

## OUELLETTE

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library  
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century"  
Interview with Don Ouellette, by John Soltis (I), January 19, 1998.

I: Mr. Ouellette, when were you born?

DO: I was born on February 7, 1920 in the worst storm in the history of Maine. The doctor didn't get to me only a week and a half later. In other words, there was no doctor around when I was born. There was a lady.

I: A midwife?

DO: A midwife.

I: And whereabouts in Maine was this?

DO: In Porter's Lake, Maine.

I: And could you tell us a little bit about the town?

DO: The town--. We stayed there, my father said, only a few months. And we moved to Eagle Lake which is twenty-one miles up toward the border, near Fort Kent. Then the church burned. All our records burned and that's where in my records now that were reproduced, I actually was born in Eagle Lake because they had to make a new--. In other words, my name was Leon Louis and in my baptismal paper and when it was recorded in Eagle Lake it was Donald Louis Ouellette. Which it has been the rest of my life.

I: And was this like a small town?

DO: Oh, when you say twelve thousand you're pushing. I think fourteen hundred. If I remember, my little town of Eagle Lake was like fourteen hundred people.

I: And how many in your family?

DO: There was four girls and four boys. Actually I was the first born and there was four girls born after me. In between, three boys, but the boys died in early childhood, as a baby. They never made it more than a month or two.

I: And you've probably already answered this by the French I heard you speaking. Could you tell us a little bit about your parents and their ethnic group?

DO: My great, great, great grandparents came from Alsace-Lorraine, France and they landed at Arcadia which is now Newfoundland and when the English people thought the Arcadians were going the match with the Canadian French they took

all of us Arcadians, that's the story of Evangeline. Well, they took all the French Arcadians down to Maine. All the way down to Louisiana. There was a story about all the--. My great grandfather landed in the north part of Maine and we haven't been able to pin it down, but it's apparent that my grandfather married an Indian, --[Siraquois] I think it was. And we started with an Indian and then the rest of the Ouellettes on my father's side and my mother's side was the [Indian name] and almost the same story with her as it was with our story.

I: So your family has been in that part of the country for a very long time. What did your parents do? What was their occupation?

DO: They were farmers, most of them. But then my father in Eagle Lake where we stayed, he was the deputy sheriff for over nineteen years. There wasn't much work around. I remember working on the road to pay for our taxes. Times were very bad. There was a mill that had been bought and then they shut it down and that's why these people up in Maine in our section didn't want nothing to do with the Republicans. They claim they are the ones responsible for taking that mill out of the area. There was no work for us. I remember going to the soup kitchen and getting whatever we could. We had to get all [unclear] when we could have. Rabbits and deer meat and everything. We salted it and my mother canned it, but we had to do something to keep going. It was a difficult time.

I: Okay, this was during the Depression? During the thirties?

DO: During the Depression. Thirty up to thirty-six.

I: What brought you to Bridgeport?

DO: My father and I were working cutting lumber. He went up a tree to bring the other tree down and he fell. He was doing my job. This one time he did it. About half way up, thirty feet down, he came down and bounced off both of his ankles. I had to put him on a horse and take him back to camp which was over a mile, soak his feet in buckets of water. They were both swollen up. Cut his boots off and put him on top of a horse. I can remember that so much because of the crying and the screaming that he did. There was no road. Just up and down type of thing.

Fourteen miles to the nearest road where I called the hospital to come over and

pick him up. Then I went back up with the horse and stayed up there another two months cutting lumber. I was a young lumberjack.

I: How old were you then?

DO: I had to be about seventeen because I was nineteen I believe when I went to the C.C. Camps when there was no work around and I went to Bangor, Maine--.

I: How did you--? Let's back up just a second. How did you go from being the young lumberman to the C.C.C.?

DO: Well, when the lumberjack was over there was no more lumberjack's job, particularly for a young man. All they knew was what work I had done before so it was impossible to really get a job. My father couldn't work all these years. I was left with supporting my father and mother and the four girls so the only thing that I heard of was going to the C.C Camps and I was getting thirty dollars a month.

I: That's Civilian Conservation Corps?

DO: Civilian Conservation Corps. They started in 1933 and ended nine and one-half years later, '42. We were supposed to keep five dollars and all my money went directly home. That was a help to my family to make it and live fairly normally until the time built when my father was able to get a job. I was in the C.C. Camp from '38 to '39, I think September 1939 I hitchhiked from Princeton, Maine which is just south of Saint Stephen in Canada and I arrived here in Bridgeport at 7:30. I did have two dollars and fifty cents when I got off the bus here in Bridgeport. I got a taxi. All I had to do is cross the bridge but he took me around town.

I: What made you decide to come to Bridgeport?

