't think they would of ()

Q: There weren't any blacks running for any official offices?

A: (H)- No, not back in those days.

Q: Did this keep black people, say, from voting? Did blacks none the less go out and vote?

A: (H)- Oh, they'd come and get you to vote. There's never been a problem like that.

A: (W)- They look for you when it's time to vote.

Q: Who's this?

A: (H)- In fact, one () had a problem. Then I went to--all I was looking for was a lawyer, so he ran for some office, I think it was congressman. He said, "All you black people out there" we were called out here, it was called the Tuttle Brick Company. They had 1, 2, 3, 4 brick yards and most of the black people worked for them, for the Tuttle Brick. Of course, "all the people out there are Republicans". I really didn't know what the man was talking about because I hadn't yet registered. But my mother was, she was a Republican. So, at least he found me a place. After that, what I did was I was made a Republican.

A: (W)- He gave you the first job, a job at the Capitol. That meant that you were the first black person that worked at the Capitol?

A: (H)- No, I don't think--

A: (W)- At Middletown you were--

A: (H)- Oh, yes, Middletown.

A: (W)- In Middletown you were the first black

A: (W)- I said that there was a time that even if you had the money you couldn't buy your house because they wouldn't sell black people a place. Nobody wanted to sell to them. They didn't want to rent to them.

A: (H)- Which is true but, at the same time, I remember now where I'm living, where we're sitting right now, we were living next door here which was the only house then in this settlement, and my mother and father, they wasn't up to buying any property, so the president of the brick company, they fold up, they went bankrupt. And, so he came down, at least three times, came visit him and try to make him buy this property. And for eleven hundred dollars they could have bought the whole shebang. But he was a nice man, though.

A: (W)- That Mr. Tuttle?

A: (H)- Yeap. Wally Tuttle. So somebody was going to buy this place, which they did, the Smiths. They just, only a few months ago sold the property. And I'm now having a problem with this new neighbor. Well anyway, he went up, he moved them up, up on the yard form weren't any electricity up there in none of those houses. He put electricity in there and remodeled the house for my people.

A: (W)- Yes, but he was just, that was one man that they had been working for. In fact, he's the one that recruited the black people to come up here and work to make bricks in the first place. So all of these houses belonged to him and naturally to get them to buy here that means that they're right here and all they had to do was walk there to the brick yard. It was a nice thing that he did but it was for his convenience too that he had these black people here. And he wasn't Italian or Polish because in the city is where you couldn't buy a house.

A: (H)- He was fair, he was fair, my man.

A: (W)- Out here you could probably buy one but not in the city.

A: (H)- ()

A: (W)-But, so many places you gone to to buy houses and they find out that you are black and then they say the house is taken or my sister is going to move here or something like that so many

A: (H)- That goes on today too, you know.

A: (W)- Yea, it's not as bad, though, as it was then. It was out of the question, then.

A: (H)- The Warmesters, they owned their house. And across the river the Smiths.

A: (W)- The Warmesters were almost on the white side, anyway.

A: (H)- A few people owned property. And then there was some that didn't want to, didn't have the knowledge of buying.

Q: Hey, you've spoken about racial tension, say, among adults. What about children going to school. Were there any problems in the schools because of that?

A: (H)- Well, I didn't go to school very much, only went one term. And the kids used to look up to me for some special reason. But, I was the biggest kid in there.

A: (W)- [laughter] I don't think they had any problems with you.

A: (H)- They never had. We'd get whites. They'd call you Black, you call them names and the next day you go back and it's all forgotten. Never had any...

A: (H)- () church at that time and then they had a church in Portland, different

faith and that was about it.

A: (H)- Most of the people went to Cross Street Church. It had a few people over in Portland and in later years they built that church over there.

Q: How did Black people get around to socialize? Was there public bus transportation or something?

