

Mrs. Annabelle Graham - 352 Newfield Street, Middletown, Connecticut - 69 years old. No Date.

My name is Valerie Hazelton and I'm interviewing Mrs. Annabelle Graham.

Q: Mrs. Graham, when did you come to Middletown?

A: In 1946.

Q: What were your reasons for coming here?

A: My husband was up here.

Q: Your husband was up here. And did you have any children, you and your husband, and he was working here at the time?

A: Yes.

Q: What kind of jobs were in Middletown for black people back then?

A: When I come here I went to work in a dress shop, (Millgrace) Dress Shop.

Q: Were other black people working there?

A: Yes, quite a few.

Q: Do you know how many, offhand?

A: Well, Jessie (Banks) was working there and Sally (Youngs) was working there, and who else? Maybelle, you know Maybelle, big, fat Maybelle. She lives in Sbona Towers.

Q: What kind of work did you do at the dress shop? Do you know how most families earned their living, that were in Middletown back then, black families?

A: What?

Q: Do you know how most black families earned their living back then? Were there a lot of different places where blacks worked?

A: I guess so. There were a lot of places there that black people worked, you know. () Jones, () Green and James Green and all those working in Cromwell over there to that factory over in Cromwell, you know.

Q: Pierson's? Was that Pierson's?

A: No, the other place where they make the cement blocks.

Q: Like the foundry?

A: Yeah. All of those black people was working over there because that was practically the only job that they, you know, was hiring for people then.

Q: Right. But were there a lot of jobs that black people couldn't get because they were black?

A: I don't remember. The whole while I been here I never been so that I couldn't get a job. I worked at the Millgrace Dress Shop, I guess about two months. I stopped there and then I worked for a doctor two and a-half years.

Q: What doctor was that?

A: Dr. Franklin

Q: Where was his office?

A: I worked at his house; I didn't work at his office.

Q: Where did you live in Middletown when you first came here?

A: On Center Street.

Q: Center Street. And how many times have you moved since then? Have you lived in a lot of different places in Middletown?

A: Yes. When I moved off of Center Street I moved on William Street before they broke that highway through there, you know? And I was living on William Street and I lived there, I guess, oh, I don't know how many years, but, anyway, during that time (Lee) Wallace was on Ferry Street and he bought that house down there, And when he bought that house he asked me to help him to raise the first payment, so I did. So he said, "Well, the first apartment that I get finished, you can take it". So I lived there, oh, I don't know how many years I lived there. I can't count the years that I lived there. And then when () McArthur and his wife bought out on Omo Street and built their home, I moved in Mary Young's house on College Street and when I left there I came here, and I've been here ever since.

Q: What's the name of this place you live in now?

A: Stoneycrest.

Q: Stoneycrest. Were the housing conditions then poor for blacks? Would you say that housing for blacks now are better than they were?

A: The housing is better for the black people than it was when I came here because when I came here, and I said I'm living on Union Street and, My God, the rats and the roaches would eat you up! The rats and the roaches!

Q: But the landlords, did people complain to the landlords?

A: You can believe it don't do no good. A rat as big as a () would come in and take a whole loaf of bread () sitting down there in the basement in the dark.

Q: You don't have that problem here, though, do you?

A: Oh, we have no kind of problems here.

Q: You like living here?

A: Oh, yeah, I like it. But only one thing about it, If I had a dining room I would just love it. See, that's the only fault I find with this place here but anything else, it's nice; it's quiet here. Nobody bothers you, nobody bothers you. You can go away and stay a month and if you don't give somebody your key to come in and to look around for you, nobody comes in your house, nobody. An inspector comes around once every six or seven months and the only place she looks is in the kitchen and in the bathroom. That's the only place she has the permission to look.

Q: Do you live here alone? Is your husband still living?

A: I don't know. I haven't been with him for twenty-seven years. I don't hear from him. I don't speak to God to find out where he is, either.

Q: O.K. Let's talk about politics a little bit. Were there any black politicians in Middletown?

A: No.

Q: Until recently. What black politicians do they have now, do you know?

A: No. I think--

Q: Barbara Davidson, on the Board of Education, do you know her?

A: Barbara Davidson?

Q: You know, Shirley Davidson's youngest sister, and Jimmy Davidson.

A: Oh, I know the kids, yes.

Q: Yes, yes, the daughter, Barbara Ann, is on the Board of Education.

A: I didn't know that. I don't know any politicians. I never think about it. When I came up here in '46 the people had to have stamps to get your shoes and your stockings, your sugar and rice and stuff like that.

Q: Why would they issue stamps? Was that because ()?

A: I don't know. They said they didn't have no money and they give you stamp books, books with stamps in them.

Q: Did you have to pay for these books? Not like food stamps are today.

A: They sent them to you in the mail.