DO: My brother was working at the Bridgeport Brass and he thought that, was sure that I would be able to get a job. It wasn't as easy as all that. Even though I was very small --but I was just muscle-bound because all I ever did was work. A full days work and my muscles never were gone lax. They wouldn't hire me right away. I went to work as a carpenter in Easton for Mr. Davis who was in charge of the mosque [masonic temple, then roller rink] on--.

I: Oh, the roller-skating.

DO: And he also was with the Shriners. Then I worked at Saint Vincent's Hospital as an orderly. That's the day that I liked my work and a job opened up at A. M. Cantor Stock Exchange to work the board and also be driver for Mr. Robinson. Mr. Robinson had been the treasurer on the Republican side for the City of Bridgeport in 1935. Matter of fact I had to swear that I was a Republican to get the job. And then I had to get a license to drive the car and so forth. And that's how I started in. I was living in the YMCA in Bridgeport and sometimes with my brother that lived in Black Rock. But then finally I got a job--. Oh, at A.M. Cantor, well we got the [unclear]. Mr. Robinson was on the board and said, "You know, it looks like you might get called soon, ", so I said, "Let's break in a man." I learned radio, which I was at the C.C.'s. I wanted to go in the Navy. So he says, "Okay." We broke in another man and on October 19, 1941 I went in and my boot training and I'd gone back to Maine after my boot training. Now I was on my way back. December 7, 1941. A moment that never leaves me. We were on a ferryboat between Providence and Princeton--. Rhode Island and there was no bridge then. Seven o'clock at night we heard the radio say, "My friends, the Imperial Japanese Army has attacked Pearl Harbor" and we listened and we all looked at each other. I had my brother in law and his wife, my girlfriend (not of today) was with me and I got to camp and they had me up on top of the roof with a machine gun. I never had a machine gun in my hands before. We expected the Japs to land, most of them out in the field. After my boot training I went to Brooklyn Navy Yard and gone aboard a transport all the way around to Boston, to Panama Canal, to San Francisco. Then we were training people back and forth around the San Diego Bay also. And we had everybody going to Guadalcanal. So we found out--. Instead I was with the first invasion of Guadalcanal, Toulagi, [unclear], [unclear], [unclear], Marshall Islands, Guam, Saipan, [unclear], the Philippines. First ten months I was on Guadalcanal from the transport. I was learning to be a radio. As soon as I made radio, third class, the transport--. APA twenty. President Hayes. We were known as the Holy Four. The Japs sunk us so many times. Unbelievable. In one particular invasion we were landing troops on

Guadalcanal and we were told that the Japs were coming around the Island and our forces went out to meet them. When I think today that I was in a position to see the Sullivan brothers, the Rogers brothers. I was there. About two-thirty in the night or something, we saw the flares shooting at each other and at that time it seemed they were shooting right by each other. That's when we lost quite a few--. Well, I know the Sullivan brothers; the Rogers brothers were involved in it.

I: This was at the battle of the Coral Sea?

DO: That's exactly what it was about. There was a nephew that I found out later after we came back that was aboard one of those ships that had gone down also. We shot down, there was nine torpedo planes that came down at us. I remember on the radio, we had a tanker with us that would take off. If they ever hit a tanker -- any ways were in that section -- around. But our formation firing at those torpedoes of those planes coming down at us was so magnificent. They could have been trained any better than that. Seven planes went down. The "A" plane almost came down, landed near us. Made the ship go up and down like--. I remember hitting the bottom of my head. In fact I was out for a little while we were watching this. And then the next day they reported the President Hayes had been sunk and everything. There was the President Hayes, the President Jackson, the Adam and the Crescent City. So anyway, the first eight months I was on Guadalcanal with Admiral Wilkerson. We'd make a plan for an invasion. We get on board some transport or some destroyer or cruiser, make that invasion, come back and plan on the other. That was just before the Marshall Islands. I don't exactly know that month that was. The AGC I, the Appalachian--. I hope to go to a reunion this year with the Appalachian. They have one coming up. AGC I, the Appalachian came in. It was completely a communications ship. [Unclear]. That's when we went to the Marshall Islands, Guam, we circled Guam and while they were landing then when it was secured we went back to Marshall Islands, then we went to Saipan and that was my last invasion. I remember a captain--. A lieutenant, he told the captain this, "There's only two guys aboard this ship that have been here since the first invasion of Guadalcanal, we were radio operators."

