

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project, "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"
Interview with Emmett Johnson (EM), by John Soltis (I) November 17, 1997.

I: Mr. Johnson, when and where were you born?

EJ: Born in the West Indies. Nassau. In 1930.

I: In Nassau?

EJ: Nassau. Now called the West Indies. It's called the Bahamas.

I: Oh, the Bahamas. And when again was that?

EJ: In 1930.

I: 1930. And could you tell me a little bit about what it was like where you lived down there?

EJ: Well, it was like hurricane season and we depend on tourists for work and we had a hard time. I had a hard time growing up and I got my schooling and then we came to the United States. I came to the United States as a child, a small kid.

I: How old were you?

EJ: I was, I think, two or three years old. Something like that.

I: And how many kids in your family?

EJ: There were five kids in my family. There were four boys and one girl.

I: What did your parents do down in Nassau?

EJ: My father was a dock- worker. And my mother didn't work at all. She was a--.

I: A homemaker?

EJ: A homemaker, yes.

I: Why did you and your family emigrate from Nassau to the United States?

EJ: Well, my father came. It was to better yourself because there was more work here than there was there.

I: You were saying that down in Nassau there really wasn't much work?

EJ: No, there wasn't much work.

I: Why Bridgeport?

EJ: Well, I didn't land in Bridgeport. I lived in Florida and then I lived in New York. I came from Germantown, Pennsylvania. I lived in

Germantown, Pennsylvania a year. And when I came here I loved being near the ocean and Seaside Park was exciting to me and I decided to stay here. At that time, when I came here, jobs was plentiful.

I: How old were you when you first came to Bridgeport?

EJ: I think I was twenty-two. Yes, about twenty-two.

I: So you had traveled around the United States?

EJ: I traveled around the United States, yes.

I: Where did you go to school?

EJ: I went to Dorsey High School. I went to Florida and I also went to school in New York.

I: So you were in your early twenties when you came here for work.

EJ: I came here, yes, from Pennsylvania and not knowing that this was an industrial town. That you could work with easy--. That it was easy to find work.

I: So this would have been like in the early fifties?

EJ: In the early fifties, yes.

I: Whereabouts in Bridgeport did you come to or did you live when you first came here?

EJ: I lived in the South End of Bridgeport. I lived Lafayette Street in the South End of Bridgeport and my first job was at H. L. Canfield. And the jobs were plentiful. If you didn't like your job or you want more money you could leave and walk out of one job and into another job.

I: Any what kind of a place was this H. L. Canfield?

EJ: It's a rubber factory. It would produce rubber. Make all sorts of tank balls and oil rings and--.

I: What was your job there?

EJ: My job was a material handler and a timekeeper.

I: Describe a little bit about what your job would be like. What would you do when you got in first thing in the morning?

EJ: The first thing in the morning, I would go in and I would get the young ladies set up. They all worked on benches and I would get them set up with the material and

then I would wait around until they finished one box and then I would go and get another box. That way, then I would take it and break a box, bring all their work and would ring it up so they got paid by the percentage of their work.

I: Piece work?

EJ: Piece work. It was a piecework factory.

I: And were the salaries there, generally?

EJ: Oh, the salary was slow. You didn't make much money. I can't remember what it was; the pay was, but the pay scale wasn't that much.

I: Did you have a union there?

EJ: No, we didn't have a union. There was no--. I wasn't in a union. There was no union, that's right.

I: Describe some of the activities maybe some of the other workers there would do just so we can get a feel for what it was like.

EJ: There were guys in the mold room and it was real hot. It was like one hundred and ten sometimes or one hundred and fifteen in the summer time. It was very hard work. I always went downstairs and looked at the mold room and I would say, "I would never work in the mold room." So eventually, H. L. Canfield moved out of Bridgeport to Virginia and then at that time I was looking for another job.

I: And how long had you been at Canfield?

EJ: I been at Canfield about two years or three and one-half years and they moved from Bridgeport to Virginia.

I: And prior to their moving, just a couple other things on this place. Did you have many benefits, insurance, sick days--?

EJ: No, we didn't have much benefits. No, no, we didn't have that.

I: Vacation time?