Q: And did you have to have a certain number of stamps to purchase a particular item?

A: They gave one pair of stockings a month, one pair of shoes a month and you could get, I think, three pounds of sugar, one pair of stockings for stamps and if you have four or five in the family then they would buy you a little bit more. But one person like myself, say if I wanted a pair of stockings I had to have a stamp in that book for those stockings. If I wanted shoes I had to have a stamp in that book for those shoes. If I wanted sugar, I don't drink coffee, sugar and flour and rice, they had to put a stamp from those books. But that didn't last too long, you know. That didn't last very long, after I came up here, before you could take your money and buy anything you wanted, but it didn't last very long.

Q: I want to talk a little bit more about where blacks lived. Did black people live all over Middletown or did they mostly live in the same area?

A: They mostly lived in () of the white people when I came here. There wasn't but one white woman in this town that would rent to colored people and that was Mamie Magnano.

Q: Where was this at?

A: On the corner of Center Street. She had a great big building there and the rent was very cheap, and that's where mostly the colored people that came here could get a place to stay.

Q: So, other than that, blacks really didn't have too much--?

A: The white people didn't want colored people in their house then. They had a vacant, you see it in the paper. You call and talk with them tonight and get an appointment to see them tomorrow and when they see your face is black, they'd say the place was rented, and that was the end. You couldn't call them no more. That was the end.

Q: So when did the trend change when blacks could start moving all over Middletown?

A: After the State took all them houses off William Street, down there. Some people who were able went and bought homes and those that were unable, whenever anybody, a white person didn't care if colored people rented from them, they could get rents like that, you know? But other than that, sometimes there'd be two families tied up in one house and in fact about it when they tore those houses down there on William Street, the white people were so mean to the colored people then. They thought, I guess they thought that we colored people didn't () down there at that ball park, you know the place down there? They give you a certain time this month to move out. They went down there one evening and put up a whole lot of tents down there.

Q: Oh, that was called "Tent City". I think I heard about that.

A: And they put them things up down there like this afternoon and a lot of tenants had to move out the next day. But when daylight came the next day, there wasn't a tent down there. It just disappeared. () and where you had to cook, it was set your gas stove outside that tent and put a bottle of gas there and you'd cook outside the tent.

Q: How long ago was this, do you remember?

A: Oh, no. I was living at (Lee) Wallace's house then. I was living down there in (Lee) Wallace's house when that happened. I was lucky because when he had to get off of Ferry Street he bought that house. And he didn't have enough money to make the down payment and he come to me to borrow it and I lent him the money. So he told me, he says, "Now the first apartment that I get ready, fixed up, you can have it". And so I moved out off of William Street and I moved out down there and that's when they put up those tents because the people couldn't find nowhere to go. They went to the mayor of the town. Do you know what he told them? "Nobody didn't send for you to come to live here; go back down South where you belong."

Q: That's what the mayor told them?

A: That's what the mayor told them, "Go back down South. We ain't got no place to put you." That's what the mayor told them. And Cross Street Church housed two families in our basement down there, Cross Street Church. We had two families living in the basement down there.

Q: You made reference to some of your friends that you had when you first moved here to town. Do you know why most of them came to Middletown? Were they looking for jobs or were they--

A: No, a lot of them, they came because their husbands was up here. Their husbands come first and got their place where the wives could come; then they sent back for their wives.

Q: Where did you come from?

A: Me?

Q: Yeah, before you came to Middletown, where did you live?

A: In South Carolina, (Florence?), South Carolina where I had my own home.

Q: You had your own home down there? So was it, was it really difficult adjusting to Middletown, a place like Middletown, after--

A: What?

Q: Was it difficult adjusting to living in Middletown?

A: No, no, no, because when I came to Middletown, you see, Mamie Magnano had that big house down there and everybody from my home town was living in that place, you see, and my husband had, he was living with his uncle there. So that's where I lived, you know; that's where I lived. I was there until I moved on Union Street. That's where I lived. And after I left Union Street I lived on Silver Street.

Q: I understand there's a couple of housing areas in Middletown just for blacks, like this place I heard of called the "Village" and "Maplewood Terrace". Do you know anything about those places?

A: I've been to Long River Village but that Maple Place thing, no, I have never been out there, never been out there. But my nephew and his wife live out there in Long River Village and I used to go visit them quite a lot out there, but there were just as many white people as there were colored out there then.

Q: So that's been out there a while?

A: I have no idea (). And when they went to put up these new projects, in everything there was rules. The white people (). Like if I needed a rent they would send me out there. But I understand there are very few white people out there now; most of them's colored. That's what I understand, but I don't visit out there because I don't have relatives, no relations or nothin' out there.

Q: What kinds of social activities did black people have then? Was it mostly the church?