And every time there was an invasion, more than once I would have had a chance to--. I went to New Zealand a few times. Australia, on a week vacation. R and R and come back and every time it seemed like I had papers to go they said, "Cancel all leaves. We're going to another..." So this is why I was stuck in the South Pacific. From Guadalcanal it took three years. And I'm so gosh darn thankful, when you stop and think of the dead that have been shifted or went to makeshift grave. They shot by a radio off my back and luckily for me, like my partner was on my other side and the bullet ricocheted in his back. He never knew what hit him. I had to crawl back to the ship to get another radio and go back to my station where the sergeant in charge of the Marines wanted to know something of what's happening to the ship or where the men were. That would be the communication. That was, I always feel the going by the bullets by my ear and then hit the radio. They used a thirty-four inch radio and I was digging in and trying to get--. So I could get underneath and close in to the ground. They had these Japs up in the trees and what have you. From Randover, then we went to [unclear] and different invasions until we got with the Appalachian, AGC I.

I: And so you were in the South Pacific pretty much until the end of the war?

DO: Right, right. Matter of fact, I had gone, when we came back, after three years, they sent me to Duluth, Minnesota to commission a ship with a net tender and we came through the Great Lakes and were stationed around Alcatraz. I have a story there that is amazing. As a radioman, while the men were working digging for mines or whatever there was around Alcatraz, around the bridge, I'd play music for the boys while they were working. A cable snapped and a young fellow, I wish I remembered his name, went overboard and all he was doing was laying like that and he was just rolling around. So the captain said, "Somebody go after him." Here I am on the upper deck, I've got to be thirty foot up there or more, I jumped down. Well, I found out later on why I had so much trouble trying to stay afloat. Around Alcatraz there's only seven different channels, rushing channels. It's like being in a washing machine. If I hadn't been able to get hold of a lifesaver and work my way to him, I probably wouldn't have been able to swim to him. When

we got to him and brought him back on board, that guy came down -- and we finally -- sitting up. I met him a few months later around San Francisco and he was so thankful. He was so grateful that I was able to be there. When I think today of what I went through, of all the different--. To see torpedoes coming at you or looking down and see a submarine periscope going by, wondering what's happening. And I remember many boogies coming in and I was sitting watch there, next to the detector, the commander, running with him back and forth reporting what happened. Seeing all these planes going down like you see on TV. Blowing up all over the place. It was really something.

I: After all this, you're now what, in your early twenties?

DO: I was twenty-one when I went in actually. I came out in October 1945.

I: So you're in your mid-twenties. After you were discharged did you come back to Bridgeport?

DO: I came back to Bridgeport. I went to back to A. M. Cantor, which they had moved from the front on State Street to a back room. They were in the process of going out of business. So the manager says, "Where would you like to work?" I says, "Well, at General Electric. I'd like to work on radios." So they sent me over to General Electric and I got a job first in the cable division. We made cables for TV and gangs for radios or whatever. I worked on the radios from 1945 for three years, I think at General Electric.

I: And what was it like working there? For instance, what were the salary scales?

DO: Oh, I don't remember the salary scales. In comparison to today, I always remember the--. All I know is when I came back--. The first time I came back after two years I met my wife. The girl that I was writing to and expecting to marry, when I went to her home in Porter's Lake on my leave, she told me she was very sorry, crying and all. She had been married over two and one-half years. Didn't want to send me the Dear John letter, which I praise her for that. However, three months later or so I met my wife and when I saw her that was it. I couldn't wait to get out of the service.

I: Did you meet her here in Bridgeport?

DO: Right here in Bridgeport, yes.

I: If you don't mind me asking, whereabouts?

DO: On Colorado Avenue, my father and mother stayed there. And she was living on Colorado and State. And my father and mother knew these people. They were French. She saw a picture of me before I even saw her.

I: In uniform?

DO: Oh, yes. From what my sister said, she was already in love with me before I met her. That was a plus on my side because when I went to visit where she was, through one of the C.C. boys that turned out that he was a relative of hers. It was her [unclear]. The Goodman family and that's where I met her. When I had to go back I kept writing to her. She was going to the church there and the church insisted --they wanted to make a nun out of her. And I kept writing, "No way. You're not going to be a nun. You're going to be my wife." That was so interesting in those letters, when you think about it today, was really quite an experience anyway. However, when I did come out we married about six months, seven months later.

I: Where were you living then?

DO: In Bridgeport.

I: Whereabouts?

DO: At the YMCA and sometimes with my brother that lived in--.

I: After you got married.

DO: Oh, no. We moved over on Lee Avenue. We went by there today and what a change.

I: The South End.

DO: Luckily, Governor Bowles, God bless him, they came out with this one and one-half percent for a home and I needed -- three children -- and I had two at the time. So finally the third one came. I was able to qualify for one and one-half percent loan. The house, I paid \$11,400.00 for it and paid thirty nine dollars and ninety five cents for thirty months and now what you see here is the result of all that.

I: Oh, it's this home on Carnegie?

DO: It's our very home on Carnegie.

I: So you've been here since the late forties?