EJ: A little vacation time, but it wasn't much sick days and all that benefit because I never took time off work anyways. I loved to work and that was the only way I could support myself. I was single at the time.

I: How big a company was this?

EJ: I would imagine they had around six or seven hundred people.

I: Where was it located?

EJ: It was located on Waterview -- on Congress and Water Street.

I: So that many people. Do you recall any experience there? Maybe strikes or lockouts?

EJ: No, we didn't have any strikes or lockout. There weren't no union, you know, that I can remember.

I: Do you recall any experiences with perhaps discrimination or harassment by your bosses?

EJ: No, I didn't experience any discrimination in my department or the company at that time. Later on in life I have.

I: What would you say that the ethnic and racial makeup of the place was?

EJ: It was, I'd say, sixty/forty or something like that.

I: Sixty percent white and forty percent black?

EJ: Yes, most of them were working down in the mold room and...

I: And you said there were also a lot of women that worked there?

EJ: Yes, a lot of women. A lot of women worked at the factory.

I: So, they left after you were here about three years or so?

EJ: Yes, they left.

I: Maybe what we could do here before we go into the rest of your work history is talk a little bit about the South End when you first moved there and what it was like in Bridgeport in the fifties.

EJ: The South End, when I first moved there in Bridgeport--. I would get off from work and the South End was...Bridgeport itself... I got off from work and get in my car and I would drive to Seaside Park on a hot day and I only closed my screen door. I wouldn't lock my door and when I came back, all my stuff was there. Nobody ever went into the house, broke into the house.

I: Whereabouts in the South End was this?

EJ: Lafayette Street and South Avenue.

- I: And I would go to Seaside Park and fall asleep sometimes and get up at eight or nine o'clock. My money was still in my pocket. My screen door was only locked and nobody ever went into your house in those days.
- I: That's something. Tell us something about the neighborhood, the kind of people who lived there--.
- EJ: It was a nice neighborhood. It was a lot of black and Italian people who lived there. When I came in the South End I noticed we had a lot of young kids and there was no recreation so there was the Marina Village and they had a vacant cellar there so I said to myself, "This would be a good place to have a club for the kids. Someplace where they can go and have entertainment." So I formed the club down in the South End. I started with thirty kids and I wound up with about two fifty.
- I: That many?
- EJ: That many. And I used my savings, mostly to support this club, the South End Athletic Club.
- I: And you had as many as two hundred and fifty kids there at a time?
- EJ: Yes.
- I: What sort of things would they do there?
- EJ: We had a basketball team, we had a baseball team. We had games. We had ping pong. We had dancing. We had a group to fix them our dinners on weekends. We'd have a party for them on weekends on Friday. And you'd have a place for entertainment on the weekends when they're not in school. And after school we would have a session where they were being tutored and learned. If they have homework, that will help them. Most kids there out of that club became very successful and we had a good relationship amongst the boys with the Bridgeport Police Department. At that time, the police department was on Fairfield Avenue and most of the policemen, they knew every kid in my club and we had a very good relationship with them. And the kids would never get into---. They would never get into trouble. The kids were very respectful and I taught those kids how to be respectful.

I: What was the name of this organization?

EJ: The South End Athletic Club.

I: Where did the people that worked with the kids come from? Were these paid staff or just--?

EJ: No, there wasn't a paid staff. There was just a volunteer and most of us were young people that would, younger guys that were twenty, twenty-one, and twenty-two. After work people would come in and volunteer. We had some adults. Like my mother-in-law was one and she would always do the cooking. And then I had other people that helped out and the people in the neighborhood helped out. We would go around to the grocery stores and they would give us donations to the club.

I: That's great. And this was when, back in the fifties?

EJ: Back in the fifties, yes.

I: What did, let's say, when you weren't helping out there, --I'm sure took a big part of your time, what were some of the social activities, like, that you would engage in? I remember that you used to go like Pleasure Beach or the dances?

EJ: Well, we used to take the kids--. There was an individual that donated an old car and we would take it and put the kids in the car and we would go ride around to the park, ride around to Beardsley Park, Seaside Park. And we would go different places with the kids. Then we had one section I start teaching the kids boxing. How to box. We taught them basketball. There was always something that the kids had to do. There was always something for them to do. By keeping the kids busy, it kept the kids from being off the street. We had a rule that any kid that got into trouble; he was automatically out of the club. We didn't allow any swearing, didn't allow drinking, we did not allow smoking and you had to respect any elderly person. Any elderly person said that one of the kids was trouble, you were out. You would be cast out. And that's what I always taught the kids. How to be respectful. How to love themselves and respect people. You have to love yourself first of all before you can love anybody else.

