

**Carl L. McKeller - March 3, 1975 - Interviewer Eileen Hammond**

**This is an interview for the Russell Library Oral History Project. My name is Eileen Hammond. I'm interviewing Mr. Carl L. McKeller at his home, 45 Fisher Road, in Middletown, Connecticut. The date is March 3, 1976 and the time is approximately 5:15 in the evening.**

**Q: O.K. Would you like to tell me how you happened to come to Middletown? How your family happened to come to Middletown?**

A: Yes, I came here from Jacksonville, Florida, in 1951 and it was just by chance that I came here because I came up on a tractor-trailer truck which we were supposed to deliver some furniture to Philadelphia, so I had an aunt in New York. So I gave her a call and told her that, you know, I had about four days' lay-over and that I would stop by and see her, you know, which was only about one hundred miles away. So I did. I visited her that day and my uncle happened to be there for the holiday, which was Labor Day, 1951, and he was there for the holiday and so I started asking him about how were the jobs in Connecticut where he lived and so forth, so he told me that, you know, jobs were pretty nice, pretty easy to get, which I wasn't making any money in Florida. So after weighing a few things I decided that I wouldn't go back to Florida and so I called the guy that I came up with and told him that I wouldn't be going back, so I left New York that night with my uncle and I came here. It was Labor Day, 1951. And then that night, I guess we got here by 11 o'clock that night, so 7:30 that next morning I was up looking for a job and I think about 8:30 that morning I found one.

**Q: What was your first impression of Middletown when you came here?**

A: Well, my first impression was--I can't really say because I came here at night and the next morning, you know, it just seemed like a small little country town, you know, which I was from the city; so, and really that didn't bother me too much. My concern was to get a job, you know.

**Q: What was the first job you found?**

A: Well, I was working at J. A. Autobody which is a metal specialist factory down River Road. We made, you know, special equipment for the Government, parachutes and jumpsuits and all that kind of stuff.

**Q: Did a lot of black people work at that particular plant?**

A: Not too many. I think there was maybe three or four at the time. At the time that I started working there were maybe three of us there and later on there were more.

**Q: So there wasn't a very large black population when you came?**

A: No, it was very small. In fact it was just like Middletown was just like one big family. Everybody knew everybody. I would say there were ten families, you know, large families, you know, around at that time.

**Q: Well, where did you meet other black people?**

A: Well, they were the older people, you know, they were in clubs and bars, you know, on the corner from where I lived and most of the older folks hung around there. The kids, you know, were out on the street, you know, the ball field, and so forth. And being 18

years old, the law was 21 at that time, you know, but we--

**Q: Do you know the name of the bar?**

A: I think it was the Blue Room, I'm not sure, the Blue Room, and there was (Jeep's) Grille where everybody went up and had spaghetti dinners and you could have beer and liquor. You could have ( ) on the side. Other than that, everybody went out of town mostly, to dances when they had the dances in New Britain, Meriden. Everybody went out, you know, followed the dance.

**Q: What type of housing did you have when you first came here? What type of housing did you have and what type of housing did most of the black people have in Middletown at that time?**

A: It weren't very good. Most of the blacks in Middletown were homeowners, you know, but we lived in an apartment. It wasn't too bad at that time considering that, you know, everything was about the same, you know.

**Q: Do you remember the name of that apartment?**

A: Well, it was just a two-family house, up and down stairs, on South Street which is now torn down. It wasn't the best but it wasn't the worst. It was no different there. It was a mixed neighborhood.

**Q: Were all the neighborhoods mixed at that time?**

A: All of them.

**Q: All of them?**

A: All of them because there was such a few blacks there was no way you could, you know--

**Q: Were you associated with any of the religious organizations or black churches in the community?**

A: Not really, not really.

**Q: No?**

A: No.

**Q: What was the state of black people in Middletown during that time? Were they mostly poor? Were they happy; were they--**

A: Most of the people. They were all working people and I guess they got along about as good as anybody else. I mean, jobs were pretty good. I mean, everybody made a living. There was, you know, there was no hardships I didn't think around too much at that time, about ( ).