DO: Yes. Well, my oldest boy is forty-five so we've been here forty-five years.

I: Oh, okay. Early fifties. So you've been here since about 1951. And what was the neighborhood like?

DO: Well, we were the third house to be on this street. What you see here, fifty-two homes was built but we were the first three homes. We were the third family to move. This street, well you could come in here with a horse and wagon. There was mud and planks and everything. And we saw this house from the foundation build up to what it is today and we were living then on Lee Avenue in a rent. I was working at the General Electric. And then when General Electric decided to move their radio and TV to Syracuse, New York I was asked to move with them but we had just got married and our friends were all here. I decided I would stay here in Bridgeport. So from General Electric I went to night school and then started night work at Bridgeport Brass.

I: Bridgeport Brass.

DO: I learned--. Was a machinist to an engineer, hydraulic engineer and then I worked my way up in the thirty-two years that I worked at Bridgeport Brass.

I: Maybe you could describe a little bit, when you first started there as a machinist, what exactly was your job? What did you do?

DO: Well, when you see the Bridgeport Brass today, was the beginning. Practically every building is there from the beginning. It's the old, first old section by the railroad there.

I: On East Main Street?

DO: No. On Grand Street.

I: Oh, that building. Yes.

DO: Our machinery were all belt-driven from drills--. Good grief, my mind escapes me all the different machines. A machine would break down -- a drawmill or something -- where you would draw wires would break down and we'd go there and repair it and we if we had to make the parts to make the machine go, we'd

come back and make our own parts. Compared with today, they just buy the parts from outside. The lathes and the building machines--. We all did that.

I: How did you get that job? Were they just hiring? Did you just walk in?

DO: No, if I went to Bullard Haven as a machinist I couldn't be hired so I started at the Bridgeport -- Bullard Haven. I went to apply at Bridgeport Brass and they hired me. So I was working there nights and going to school before and going right to work.

I: Was there a union there?

DO: Yes, there was a union. I worked for about three months, got laid off because there was a slack in those days in 1945 for about four months. I sold siding. I was a salesman, just trying anything to keep alive. Then they called me back and another four months later I was laid off again. I went to work at American Chain, working on the--. Making the blades. What was I doing there? The girls would work on making the blades and something would happen and I would repair a break down. Trouble shooter. And they called me back Brass and I went back and then I went to Bullard. Worked on a milling machine there. I liked it there. But then when they called me, I felt that I had to build some time as far as the union was concerned. So then I worked another three or four months and got laid off again and went back to American Chain. Laid off again and back to Bridgeport Brass. Four times in a matter of--. Before the year was over I was laid off five times and then I finally built up enough seniority where there was a layoff there was somebody in the machine shop after me.

I: And did you have benefits there? Was there insurance, sick time, vacation time?

DO: Bullard's had it but Bridgeport Brass had--. When I retired from Bridgeport Brass after thirty-two years, I got a certain payment for so many years, and that was all. I got four hundred and ten dollars a month pension for thirty-two years.

I: While you were working there though did you have sick days? Was there insurance, any of that?

DO: They had sick days and insurance, but I was not the type, if I had a headache or didn't feel like working, I went to work. I was sent home once because I had been

cut on the leg from a saw. Another time they sent me home because I had a fever. Twice, you could say, in thirty-two years I stayed away from work.

I: In general, when you first started there, what was the salary like?

DO: I can't even--.

I: Not necessarily what you made but what the average worker was making?

DO: I can't even think of what we were getting. I don't know if my wife would remember either what the salary was. I know that we got along anyway.

I: How big a company was this?

DO: Bridgeport Brass? It was in Bridgeport here for one hundred and eleven years.

I: And when you first started, about how many people worked there?

DO: I used to remember. Fourteen hundred?

I: So it was a good sized company?

DO: There was over one thousand people working at Bridgeport Brass when I was working there. Then it dwindled down.

I: Okay, so there were fourteen or fifteen hundred people there?

DO: At least --one of the largest plants in Bridgeport.

I: And that they worked different shifts?

DO: I worked for, let's see. For fourteen years I worked on the third shift and I worked on the first shift for awhile. And then again, my last years there in the machine shop was on the third shift. That's where I broke my left wrist and back in two years before the plant closed down broke my right wrist. But it never kept me from finding other jobs once I got laid off there. When I got laid off, Bridgeport Brass closed down in 1981.

I: Before we go beyond the brass shop, during the time that you were there do you recall any strikes or lockouts?

DO: Oh yes. I remember there was one strike. We was on Bond I remember where they had barrels there to keep us warm. I forget exactly what the strike was about. It was about money and insurance. We won out anyway as far as I can remember.

I: Now was this at GE or--?

DO: It was at GE. No, no it was at Bridgeport Brass. I was still at Bridgeport Brass when I went on strike. No, we didn't go on strike. That was with GE.