I: So the club was made up of just kids from the neighborhood?

EJ: Yes. The neighborhood and kids that were out of the neighborhood. But there was no--. We didn't care where they came from as long as there was respect from the kids.

I: So it was open to everybody?

EJ: It was open to everybody.

I: I guess what I'm getting at here though is what did you do for entertainment? Just yourself, aside from all the time you were putting in with the athletic club. When you had a day off or something. What would you do? What was there to do in Bridgeport?

EJ: We went to the movies. We went to watch the ballgames. We'd run track. We'd play basketball, but my life was donated mainly to the kids. I had no time to myself. After work, that was it. I got off of work at three o'clock and to the club. I devoted my time to the club seven days a week.

I: Had you married yet?

EJ: No, I was single at that time. My wife and I were dating.

I: Tell us a little bit about that.

EJ: Well, it was a very good relationship. I met my wife and when I met her I sort of said to myself, "This is the young lady that I would like someday to get married to."

I: You met her here in Bridgeport?

EJ: I met here in Bridgeport. My wife is born and raised in Bridgeport. She was born and raised in the South End of Bridgeport.

I: And that's Gail?

EJ: Gail Johnson, yes.

I: Get Gail's name in there. Tell us a little about settling down, married. Where would you go on a date? Before we get to the marriage.

EJ: Where we'd go on a date. At those times we had the Warner Theatre on State Street. Then we had the Loew's Poli. We had the Majestic. We had the Strand Theatre.

I: Those were downtown?

EJ: Those downtown. On Main and Congress Street. The Warner Theatre was on State and Lafayette Street. I would take her to the movies and that was--. Take her to the movies. Take her out to dinner. That was our entertainment because she wasn't into dancing. She wasn't into going to clubs. And I never went to clubs because I didn't have time and I didn't have time to spend doing a lot of things because I was mostly involved with the kids.

I: And working.

EJ: And working.

I: Back to the work a little bit. After Canfield's moved to Virginia--?

EJ: After they moved to Virginia, then I got a job in Outlet Dress Shop. It was a dress shop down on Fairfield and Main. I got a job at Outlet. From Outlet, I worked at Outlet and the manager at Outlet, he and I was very close. He left Outlet and he went to Levitz.

I: Levitz was right down there--?

EJ: Levitz was on the corner of Main and Fairfield and he got me a job in the men's furnishings. I was the first black guy in men's furnishings in Levitz. I worked in Levitz about five, six years I guess. Yes, maybe about five years I worked in Levitz.

I: And when would this be? From like the mid-fifties?

EJ: It was the late fifties into the early sixties. Yes.

I: And by men's furnishings, you were in the men's department?

EJ: Yes, as a salesman. Men's shirts, men's socks underwear. I worked in the men's department --men's furnishings, and haberdashery.

I: What was work like there? Did you have benefits?

EJ: There was no benefits. There was no union. There was just a job and that was it. I didn't recall a union or benefits until I started working--. It was quite a few years later I came into the union. Like I said, I left Levitz to go work for Wonder Bread. I worked for Wonder Bread. I was the first black route salesman for Wonder Bread.

I: And they were located--?