A: Go to church, and that was it. If they wanted to go anyplace else they'd have to go to Hartford where there were all kinds of activities, places where they danced and things like that, you know.

Q: How did people get to Hartford? I don't see anything but only one bus that goes.

A: Oh, no. They had buses that would run every hour and every half-hour.

Q: Really?

A: Every hour and every half-hour.

Q: Was that just the bus going to Hartford, or was there a bus that went throughout the town?

A: There was a bus came from Hartford that go to the State Hospital, down to McDonald's, rest about ten minutes and turn around and go right straight back to Hartford.

Q: Did they ever have public bus transportation within the city that could take, say, somebody who lived in this area out to the shopping plaza?

A: Not to my knowledge, no. They didn't have any shopping plazas down there.

Q: This Washington Plaza out there on Washington Street, that wasn't there?

A: All this building's been done since I came up here, since I came up here.

Q: So was it convenient for, say, older people then to get to the stores to do their shopping?

A: No supermarkets. All the stores was on Main Street. There were no supermarkets. I'd go back to the A&P any day and buy my groceries!

From Aside: Corner grocery stores, that's where you had to shop.

A: That's all there was, it was on Main Street.

From Aside: Little corner grocery stores.

A: There was a corner store right there by Court Street Church, sitting 'way out somewhere, you know, but a shopping plaza, that just started a few years back. When I come up here there was nothin' up here but just Main Street and if you wanted to buy anything, you'd take a bus and go to Hartford.

Q: Did black people socialize a lot together or did families more or less keep to themselves?

A: No, (missed entire answer)

Q: So there were only a few black people. You think that because of that they stuck together more?

A: Well, sure, sure. You take Elizabeth Jones and (), James and Hattie Wright, all of us lived in Mamie's building, all of us. Just about everyone that was from () South Carolina was in Mamie's building and we knowed each other before we left the South.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: See? So you were no stranger to me and I would remember you. That's just how it was.

Q: Did some of your friends have children that were going to school here in Middletown?

A: Not then there wasn't, but since then () Spencer School. Quite a few of them graduated last year. Quite a few stayed here, got jobs and are still here.

Q: Do most young, well, the younger people, do you think they stay here because their parents are here? Like, when they get older do they usually move away, or do they stay here too and raise their families?

A: Most of the kids who graduate here in Middletown, they don't stay here.

Q: They don't stay. So is it the young people who don't like Middletown that much because--

A: I don't know whether they don't like it. Well, there is one thing, there's nothing here in Middletown for the young generation, you know. They have no social life and you know how young people love to dance and go on (). There's nothing here in Middletown for them to do. There's nothing here in Middletown for them to do. So when they graduate and things, a lot of them leave here and some of them go to New York and some of them go back South.

Q: Did they have movie houses? Did they have movie theaters a long time ago? There is one movie theater down on Main Street now. Were there more movie theaters then?

A: The Middlesex Movie here was open and the two on Main Street was open, you know, but when you went in there you had to stay back. You couldn't mingle up there in the front with the whites. You had to sit back. If all the front was taken in front you had to stay back and even if it wasn't taken, you had to stay, you know, get so far back from the front.

Q: Did black people have their own churches or did they go to church with ()?

A: Well, I don't know what one. One church that was here when I came here, I mean the church now that was Cross Street. Reverend Woods, he started preaching down there on Miller Street near that (Stowe) Farm. Well, they stayed there, I don't know, they were there when I came here. I don't know how long they stayed down there. They bought a tract of land right there all along Union Street and Summer Street, right on that corner; and they were trying to raise enough money to build a church there. So they found out that if they built a church there they wouldn't have no property owned by them. Then they got together and they built a big house right on South Street down there. They bought that and they had services in there until they built the Zion Baptist Church. But when I came here there wasn't but one colored church that people went to and that was Cross Street. But all the people who wanted to preach and wanted to have a church of their own, if they could find an empty storefront, they took it. If they found an empty house, and I know of one they had down here (), the shop down here on Church Street, you know where it was, [Aside: Goodyear.] and where those people lived upstairs. Aside: Above where you're living now used to be a rubber factory.

Q: Oh, the William Street high rise that belongs to the University?

A: So there was a few colored people there that lived upstairs and there was an empty apartment downstairs. So Reverend Lorenzo, when he found that open, he went back and had service there for awhile. And then he saw in the paper where this church on High Street burnt down and they went to work and they built that church, and those were the only three colored churches that I knew was built around here in Middletown when I came here. There wasn't but one church, the rest of them was preaching in storefronts and old (piece) of houses. Wherever they could get a place, they were ready to go.

Q: And so the church members had to raise the money themselves ()?

A: Yes, yes. Had to raise everything themselves. [End of Tape]

t: 5/10/96

/msk

DK~