I: Yes, because you mentioned Bond Street.

DO: Bond Street, yes. Because that was before I went to the Brass. I was at General Electric. Not at the Brass.

I: So during that entire thirty-two years there were no strikes there?

DO: No.

I: How did workers get along with your bosses? Apparently things were going well.

DO: Yes. Things were going well as far as I was concerned. I was never one to mix in. They used to ask me if I wanted to be a steward. And I said, "Well, as far as I'm concerned, if a man is wrong he shouldn't be protected. If he can't do his job he shouldn't be protected." That was my feeling about the union. As far as I'm concerned, that is. I never had no problem. I know one thing. I was called on jury duty and in those days they didn't pay nothing. I got ten dollars and that was it for a week. Almost a whole month I was out. I was out three years in a row. And finally in the third year of being called for duty, finally the union put in a clause where I would get ten dollars from the court and the company would pay me the rest.

I: The difference between--?

DO: That's one thing I think I was instrumental in getting that in for the other people.

I: And do you recall any examples of, I don't know, discrimination or anything like that? Harassment?

DO: I never was involved in anything. I worked nights and did my job. Concentrated on doing the best I could. Like I tell my boys when they work, or go to work, "do the best you can whenever and no matter what the next man is doing. Because when the time comes when they need a good man they'll always have you to remember. They would probably have another union man or another relative involved. But there was a possibility." My son is going through that now at Sikorsky as a matter of fact.

I: Okay, so you were at the brass shop until they closed down in '80.

DO: 1981.

I: Describe that. Why did they close down?

DO: Well, at first they were sold to an alcohol company and then that company sold to another. Steinkraus was one of them and when he left is when the Brass went down.

I: Steinkraus was?

DO: Steinkraus was the president of the Bridgeport Brass. He was the finest supervisor or boss or superintendent that the Brass ever had or any company in Bridgeport. All the ones I worked at. He had the feeling, even on radio. He was responsible to say the prayers on radio. If there was any promotion or at Christmas time he had parties for the workers, like where Bishop Sheehan Center is. And when the foremen had a party, they had a grand party. And he believed in a family. A family that grows together stays together. That was the symbol that he used in prayers I believe also. And I have very, very fond memories of the Bridgeport Brass. I never had anything that I could say, "Oh well, what about this case or that case?" I remember somebody one time when one guy was stealing bronze, big briquettes. When he went out to his car in the driveway that morning they were watching him. The springs broke and everything and the whole back end kind of dragged so they didn't have no problem proving that he was stealing.

I: So after he [Steinkraus] left, the company started going downhill? Or after the company was bought out?

DO: It seemed to us that after Irving Steinkraus--. Matter of fact, he was our second parade of champions--.

I: Barnum Festival?

DO: Barnum Festival. He was our second ringmaster. And matter of fact to the Barnum Museum where I work now, there is in a case the very first uniform that Irving Steinkraus wore. Today, every ringmaster has a suit just like that. But there at the Barnum Museum is the original one.

I: Let's get now to the closing of the brass shop. They shut down in what, 1980?

DO: 1981, if I remember correctly. And we fought against that. I remember having union meetings outside. We even had some senators come in trying to keep the Brass from closing up. Three years before the Brass closed down, we didn't go on strike but the company said, "We will close down unless you agree to these terms. We give out one-week vacation. We give out no increase in pay each year or the incentive." Something else. We gave out over four hundred dollars a person. I had twenty-nine years at the time and most of us had over twenty-five or in that area. I would say that three quarters of us were in need of a year or two. So we all said, "Yes." But I think the general opinion, from what the union reacted to this, when all of a sudden after three years said, "Sorry," then they were taking the machinery and putting it into the other plant that kept working all those years. I think a steel plant is in there now where big extrusion machinery is. And we felt that the union has sold us out. They told us that was the best thing to do. Go ahead. After three years, the company says, "Sorry. We're closing down. No matter what we said before, it can't be helped."

I: How many people lost their jobs when--?

DO: I wish I could say the exact number. I can't. That was a large number because a good percentage of them didn't even have ten or fifteen years. Didn't come any where near to get a week's vacation or anything.

I: So they weren't vested?

DO: No. I'd forgotten about that. Imagine that?

I: No. It came back. That's the important thing. Now, you were laid off from the Brass?

DO: Right.

I: And where did you go then?

DO: I heard, through a friend of mine in City Hall that there was an attempt being made at the Central High School for a waste treatment plant employee or whatever.

I: Was this civil service?

DO: Civil service, yes. There I am proud to say that out of the thirty-nine who took the test, I came in first. Man, what a feeling of--. Because it was all about mechanic

work and engineer work and hydraulics and things like that. It was right up my alley.