- EJ: They were located on Wells Street. Housatonic and Wells.
- I: Yes, just sort of on the East Side--?
- EJ: No, it's the North End, yes. So Housatonic and Wells Street. I worked for Wonder Bread for about four years and I came into a lot of segregation and when I worked for Wonder Bread and I was a route salesman--.
- I: I'm sorry, Mr. Johnson. But by route salesman, what does that mean?
- EJ: I just delivered the bread. I just sold the bread to stores. And cupcakes. I sold cupcakes and stuff. Doughnuts, the Hostess cakes and all that. And I experienced in some of the stores that I had to go into and I would deliver my product and a lot of storeowners--. I worked for Wonder Bread. You got your Sunbeam, you got Drake Cakes. We were all going to the store at the same time and if my bill was like twelve-fifty, he would take it and take both guys and he would pay them and give them dollar bills and he would give them whatever amount the twelve-fifty would pay them. And me, he would take my balance and he would take and count me pennies. He would give me twelve dollars and fifty cents worth of pennies. I experienced that kind of segregation.
- I: And the other people from the other companies were generally white and they would get the payment in dollar bills?
- EJ: In dollar bills and mine, he would stand there and count me out twelve dollars worth of pennies. And if I would give him eight dollars, it wasn't good. He would count me out eight dollars worth of pennies.
- I: And this happened in a lot of cases, or--?
- EJ: Well, I ran into a lot of problems where I would go into a store and have to use the bathroom and he would tell me that the bathroom was broke and I would see white people go into the bathroom and use the bathroom and they would tell me, "It's out of order." I experienced this.
- I: Here in Bridgeport?
- EJ: Here in Bridgeport. Even with the company, when I first started, they'd go on my truck. You're responsible for your load on your truck. You're responsible for every penny on your truck. They'd go on my truck at night and steal stuff off my

truck. One week I would be short thirty-five dollars and I know that I'm a mathematician and counted good. It's anybody in the company. They would steal stuff off my truck at night. That went on for about a year until one guy came over. He felt sorry for me and he told me what to do. To lock my doors and that way you won't be able to get on my truck. My truck would be in the barn, in the garage and I'm the only one with a locked truck. Everybody, their trucks is open. This is their way of trying to get me to quit and I wouldn't dare quit. I had the longest route in the bakery. The average guy in the bakery went out forty-one stops, thirty-nine stops. I had eighty stops.

I: So twice what the--?

EJ: Twice as much as they had. I would get up in the morning at five-thirty and go in the bakery and go on my route at six o'clock and I would come home at seven o'clock at night. Six-thirty, seven o'clock at night. And the majority of those drivers would be in and out by two-thirty, three o'clock. I had twice as many stops, but that didn't stop me. I was determined that I'm capable with that job and I can do the job. And the saddest thing when I left and quit the bakery after they hired four more minorities and my route, that I had to deliver my product, they put four trucks on that route. The route that I had, they put four trucks on that route.

I: This is the route that you had been doing by yourself?

EJ: The route that I had been doing by myself.

I: And what was the pay like there? Were you making--?

EJ: The pay was good. In those days it was good because when school's open, they buy cakes and bread to make sandwiches for the kids in school. In the summertime when the schools were closed the pay scale was hardly nothing, the pay scale went down. So in the summertime you suffer quite a bit, but when school's open you made a good dollar.

I: So you weren't making an hourly wage. You were paid by the basis of how much was sold?

EJ: Yes, you were paid a bonus. You were getting a bonus on what you sold. And you had to learn how to maneuver and make sure that you put the right product in

the right places. If a store's not open on Saturday or Sunday, you don't put any quantity in that store. If a store's open Saturday and Sunday, this is where you put the quantity at because if the store's open Saturday and Sunday, they've always got people in and out the store. And they're always going in Sunday to buy the bread and cake for the kids to go to school with. To fix their lunch with. So you got to learn. Nobody taught you stuff like this. You had to learn it on your own. And this is what, took me a couple of weeks to find out. Nobody would tell you. They wouldn't tell you anything. They wouldn't tell you nothing. They wouldn't tell you anything because they didn't want me there in the first place. As sad as it seems, before I was hired for that job, all the white guys had to come together and decide whether they wanted me to work or not. As sad as it seems, in the state of Connecticut. I would see them doing something like that down in the southern states, but as sad as it seems, in the state of Connecticut.

I: This was again, in the early sixties.

EJ: This was in the early sixties.

I: How long were you there?

EJ: I was there four years and then after they hired a couple more minorities and then I got out. I told them what I had experienced and I told them what to look for and how to keep their record clean. The main thing is you've got to have a good work record and a good driving record. If you don't have a good work record and a good driving record, then they can lay you off; they want to get rid of you. But if you come to work, have a good work record and a good driving record and then I taught them how to move this stuff around. Different stores were open on the weekend and how you could make money. But nobody would teach you that. Nobody taught you that. You have to learn on your own because they didn't want me there in the first place.

