

**Mr. & Mrs. McRae, Sr., 456 Wadsworth Street -**

**Q: Mr. McRae, when did you come to Middletown?**

Mr: Middletown--the year 1919.

**Q: When you came to Middletown, Mr. McRae, what type of job did you have?**

Mr: Well, brick yard, brick yard.

**Q: You worked in the brick yard. Where was the brick yard?**

Mr: It was all around, it was in Middletown in the center.

**Q: Was that the only type of work that blacks could get at that time?**

Mr: That was the only type that you could get anywhere and, once in a while, you might strike one in a shop. ( ).

**Q: As in shop worker?**

Mr: It was best to--

**Q: How was it that you came to Middletown, Mr. McRae?**

Mr: Seeking work.

**Q: Right. And you had mentioned before that you came to Berlin first before you came to Middletown. How did you go to Berlin? How did you happen to go to Berlin?**

Mr: Well, I heard--I was seeking work, you know.

**Q: That was for Berlin too?**

Mr: Like I said, yeah.

**Q: Oh, I see.**

Mr: I heard of that place.

**Q: Where did you live before you even came to Connecticut?**

Mr: I was discharged from the Service. I lived in Carolina.

**Q: Oh, North Carolina?**

A: Yeah, North Carolina, my home State.

**Q: Oh, I see. And how did you find it as far as, like, finding houses, you know, finding a good, decent place to live in Middletown?**

Mr: There wasn't any place.

**Q: Around 1919 there wasn't any place?**

Mr: In 1919 there was no housing among the blacks. They didn't have anything better than a slum.

**Q: Mrs. McRae, when was it that you came to Middletown, Connecticut?**

Mrs: In 1924, in September, 1924.

**Q: How did you happen to come?**

Mrs: I just didn't like North Carolina. I didn't like the situations down there, you know, this white and black and all this; and I was told that the North wasn't discriminated. I didn't like the discrimination there in the South.

**Q: Did you find it much better than North Carolina?**

Mrs: Not too much different.

**Q: There wasn't too much difference?**

Mrs: But just under cover. Where the Southern people are brave with theirs, the Southern white people are brave with theirs, the Northern people are just as bad but they are sly.

**Q: Yeah, and subtle; I understand. When you came up to Middletown, were you looking for a job also? You thought that--**

Mrs: No, I just didn't like it. And finally I did find a job, after I was married. I was single when I came up here.

**Q: Oh, I see.**

Mrs: I found a job. I just come because I just didn't like North Carolina. I didn't like the situation of the South.

**Q: How did you happen to hear about it, though? Just from ( )?**

Mrs: My husband was up here. Well, we wasn't married but we was courting and he came up here. Then I asked my father, then a friend of ours, Mrs. McArthur, and my father said, "You're too young to go out without any supervision" and so he asked her would she be a supervisor, like oversee; so she decided she would.

**Q: So you both came up?**

Mrs: He was up here already; then I came.

**Q: When you came to Middletown, were there many blacks in Middletown at all?**

Mrs: Not very many.

**Q: There were, how many would you say there were altogether? Like, there were a few families or--**

Mrs: Well--

[From background, Mr.: I've got to tell you about it. Could I tell you about it? They were called the Dickersons.]

**Q: The Dickerson family?**

Mr: Yeah. The Banks.

**Q: The Banks?**

Mr: And Smiths.

Mrs: The Johnsons, Everett Johnson.

Mr: Johnson, yeah. Curkin and Suttons, Smith.

Mrs: What's Sutton's? What's Hattie's name?

Mr: Wanda?

Mrs: Yeah, Wanda, that's right.

**Q: Those were probably the most--**

Mr: That's the most, yeah.

**Q: Oh, when you worked in the brickyard, could you notice any difference? Were the wages that much better in Middletown rather than in North Carolina?**

Mr: Much better.

**Q: About how much was the difference do you think?**

Mr: It was a difference of about a dollar-and-a-half, two dollars an hour.

**Q: Mrs. McRae, when you came to Middletown, were there any black businesses in the Middletown area?**

Mrs: Nothing, nothing.

**Q: Not any at all? And what about schools? Was it hard or easy for blacks to go to school, elementary school?**

Mrs: Well, the schools was O.K. but at that time--[Could I be excused just right now to get my books? My children are yellin'.]

**Q: O.K. Mrs. McRae, I see in your yearbook that there were only three blacks who graduated from Middletown High School in 1940.**

Mrs: No, not from the year book. I'll get the book.