I: About how old were you?

DO: Let's see. When I came out--. Eighty-one. I was born in 1920. Sixty-one. So then I went to work for the city in the waste treatment plant. I expected, from all the exam things, to wear a white jacket and walk around and taking samples and reading meters here and there. Of course, it was nothing like that. It was hard work and I wanted to be able to run the plant, per se. I went to college during the day for about 9 months. I can show you the diplomas I have on it. How I graduated to be a waste treatment plant--. To run a waste treatment plan. But I got hurt, my shoulder and there was some politics being played in there. So I had to go out of it and that's when I went into the--.

I: Okay. So how long were you there?

DO: About six years.

I: Okay. So then politics--?

DO: Yes and with my shoulder they wouldn't give me the job I had earned the rights to. Nobody else had it. Even the ones that were running it didn't have the papers, the qualification and everything that I had. You know the city politics could be taken or--. Make a case or not. It depends. Anyway, from then on Pat Fianitto with the Veteran's Affairs Office suggested that I work with them. So that's what I started working. That was sixty-one, sixty-six or sixty-seven I started working.

I: Eighty-seven.

DO: Eighty-seven, yes. I started working at the welfare building.

I: On East Main Street?

DO: On East Main Street, yes.

I: The old brass building.

DO: Yes, right next to the old brass building. I had taken three men to the veterans' affairs office that day. I come back and the director of human resources was a Brian Williams, came in and said that Bucci had closed the office.

I: Bucci was the mayor at the time?

DO: Right. Well, this is serious when I stop and think of it, what it meant in my lifetime what happened then. Vinnie Viso in charge of the Columbus Day parade with the Italian community, that night in the council chambers when Bucci announced that they were closing the Veterans' Affairs Office, he got up in a rage and dropped dead. You must remember that. Vinnie Viso Well, you don't know what that meant to me. Vinnie and I were working together on the Columbus Day parade, setting up each position and what have you. I was supposed to be in that night. I had been with him the night before. Well, when I heard that I felt so responsible. I made it a point in my lifetime, even though I was a machinist, a factory worker, I became an office worker, a personnel director, -- a counselor there -- when I went and helped and spoke on TV. I had TV people here, radio people here. I was working so hard getting names of people who wanted the veterans' affairs opened and I had over three thousand. Three thousand is a lot of names and I've still got them. When I went to the council chamber that night, eighteen council members agreed to go on my side. We had another meeting an another twenty went on my side. So Bucci said, "Okay. We'll reopen the Veterans' Affairs Office. So, when we had that meeting and I was there with the mayor, we had a meeting afterwards and I told the mayor, I said, "Look, I know you have a problem with money. I'm losing money every year because I'm over sixty-five and I'm over my social security. I had to pay back. Because of the sick problems you have in Bridgeport, I will return my twenty-six thousand. I'll take my eight thousand something." Because I felt -- because I could not appreciate the fact that they felt so --they thought that I could handle it, the responsibility. And I've always felt so bad about not being able to produce and prove something. This is what kept me. To prove the point that I could do the job. To prove to Vinnie that he hadn't gone for nothing. That's when the mayor said, "Okay." I have papers that prove this, what it says that Brian Williams, he didn't want to talk, he was there. My raise, my wages was supposed to be adjusted eventually. The second time they wanted to close down, Rosa Correa, who was director of human resources after Brian Williams, --well, maybe it was the other one. What's his name? He went to the

food factory in Fairfield. Anyway, she said, "You know, Don, if you're going to give part-time to keep the office open, I agree to give you on top of everything," what I had given up before. I said, "Hey, this is my work now and I'm not doing this for money, I'm doing it for living. Whatever I can make out of it." Luckily, my wife was working. I said, "Okay, we'll do that." I was the only one that did that and then when I tried to get a [unclear] what can I do? Okay. So then I was paid by the nine something and they brought in another girl because one girl quit as a secretary prior to that and was supposed to be my helper. So like I said before, everytime I tried to get them to bring my wage up, they never had the money and yet they brought in a girl and paying her twenty-three thousand. And then I was still trying financially to get more money to get more aid because we had to cut some days off on Fridays. The bus wouldn't run. For what I was getting for my budget, I couldn't run every day. I think they were willing to agree to give me another three thousand for the bus. I come back on a weekend. They had cut her pay fifteen- percent. When I come back she said, "Can you sign this?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, we're going to take days from the bus to make up for my pay." And I screamed and hollered because I was so mad.

I: Okay, by the bus, can you--?