A: (H)- There used to be a trolley car run right in front of this house here. But this house wasn't here, of course. Then we had the Berlin, we used to call it the Berlin "dinky". And then we had bus service through here after they took the trolleys off, which was nice.

A: (W)- Some people owned cars, because your mother owned a car.

A: (H)- Well, yes

A: (W)- His people didn't know very much about Depression.

A: (H)- But we had the public facility was good too because that trolley years ago used to run about every twenty minutes or so on this.

Q: So when did the city do away with bus transportation?

A: (H)- Yea, that went I think with the Depression. It went out with the Depression. Then they put on the bus and the automobile chased the bus out.

A: (W)- And everybody started getting a car.

Q: So, a car was more or less a necessity?

A: (W)- Yea, it was.

A: (H)- Now it is but then it wasn't too much because you had some form of transportation, public transportation. The buses were running, you could depend on them then. But now, you got to depend on a car. It is a necessity now if you're out here.

Q: Say, were there neighborhood grocery stores that people could shop in, like, they didn't have to go a long distance to go to a big supermarket?

A: (H)- It wasn't out here. There was the Lineberry store. It's still there, that's been there for years but it was a small operation at that time. I don't think you could get anything there that would satisfy as groceries, maybe a loaf of bread, pack of cigarettes, a piece of candy. It wasn't considered a store.

Q: Where would you have to do your main shopping then during that time?

A: (H)- On Main Street.

Q: Was it a grocery store or just a

A: (H)- It was a, A&P and

A: (W)- and Public Market that's there

A: (H)- There was no supermarket

A: (W)- The Public Market was there, it's still there, on Main Street, because that's where () used to shop

A: (H)- And that's the oldest market there is. I can remember that for a long time.

Q: Well, how long has Pelton's Drug Store been here? Was it before Misenti's or

about the same time as Misenti's?

A: (H)- That's the oldest drug store in Middletown.

Q: Pelton's is the oldest?

A: (H)- Yea. There was no such thing as supermarkets then and you had clerks there then. It wasn't self-service. There wasn't much shop left in there. [laughter] I think the supermarket must have brought that on, more or less. The temptation was too great to

A: (W)- resist? [laughter]

Q: When did your family first come to Middletown?

A: (H)- That's the part that's out. Oh, I would think 1925, I would think.

Q: Were you a child then? Did you come with your parents or

A: (H)- I was about fourteen years old, sixty-four now, yea.

Q: What were their reasons for ()

A: (H)- Well, many reasons I would think, looking for betterments in life, better job or something like that, do recruiting

A: (W)- Now, John, you came after George came and got a job and then they sent for you, didn't they? Weren't they here first?

A: (H)- Yes, but it

A: (W)- Well, the purpose of it all, most of the black people coming here was to get jobs, cause it was during the Depression and wherever there

A: (H)- No, not at that time there was no Depression then

A: (W)- Was no?

A: (H)- No, that was in the great twenties, when the jobs plentiful. They couldn't get enough (). Back in those days, in the Roarin' 20's, there was recruiters out there and they'll come into a city and try to bring help out and whatever proposition they offer was the best. That's where the available people would go and a lot of them came here. And people that got here they go and bring their friends or their relatives along behind them but in those days, there was in fact a lot of people used to go recruiting people from different cities and bringing them, offering them better deals. Course, you probably wouldn't know about that, but. There was a fellow here, Harry Ruffins was responsible for probably 300 or 400 people coming to Middletown doing this recruiting deal. He would go down to Virginia every three or four times a year. The people would send him down and bring help up for him.

Q: What area of the country did your family come from?

A: (H)- South Carolina, originally.

Q: Would you say that most blacks that came to Middletown came from the South?

A: (H)- 95-99%, yes.

Q: And the recruiters that you were speaking of earlier, what kind of jobs were they recruiting people for?

A: (H)- All over the country when they recruit black people it's for coal mine, brick yards, construction and most jobs run like that because they wasn't looking for anybody with a trade. They was looking for somebody to take up the rough end of it.