**Q: No? Here we go.**

Mrs: Well, when my oldest son was born, what few people was here they had only seen the adults of black race, of black people. He was the first black, well, he was about the second black baby that they really knew something about when he was a baby. He was born in Middlesex.

**Q: Oh, I see. He was the second in the Middletown area?**

Mrs: Yeah, in Middletown area, because they had one they called "Little Raskus", but that was in the hospital. The doctor did that one, But so many people would come to visit the hospital and say, "We never saw a black baby" because all the black folks that they had seen was adults and it was interesting to take Eddie into their arms and take him and ask me did I mind. I said "No" when I saw they were real. I didn't like it at first. But when I saw they were real, it was real, it wasn't phony, then I said, "Yes, you can take him around and show him if you'd like", see? So many of them hadn't seen a black baby.

**Q: That is interesting.**

Mrs: Most interesting.

**Q: We was looking through your yearbook of 1948 from Middletown High School and I notice that there was only four blacks in the yearbook.**

Mrs: In the yearbook--and we came in 1924. So you see that's the way--you see that's how it was. When the black people began to settle here it was in the 40's, about '44, after--

**Q: After World War II?**

Mrs: After World War II, yes. Because there wasn't any jobs for the black people. Well, I'll tell you, the black people couldn't even work in factories like Russell Company which employs now quite a few blacks.

**Q: Those were the places that--**

Mr: Yeah. Enamel, that was the tin shop.

**Q: I was also told something about General Motors or--**

Mr: Yeah. It was hard to get in them places. Blacks couldn't get in there.

**A: At all?**

Mr: No. Russell Rubber Company, Good Year and Middletown Rubber, they turned their head the other way.

Mrs: Between 1944 and 1945. That was when they began to hire the blacks. That's when they begin to settle here. Most black people came to settle here in 1944 or '45.

**Q: 1945. And you were mentioning before about the living conditions and how bad it was.**

Mrs: They were very, very bad.

**Q: They were very bad?**

Mrs: Yes. But the first flood that I had experienced, we were living on Union Street during the wet in the spring.

**Q: Around what year, do you think?**

Mrs: Well, '36 was a BAD year and I never shall forget that one. That was a very, very bad flood. No one told you about that flood?

**Q: Yeah, I heard.**

Ms: You've heard that before?

**Q: Yes.**

Mrs: Then it isn't necessary, is it?

**Q: Yeah, it's good for the, that's good.**

Mrs: Oh, I see. Well, that was one of my first experiences with water coming up and you had to leave your home. In 1927 I was living in Cromwell. That's still in Middletown vicinity and we moved out. My husband was working in New Britain and I went up to live with him in New Britain. That's my first experience with a flood. But the REAL flood was 1936 and the place where we was living was 'way low, you know, the ghetto. And everyone had to leave their homes and the City placed the people in, what was it? The Salvation Army? No. What's the name of that place?

Mr: It was the Salvation Army.

Mrs: There wasn't any at the YMCA, I'm sure. That place down there?

Mr: YMCA.

**Q: I heard something mentioned of tents, or something, before?**

Mrs: Yeah, well that was later on.

**Q: That was later on?**

Mrs: That's 'way up, 'way up. There was a lot of black people when they began building them tents. You see, the way they got here, I wouldn't say. When you rent a house they'll come to you for an apartment and they'll say, "There's only three of us". Well, when you rent an apartment, maybe about four years, they got the apartment filled up because, you see, in one right they go back visiting to North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama; well the people just really come from Alabama, and then they would fill the apartment up and bring up the relatives and friends and you just have to chase them out or work on the rent, or do something because--

**Q: They all be living in one apartment, yeah?**

Mrs: They'd fill up one apartment. That's the problem the landlords had.

**Q: The landlords, yeah. And how were, like, the buildings and things?**

Mrs: They were all cold, cold, cold. You'd keep a stove, a black person never had a furnace or nothing like that.

**Q: And this was up until around--**

A: That was 'way up in the '40 's. It was 'way up.

**Q: And they didn't start getting better until after the war, either? Housing, I mean?**

Mrs: The housing was beginning.

Mr: It was maybe thirty-five years ago.

**Q: That's when the housing start got--**

Mr: Started. The project started.

Mrs: Has it been that long? I guess the time goes by fast. It was very, very poor conditions here when we were here, the housing.