DO: I worked so hard to get that bus that takes veterans from Bridgeport to the Veterans' Hospital in West Haven. We're one of the only cities in the whole United States that's doing it. And the budget that I was getting, most of it went just to pay for the bus, four days a week, something like that. Well, she turned me in for a ransom. They wanted, well, they threw the book at me --to fire me and so forth and I said, "Okay, if that's what you want. If politics is setting up in here--." If they wanted, they wouldn't do it for me before, they were willing to do it for her when I'm getting less and she's getting more. It don't match up. I have a letter that I wrote to the mayor on the conditions that I'm facing, "--I'm unable to do my work like I should under these conditions and I retire as of today." So when the veterans about it he said, "Well, he retired." Four times I went to see the mayor. Four times I was waiting. Four times I couldn't get to see him. They were trying

to--. I was meeting with his people and finally they said, "Well, we'll take you back and we'll give you the twenty-six but you got to take the girl back." I said, "Not in my right mind could I work with someone like that." I was afraid to turn my back. I said, "It's impossible, I did everything for that girl, everything she wanted. She wanted [unclear] on the phone and everything, I had to stop her [unclear]." I would never turn her in. They told me it was my fault that I didn't turn her in. Wasn't doing her job. But her mother was advising her and they got what they wanted and that's the situation that you have there at the Veteran -- as director of Veterans' Affairs at Eisenhower Center.

I: But as I think you mentioned before, that the bus still is running?

DO: The bus is still running. Oh God, I'm grateful for that.

I: Okay, just a couple of things before we close up. We have a little bit of time. Something I didn't touch on. Could you tell us a little bit. You know, you've lived in this neighborhood since the early fifties. What would you and your wife do just to go out and, I don't know, to recreation or a movie or whatever? What is around here?

DO: Lucky for us, my wife is a beautiful dancer and she makes me look good. We've been dancing since we've been married. I remember going to the Ritz Ballroom when I first met her and coming back and walking. Didn't have no car. Walking her home singing different things to her.

I: The Ritz Ballroom on Fairfield?

DO: That's down on, yes, Black Rock.

I: [Unclear]?

DO: Well, Merry Journey's --right across from where Merry Journey's was. And of course the Pleasure Beach Ballroom and all these things we used to go dancing a lot. And we've always danced. Square dance. And then when my youngest son was going to Notre Dame we taught line dancing at Notre Dame. We charged them a dollar and a quarter but we served crackers, cheese and wine. We graduated with Sister-- Oh gosh, I forgot her name -- Sister -- eighty-two at one time, all seniors, --and with diplomas. And we had caps and gowns. We went

over and rented caps and gowns to be in there. Sister Maryann--. She died a few years back. Oh, those were the real good days. While my son was there, we made dances over there. One year I even had a New Years Eve dance. We had three hundred and forty-two people and something happened to the floor. It looked like I was going to have to cancel. I said, "Sister Marion, God I'll have to work night and day. I cannot call all these people and cancel everything." And of course they were able to put it together anyway and we had--. The school made good money. None of it I kept. Never kept anything on it.

I: Okay.

DO: Now we teach over here at Saint Ambrose from twelve to one on Wednesdays to the seniors there. Then we have our meetings on Tuesday from ten to one or two. I'm a tour guide on the second and third floors at Barnum Museum. I'm learning for the other floors. I'd like to be total --eventually.

I: There you go.

DO: On Thursday also I do that. Plus every month and a few times we go to the advisory board of the Salvation Army. Around just before Christmas I went to Thirty-Thirty [retirement apartments/nursing home] and Southport Manor and there are about three hundred rooms. Knock on their rooms and find the ladies or the gentlemen there. Say, "I'm a representative of Salvation Army. We have a little gift for you. A book of the war cry of the Lord. And little gifts here. Little socks here that are actually also used as--."

I: Slipper, slippers.

DO: Oh that's so nice. That's what you brought me last year over there. I always thought great of the Salvation Army. To me, with all the report and the meeting that we do and the tremendous amount of people we help with the Salvation Army is going unnoticed. That was my biggest peeve with the Salvation Army. They say, "Well, we're so well-remembered," because even the veterans, talk to the average veteran, they won't say American Red Cross or anything. But here there's a fire, the Red Cross gets noticed in the paper and yet it's the Salvation out there with their truck and food and clothing and hotel rooms and what have you. But

they feel that the past history is [unclear]. And now it's amazing how well we are doing.

I: So you've stayed very active. I guess, just before we close, if there's anything--  
As I said, this tape is going to be our archives for a very long time. Anything you would like to--?