**Q: When did, to your knowledge, did black people always play an important part in the politics in Middletown?**

A: Well, I think so. I think so. Really, I mean, I think they didn't realize what, you know, what part they really had, you know. But a lot of them don't want to go out and vote because their vote didn't count. But as their population grew, as the black population grew in Middletown, then, you know, it started to be recognized because at this particular time now you got the majority of the blacks in a certain district, you know;

and, really, you got to give some consideration to this district because we know it's predominantly black. So, right now they really--it's much better now. They're playing a more important part in today's politics now than they did years ago because there wasn't that many--so really the politician really didn't have to, you know, cater to them, take them into consideration; but today you can't ignore them because they could really turn the vote.

**Q: What made you decide to run for office as Constable for the City?**

A: Well, I just have a knack, like, to get into things. So, for me, it was--when I got this job in Middletown, when I first came here my foreman was Town Chairman, Republican Town Chairman, here at that time. So, you know, so working with him, talking, he invited me to the meeting and after that I finally got on the Town Committee. And after a couple of years he asked me if I wanted to run, you know, for Constable, so I told him, "O.K.", you know, and went from there. It was kind of an exciting job and I ( ).

**Q: Constable, being Constable of the town, that's not your only job?**

A: No, it's not. I work for the Hartford Electric Light Company at the present.

**Q: How long have you worked for that? I mean, how many, like, jobs have you held between your original one and the one that you're holding now?**

A: Not too many. I worked for American Cyanide. Then I've had, most of the times, a man couldn't survive around here with one job and so mostly I held two jobs, part-time jobs, not full-time jobs. Autobody was my Number One job when I first came to the state. I held that job until the first time I went to American Cyanide and from there to the Hartford Electric Light Company. They were my three main jobs. I worked for Goodyear Rubber Company part-time ( ) and I also worked for ( ) detective agency part-time. I did security guard and detective work, what have you, you know, and right now I'm still with the ( ) Agency, but Hartford Electric Light is really my main job.

**Q: The whole election process you went through, was it a, like, a real campaign that you had to wage and, well, since, you know your position is elective--**

A: Well, it's really, it was no big thing being called for a Constable job because, you know, Constable was right down on the bottom of the list. So, actually, all the focus is on the top part of the ticket. So the main thing, the main thing is to try to help your fellow man to get the ticket in, you know. My job was almost guaranteed because they ran six, they made six. But the point was to get your party in, to get your ticket in and get the guy, you know, get behind the guys in your party.

**Q: What's the party?**

A: Republican.

**Q: Republican party?**

**Q: Did you meet your wife in Middletown?**

A: No, I met my wife in New York.

**Q: Oh.**

A: I was in the Service in Brooklyn.

**Q: All right. So she also came to Middletown? She's not an original resident of Middletown?**

**Q: You have several children in Middletown public schools?**

A: Right now I have four. They're all in the schools.

**Q: How do you feel about the school system here? Do you think that your kids are getting an adequate education, a good education?**

A: I think they're getting a pretty good education but I still think there's a lot of loose ends in that school, a lot of things that should be--I know that the teachers can't watch every kid, you know, but there's a lot I think they could do as a whole in that school to cut down a lot, you know, of unnecessary playing around that kids do, you know. I just can't see kids smoking on campus, in the hallways, you know, and stuff like that. But I think they're doing a good job, giving them a good education.

**Q: Have your kids experienced any racial tensions in the public schools?**

A: Not as far as I know. If so, you know, they more or less keep it to themselves because, you know, I would ( ).

**Q: Are there--Do any of your children expect to go on to college or are they encouraged to go on to college in school?**

A: Well, yes, they're encouraged. I don't know, you know, kids have their own mind. ( ). I haven't talked to my kids seriously. ( ). She's getting letters from all different colleges. I don't know what she ( ). Two or three of them ( ). I'd be happy to let her do what she wants to do.

**Q: Sort of to sum up, how do you feel about Middletown, you know, coming here as a young man and, you know, starting your family and living here, even be coming an elected official of the town?**

A: Middletown, I love it. I love Middletown. I think it's a nice quiet place and there's a lot of advantages here. Maybe I could say ( ). Maybe I was one of the fortunate ones because I never had to ( ), you know, so I consider myself very lucky. Maybe I haven't felt the hardships that other people, that a lot of other people have had. You see, I've never been without a job so I really don't know exactly. I have an idea what's going ( ) but I really haven't had any hardship.

**Q: O.K. Thanks.**

t: 12/1/95

/msk

DK~