Mr: It was Long River Village.

Mrs: Yea, Long River Village, and that's the beginning. ( ).

Mr: ( ) When they were working in the brick yard they had to furnish everything,

cooking utensils, new bedding. ( ) The brick yard where the colored people did have access to jobs, they all torn down.

**Q: Now it is.**

Mr: All torn down, yeah. ( ) quite a few.

Mrs: About all the work that the black people could do was domestic.

Mr: Housework, Yeah.

**Q: And transportation?**

Mr: No transportation.

Mrs: Housework you didn't mind, in the factories, in the Russell Company mostly. About the only kind of work they could do was housework. And then they only wanted to pay about twenty-five cents an hour.

**Q: Twenty-five cents?**

Mrs: 'Way back then, and then to thirty-five. You know, my husband-- when was it you worked for twenty-seven cents? What year was that?

Mr: Well, I worked there during the Depression. Yes, that was in nineteen and thirty-seven. ( )

**Q: And where did you work at that time? I didn't catch it.**

Mr: I wasn't working. I couldn't get a job.

Mrs: WPA.

**Q: I see.**

Mr: Not too much of that.

**Q: What was that, the WPA?**

Mr: It was close to WPA. It was a job for a couple hours a day during the Depression. You had to stay all day for that.

Mrs: The WPA. How did that started, the WPA? Was that the City or Government? It's a Government job, a city job, the WPA? What did that come under, Federal or--

**Q: That was Federal.**

**Q: When, um, you never saw, like, in Middletown, any blacks having, like, offices in politics or nothing of that nature at all?**

Mrs: No, nothing of that kind at all.

**Q: And you were talking earlier about how your daughter got a very good job with the Board of Education. That wasn't until when, though, around--**

Mrs: I don't know what year she graduated. She graduated from Columbia University.

**Q: Was it hard for her to get a good education after high school? You know, like a college education in Middletown?**

Mrs: Well, I'll tell you one incident. My daughter, well, actually a friend of mine, her daughter wanted to go in Nursing and they wouldn't take her at Middletown, at

Middlesex Memorial Hospital.

**Q: They wouldn't take her because she was black?**

Mrs: Yes, because she was black. They said, "We don't train blacks". She had to go down to New Haven. What year was it that Connie went into training? Do you have any idea? Martha's Connie, she's a R.N., but they wouldn't train you there. I don't know what year it was, but I know, you see. I'm hard to remember, but I don't remember years very well. I remember '36. Well, I told you about that.

**Q: I understand.**

Mrs: It's hard. I know when these events occurred, but when you need to remember years, that's kind of hard.

**Q: I'm the same way.**

Mrs: Yeah. It's kind of hard for me but I can tell you quite a bit what goes on, but when you come to talking about the years, then I'm lost, but I--

**Q: How was it, though, she couldn't get into Wesleyan at all, though that's--**

Mrs: Well, I don't know too much about Wesleyan, about people getting in there because they really couldn't afford it, but I know the amount. I don't know whether there was discrimination or financial. I think it was more financial than discrimination. Wesleyan's always been very good. If it wasn't for Wesleyan the blacks would have had a hard time.

**Q: Because Wesleyan gave blacks jobs?**

Mrs: No, they don't give them jobs but they gives them--we don't have no social activities here. Wesleyan is the one that provide, that made sure my children ain't staying on the street. At Wesleyan they have a skating rink and they play tennis and they don't care black or white or anybody. But for discrimination, I don't know whether it was discrimination or financial. I think the blacks just couldn't finance the Wesleyan, and that's all. I don't think it's discrimination. I wouldn't be ( ) about Wesleyan. They was too nice for other things, but I just think that they just couldn't afford it at that time. You see, now you could go in with scholarships. I don't know if Wesleyan...

**Q: Yea, that how I'm there.**

Mrs: Scholarship! My daughter won a scholarship. My daughter won a scholarship.

**Q: To Columbia?**

Mrs: To Columbia. That's where she got to when she won the scholarship. At first, when she left Middletown High School she went to Virginia, to Hampton Institute. After she( ) Hampton Institute she went into--she won a scholarship through Columbia University.

**Q: I understand.**

Mrs: And then after that she went--the way she got to this high position, she took many courses from UConn and also Central Connecticut and that's where Willie graduated. Willie commuted from here to Central Connecticut.

**Q: He was also your son, right? Your oldest one, right?**

Mrs: Willie is my youngest son.