DO: I go out speaking to different groups, different libraries. I spoke to Stratford and Trumbull and to the males' senior group. I feel that three and one-half million boys between the 1933 and 1942 era are going unnoticed for the simple reason we worked for a dollar a day. Thirty dollars a month and when you look up the records from 1939 and 1942 when the C.C. stopped and what it had done in those nine and one-quarter years, the billions of trees are still there. A lot of our trees, -- with Reagan I believe -- from the C.C.C's -- with the tree they use in Washington. We were so much responsible for the reverse of the worse recession we had in that period because President Roosevelt who came in and fourteen days later he said, "This is what we're going to do to help our youth of today." And that's what saved the country. Three and one-half million dollars a day went but that three and one-half million dollars a day went to the mothers and the fathers and the children. Went to the stores and went all the way around [unclear]. We worked our way up. And to think --I have a list here I could show you that billions and billions of trees, roads, dams, recreation centers--. Matter of fact, Merritt Parkway, right here started our project along with W.P.A. in those days. In 1942 is when we stopped it. We have been, also, the desert, the desert the sand dunes in Nevada. There was nothing but sand dunes. We made a garden out of it with our restoration of water conserving things. Plus the very important part that people forget, a million and one-quarter of us went right into the service. General Marshall called up the First Army. President Roosevelt called us his First Reserves because we were trained under the Army. We had Army clothes and we had Army regulations and getting up and working. And we also learned. I learned radio. Consequently, that's why I went from radio first class, second class, third class and then chief petty officer in the four years that I was in because I used that as my--.

That's what helped me from between invasions. I'd study for my next course and TV. I didn't at that time completed high school and I talked to some of those lieutenants about helping me. I remember them telling me, "Readers' Digest. Get everything you can out of Readers' Digest." I remember reading the book over and over again, Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman. "I steal into the night and I,"--. It was so so long ago, but that helped me to visualize what I needed to know, to participate, to learn. Whatever job I ever get in my life, it might have begun here but it always ended up as far as it could go because that's the way I keep telling my boys. "You do the best you can, whether you get passed over or anything. Eventually you do good work, they have to get back to you." You hope to live to see the day sometimes. You know how difficult that is. I say that a few times that way.

They had a few parties for me when I retired, but with me I can't win. When I retired they put all the same numbers in a hat and they made me draw. I had that number. What do you think I come up with? six or seven eights. I couldn't even win then.

I: Okay. Thank you very much.

DO: Let's see. What did I miss? I'm also an usher at Saint Ambrose and I'm on the council board, the --I'm on the council. I work with Saint Ambrose. And then also we have a C.C.C. alumni [group] that we meet at West Shore Recreation Center in Milford once a month and I take care of that. I'm the chaplain for that. I'm also getting speakers. Now the dances that I have at Saint Ambrose, that's the book there--. Oh no, the book that she has. You know, people have been calling in--.

I: We're just going to finish up here with Don's comments perhaps on taxes and other things.

DO: Well, taxes. That's the whole story about why our taxes are so high today. If people go back to the time when General Electric, Bryant Electric, Sikorsky, Avco, Casco and another forty or fifty more factories that used to be here in Bridgeport. Everybody would get good wages. I remember when the, even the

teachers were not having good wages, but the good tax money coming from these factories, they were able to give the teachers their due. And everybody was getting good wages. Now either to the undersite --or over under view or whatever the word is, of the mayors or the chamber of commerce, when a factory decided that it couldn't make any money here because of the union demands and the taxes, they couldn't make a business in Connecticut and Bridgeport. It should be at a time when somehow, someone should have taken the collecting taxes and keep the factory working here. That meant that the workers could be working. But from one factory to the other thousands upon thousands of people went out of work. And what happened to all that? They all moved out into different countries, all over the world, away from Bridgeport. Yet, all those high wages, everything stayed the same when they were not getting all those tax money from all those factories that was here.

I: You mean, [unclear] political figures?

DO: Yes. All the time they kept on the same basis. As if the factories stayed here. That is why our taxes have stayed up and never gone down. Some how or other, somebody should have come up with an idea and said, "Okay." Ten percent across the board was mentioned one time --to make up for the tax loss. So give the taxpayers a breather, a chance. Here the taxpayers are paying high taxes because those factories are not here anymore, double everything. A double load on us and when I pay almost four thousand dollars for a little Cape Cod house---. You know what I mean? And I go to my niece in Southington. They have a three hundred thousand [dollar] home and pay less taxes than I do. I have my nephew in Southbury. He's got a pond and everything. He pays less taxes than I do here. Now someone made the wrong decision and of course, right now, maybe the roofers are going out. I think most what's really going to put this Bridgeport back on the map is the do follow through with the billions of dollars for building that seaport out here where Carpenter Steel used to be. Where they're planning on having hotels and a place that Bridgeport could be proud and where other cities could come in and have a show because we have the facilities.

I: And it would also ease the burden on the taxpayers.

DO: It would ease the burden. Oh, it would ease the burden. You know, there's a limit to--. Even the mules don't last forever. Amen.

I: Good place to end. I think so.

End of Interview