Q: And Tuttle Brick Yard was recruiting blacks to work there or just recruiting people in general?

A: (H)- Yea, they had agents out there that recruit, yea.

Q: Were there many blacks in Middletown when your family first came here?

A: (H)- No, there were few.

Q: Where did the black population in Middletown live? Were they spread out over the town or did they live in specific areas?

A: (H)- If the police was looking for a black person they would come out to Newfield and the Tuttle Brick Company but it was a few that lived everywhere. They wasn't no particular settlement, no.

A: (W)- Some were on the North End. The Warmseys were on East Main Street. That's up around the city.

Q: Would you say that the majority of blacks lived at the Brick Yard place?

A: (H)- Yes, yes, yea, in a community life, yes.

Q: And what kind of houses did they live in? Were they apartment buildings, or trailers?

A: (H)- There was no such thing as trailers then. They used to, the Company had boarding houses and what they used to main call them then was shacks and things like that they had for them to live in. Otherwise, it was boarding houses. They promised them in recruiting and they gave them that. They were fair about that.

Q: Was there housing accommodations for people that had large families, say four or five children?

A: (H)- Somewhat, yes. It wasn't as much discrimination then as it is now in a way of speaking. Only thing now they got laws that covers that but I didn't find as much then as there is now.

Q: Have the housing patterns changed for blacks in Middletown over the years?

A: (H)- Well, I'd have to say yes to that because you got laws now that will insist if you want to be consistent you can get a lot of things you could be denied those days of. Just on the question of who are you, you black or you a Negro, or have you got any children. Well, now a days, you can fight those things but those days there was nothing to turn to so you just had to be denied and go to another source. But with my experience, the problem wasn't as great as it is today because I moved in places where black people never been before and once or twice a couple people asked me when another rent became available if I would speak to the landlord, which I did. Then the landlord, he wants to know, are they like you, or. I say well, you never know until you rent to them but, they didn't get no rents anyway. Had to go other places.

Q: What are the housing patterns for blacks today? Are there any public housing? Projects?

A: (H)- As of now we got quite a few places and different projects but it's not to my approval because the most of it has gone back to the ghettos, Maplewood Terrace, the Long River Village and what's the name of that one by the Police Station? Traverse Square. I think that was quite a mistake that the Redevelopment made when they allowed that to go up. That's a ghetto. I don't think there's any white people in there now at all! It used to be a few in there. But, anyway, it just seems to me in any community, some of the black person come in or an Italian come in or a Polish come in or a Jewish come in he wants to know where's the Polish settlement or the Black settlement or what not. He looks for that [chuckle]. And they would segregate themselves. So it was very easy for them to go right back to a ghetto and that's the way I got this picture. It's all another ghetto in the city. But not all the black people are there. Some that looks for better things, they go in the rural areas and they pick a house out and they want that and they go for that and that's good. And they go for the high-rise out here on Washington Street which a lot of people come out from out of town and they are settling there but most of it is a ghetto.

Q: During the Depression, was there any low income housing for families that couldn't afford to pay their rents?

A: (H)- Yes, there was Long River Village and after World War II there was the veterans housing and some I would say, I just don't know how to word it, but it was like tents. And they must have had three or four apartments in one get together there and that's what they based it on. Well, there was white and black in those days. Long River Village was mixed up fairly well. In fact, there was some business people out there which shouldn't have been there and it was a lot of people, black people, that should have been there that wasn't there because they told them their income was too high. And they never did get there. I know a couple or so more families they had, the fellow was making something like \$85 a week pay, he had five children and they said he made too much to move in to that low rental. But I can't see a person make \$85 dollars a week with five children moving in to a low rental. He needs a low rental.

Q: During the Depression, could blacks get jobs, and if not, was there any form of relief they could apply for?

A: (H)- Well, I know of quite a few that was that if they needed relief, they would give them a ticket back to where they came from. And, I also know that a lot of factories and jobs that they wouldn't get hired because the people that they had to work with wouldn't approve.