**Q: The youngest. Oh, I see.**

Mrs: Eddie is the oldest one. ( ). Now this--'48, I think it is, but I don't see Eddie in here. ( ). They was my first ones to graduate from Middletown.

**Q: And what type of job was it that your daughter had in Middletown with the schools in Middletown?**

Mrs: Well, first she was a reading consultant, speed reading. That's what they say she was. She was a reading consultant, that's what she was. That was her main job.

**Q: And then afterwards you say she was, more or less, like, an administrator or that she got promoted to that?**

Mrs: From reading consultant to that.

**Q: Right.**

Mrs: But she was a reading consultant.

**Q: Yeah. And so what I understand there is a school named after her, Wesley. Where is that?**

Mrs: Out in Cromwell Hills.

**Q: Cromwell Hills. ( ).**

Mrs: It was Wesleyan Hills where the school is located. She ( ). Perhaps she could take you by there to see it. ( ). There's three theaters.

**Q: In Middletown?**

Mrs: Middlesex Theater, Capitol and Palace. It was the only recreation most of the children had to go to.

**Q: And all children, blacks and whites, could both go there?**

Mrs: No problem.

**Q: No problem whatsoever?**

Mrs: No problems.

**Q: And that was the only type of entertainment?**

Mrs: The only type of entertainment. There was no other place to go.

**Q: Oh, I understand. And how was it about the church? I understand that there was one major black church in Middletown.**

Mrs: One major black church; that was Cross Street.

**Q: That's Cross Street.**



Mrs: That was one major black church.

**Q: And did a lot of blacks attend? Most blacks in Middletown, I guess, attended that church in Middletown at that time.**

Mrs: Yes.

**Q: ( ).**

Mrs: I can kind of tell about that. My baby was born in '26. I'll say about '20 it was, about '25, when this girl couldn't get in there; about '25 or '26, something like that.

**Q: And you said Middlesex Hospital wouldn't hire her because she was black?**

Mrs: They wouldn't let her go in training. She wanted to go in training at Middlesex.

**Q: Oh, right.**

Mrs: She wanted to be an R.N., but that was later. That was about '37 or '38 because she had graduated from high school. That's about '30 or '40, something like that, because they wouldn't let her--they said they don't train blacks kids. So she went down to New York, her mother and father sent her to New York. So she is an R.N. but she couldn't, they told her they couldn't train black people there. They didn't say it like that; they'd make up some excuse, you know, that she couldn't get in, but that was the reason.

**Q: So how long altogether have you been living in Middletown?**

Mrs: About fifty years. From Berlin, all around.

**Q: Fifty years?**

Mrs: I've been ( ) in Middletown about fifty years.

Mr: I've been here since about 1919.

**Q: Ever since 1919?**

Mr: Yeah.

**Q: Have you noticed much of a change for blacks in Middletown since, like, compared to now?**

Mrs: Well, it varies. Now, sometimes you may think that everything is fine. Now, my son, Willy--they had a big fight about him about a month ago. Some kind of a discrimination. Oh, it's the black Elks. They have a Elk here. Now, that's been last year, about four to seven, eight months ago.

**Q: What was the problem with them; did you say?**

Mrs: Part of the Elks. They have a white Elks Club here. When they wanted to raise money they would send you an invitation because that was something going into their pocket. But just to go to the Elks Club to socialize, no.

**Q: Socialize--blacks couldn't do it?**

Mrs: No, blacks couldn't do it. And that's been just about--it hasn't been a year.

**Q: And you said your son tried to do it?**

Mrs: No, they was protesting it. They got up a group of people to protest that. So I said that, it varies.

**Q: You really can't notice that much of a great change.**

Mrs: No, because sometimes you're thinking things are O.K. and then something breaks out. Just like this here discrimination thing in Boston. At times you think it's all settled and it really has it tough there. They really have it tough there. It's kind of--I was very much surprised. So this hasn't been very long. I don't know, that hasn't been a year.

**Q: No, I've heard about it since I've been here.**

Mrs: It hasn't been a year since they went in, they protesting. This Elks people, they didn't want to give them an invitation. They sent Mr. Freeland and they wrote and told him that "The invitation you sent me, you can shove it!" Well, they no way admit, you know. So that hasn't been allowed. As I say, the only difference between our agreement with white people in the South and in the North. I was so disappointed.