Q: When you say "give them a ticket to go back where they came from" was that back to the South?

A: (H)- Well, yea, mostly, yea, you could say that, the South.

Q: So, was it thought that people could get along better in the South on the farms during the Depression than in the

A: (H)- They didn't worry about that. They just didn't want the responsibility. At that

time, a black person wasn't really a citizen, anyway. He was just something in the country that nobody cared about. If you need him, good! If you don't need him, get back! That's a little bit of today too.

Q: When did the Tuttle Brick Yard close down and what did blacks do about jobs after that?

A: (H)- Well, it was in the thirties. I think the bank took over the company possibly '31 or '32, they went bankrupt. And, the bank worked it. And some of the Tuttlés were still employed here as manager in that capacity and a lot of people worked. I worked a little while. I worked a couple of summers with them too.

Q: Would you say that there are more jobs for blacks in Middletown today than there was in the past?

A: (H)- There are a lot more, yes.

Q: A lot more today or then?

A: (H)- A lot more today. Greater opportunities, better jobs, yes. You don't just have to take now for it because you have a better civil right program and human rights and so that gives quite a boost to the black people, to the minority across the board.

Q: Can you recall if there were any black businesses in Middletown, say in the thirties, forties?

A: (H)- None that I can recall. As near as I can recall was in the forties. I think there was a restaurant opened up here. It was a public place. Before that, we opened up a place on the corner down there, as a recreation place. But I don't recall any black business at all.

Q: Do you know how many black businesses are in Middletown today or what kinds of black business establishments there are?

A: (H)- I'm sure of one [chuckle]. Lets, see, there's the, there's not very many left. There's two, Augie's.

Q: Is that a restaurant?

A: (H)- That's a restaurant. There's the fish market. There's a record thing just open up here lately.

Q: Can you think of any other like, businesses, in addition to the few you just named?

A: (H)- Well, there's the Goodwill Social Club.

A: (W)- What about the garage, Sam's Garage?

A: (H)- Top Hat Barber Shop, Byrd's Barber Shop

A: (W)- What about Sam's Garage?

A: (H)- Well, there's a couple beauty salons which is Kitty's, Salon Limited and

Q: What that?

A: (H)- That's a beauty parlor, a beauty salon. And Howell Cleaners, Slade's(?) Auto

Repairs, we got a Thomas, I guess we'd say, industrial cleaning. They do office work, and whatever, not lawns. And Sam's and Frank's Service Station, which is a good business going. And I don't know what Catherine is doing with her business but she's got something left there pertaining to a business on Main Street. I don't know if she's going to open again or not but it has to be seen. Otherwise, I think that's the whole package of the black people.

Q: Are all these businesses still functioning?

A: (H)- Yep.

Q: For instance, is Tops still open?

A: (H)- Yep

Q: Aside from the black businesses, Mr. Davis, do you know if there were any and are there today black professional people in Middletown?

A: (H)- Yea, we got Doctors, which is a dentist. We got any number of teachers and professors and quite a few connected with Wesleyan. We're represented pretty good there.

Q: And you mentioned also that there are black nurses?

A: (H)- Yes.

Q: And where are they working?

A: (H)- Oh, there was one with Middlesex, there was a couple with Valley Hospital, that is the state, and they also had some other professional people up there that I know of but wording that I, a medical term that I don't know how to word it, but they got a few up there in that capacity.

Q: But there are no black lawyers in Middletown?

A: (H)- We haven't been fortunate enough but I intend to try to recruit one here in the near future.

Q: And I also understand there is no black mortician. Is that correct?

A: (W)- No, there isn't.

Q: Okay. We've just about wrapped up everything. So, I'd like to thank you both, Mr. & Mrs. Davis, very much for the interview.

Q: My name is Valerie Hazelton and I've just interviewed Mr. & Mrs. John Davis.