**Q: Yeah.**

Mrs: Because they just tell you where you're supposed to go and I'd rather that you be a BOLD devil than to be a SLY devil and I just know about you, and I know you are a devil and I won't bother with you. But you know you just, oh, smiling on the inside and black on the other and some black on the inside. You see, that's pretty bad, you know. That's the way so many of these people are.

**Q: And even in houses, housing and--**

Mrs: Well, we moved out here twenty-two years ago. That lady right there.

**Q: Was it hard for you to get a house in Middletown?**

Mrs: No. At the time we got out here it was kind of--it was in a real estate agency. They had a big sign out "For Sale" and they got mad at this Jew because Jews is--that's one thing I give Jews credit for, they have a very good ( ). They just like anybody else. You might run across somebody else who says, "Why does she say that?" But I'm going to say from MY experience.

**Q: That's all that--**

Mrs: That's from my experience. A Jew will rent to you when the other ones won't and I'll tell you of an incident when we lived on Main Street. Mrs. (Crosby) cleaned up this man had a great big house. He had four apartments.

**Q: He was white?**

Mrs: Yeah, he was white and all of his tenants was white. He was going to rent to this black woman, Mrs. Crowley. In Portland that was. Oh, way back in the 30's. And anyway, the white ones told him that they would move out

**Q: Before he'd let her live there.**

Mrs: Well, naturally, then he refused. I would of too. Because he knew what he had; he

didn't know what was coming in. So he didn't give them any argument and I don't think ( ). I don't hold that against him. I would have done the same thing.

**Q: So how was it that you happened to get your house? Was it hard?**

Mrs: Well, when we come up, after we bought the house--we just saw it in the paper. You know, the house had to be published in the paper. So there was a man in back of us, George Fountain, and they began to--this woman right over there, that little house right there; it was eight years before she spoke to us. Well, they got all upset. When I came up here to clean up they didn't know who it was until they read in the papers. Well, I come to clean the house and I came to clean the house ( ). There was three of them. That was 1944 and there was three blacks, she and, well, she and her brother and one more, (Dot) Davidson.

**Q: There were only three blacks altogether from Middletown High School?**

Mrs: From Middletown High School. That was in '44. She just took out my daughter ( ).

**Q: So you were describing about the neighbors and how they reacted?**

Mrs: Yeah. Well, then he said, "Well, don't worry about those people. The blacks I know, it's nice to have as a neighbor." So Willie was gong to college then so we moved out and they peaked around, looked around, but they didn't know who we was until I came out to clean up. They said, "Oh, the blacks coming out here!" Then they got a little upset, but there was a man in back of us who had known us for a long time and he come out and straightened it out.

**Q: He straightened that out with the other neighbors?**

Mrs: With the other neighbors.

**Q: So you didn't have any--**

Mrs: We didn't have any problems after he straightened them out.

**Q: Maybe they weren't violent, or anything?**

Mrs: They didn't care for most of us. They didn't care for us too much, but after we lived there they found out that we were clean. See, here's the impression that the white people have when you move into a white neighborhood. They say that the property, the valuation of the property, goes down because we are dirty. But after they moved here they saw that we kept our property just as nice, as you can see. Our house is just about as well as all of them on the street and when you go out you'll know it's all the 'way down as you travel, and so they all came out. But we didn't have no problems. When they didn't want to bother with us we didn't bother with them and, I guess, other people have had their same problems throughout the years.

**Q: But a lot of blacks now have houses?**

Mrs: Everywhere you go you find them. I don't care how rich the neighborhood is, you find a black. That happened about fifteen years ago.

**Q: No more than that, you would say?**

Mrs. No further back than that.

Mr: ( )

**Q: Blacks on Main Street?**

Mr: On Main Street, just walking along the street. ( ). When I first came up I didn't think there was any colored around.

**Q: At all, hmm?**

Mr: Actually, in New Haven.

**Q: There wasn't much difference in New Haven, then?**

Mr: In New Haven they had one route on the trolley cars. That was in '17 or '18. And you'd see a bunch of Church and Chapel cars in the city. On Church and Chapel you'd see all the other cars going, all kinds of trolleys going in different directions; and you'd see one going and you'd see the one with the sign, Dixwell Avenue or Winchester Avenue. That was the colored section.

**Q: Colored section in New Haven?**

Mr: In New Haven. You might see two, one, three. ( ) Savin Rock and ( ) and all those ( ) about one or two to a car, trolley car.