I: So you were able to pass some of that on?

EJ: I was able to pass that on to some of the other minority drivers and then I decide one summer that I would go back. I went to Bullard Havens [High School] for a course in math. Then I got a job at G. L. Lucas, rebuilding machines.

- I: This is a machine shop or something?
- EJ: A machine shop. I went to high school or vocational school for auto mechanic. I went there for radio repairing and TV--. Not TV at that time, but radio repairing and by going to school for auto mechanic and being the number one student, I knew about repairing things so I got a job at G. L. Lucas rebuilding machines for Bullard Company. And we would do all of Bullard's rebuilding. I worked there for thirteen years. After working there for thirteen years, I experienced again at Pratt and Whitney--. I was repairing a machine at Pratt and Whitney and I was asked did I want a job at Pratt and Whitney as the head of the mechanical department. I talked it over with my wife and she said that was quite distance from Bridgeport to go to work every day.
- I: Where was Pratt and Whitney at the time?
- EJ: Pratt and Whitney's in Hartford. I had an uncle worked at Carpenter's Steel and I talked it over with them and he said, "That's a government job," and when the government cut back, I would get laid off. So, why not come to Carpenter Steel? And then put an application into Carpenter Steel and I went to work in Carpenter Steel. And that's where I retired from.
- I: Before we get to Carpenter Steel, back to the machine shop. Was this a small place? Tell us a little bit about where it was.
- EJ: Yes, it was a small place in Fairfield. In Fairfield Circle. We did all of Bullard's rebuilding. I rebuilt the cut master, the VTL, the manitrol and I did all the rebuilding for Bullard's. And we used to travel out of town doing repairs. We'd go to different states doing repair work.
- I: And why did you decide to leave there either to go to Pratt and Whitney or Carpenter Steel?
- EJ: At the time, I had about thirteen machines repaired. I repaired two machines that were Pratt and Whitney and I knew right then that I had about nine more machines to repair. So I went back to the company and they offered me a job at Pratt and Whitney. They offered me a job making a dollar an hour more than what I was getting at G. L. Lucas. So I went back to G. L. Lucas and asked for a raise and

they said that wasn't able to give me a raise. So I looked to better myself. So what do I do? I go out and talk to my uncle and he mentioned coming to Carpenter Steel. I went over to Carpenter Steel and I got a job at Carpenter Steel and I made more money working at Carpenter Steel than I did at G. L. Lucas.

I: And what was the timeframe? Where were you now? In the seventies?

EJ: In the seventies. I went in the beginning of seventy-three.

I: If you don't mind me asking, what was the average wage at Lucas?

EJ: I tell you, I think I was bringing home something like two fifty or two seventy-five a week or something like that.

I: Was that for a forty-hour week?

EJ: That's a forty-hour week. And when I went over to Carpenter Steel, I was saving one hundred dollars a week.

I: Because the pay was that much better?

EJ: Because the pay was that much better. I was working as much overtime as I wanted to work. I started to work forty hours a week. I was there two weeks and I was working twelve hours a day. And they offered me a job working twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

I: It was that busy?

EJ: It was busy and by me being the type of young fellow that I didn't experience making this kind of money. So I took all the hours that I can get and I got five kids so this was a way for me to send my kids to college if they wanted to be sent to college. If you want to attend college and buy whatever they need and whatever they wanted, this is my way of helping my kids and helping others.

I: When you started at Carpenter Steel, what was your position? Tell us a little bit about your job. What would you do each day?

EJ: When I started at Carpenter Steel, I went over to Carpenter Steel as a millwright and the only way I could get into Carpenter Steel within a couple of days was to go over there and run a straightener. And that was the type of machine that would straighten out all the material, all the bars. And I took that job just to get in there

and once I got in there, then I got my millwright job, which I'm qualified for. I worked on the second shift for a number of years.

I: Okay. Describe just what does a millwright do?

EJ: A millwright repairs all the machines. When a machine breaks down, the millwright has got the ability to repair that machine and keep them going because they were on an hourly rate. When anything breaks down, you have to be qualified to take that machine and repair it. To be a millwright, you have to know exactly what you're doing. And they didn't care about anything. They were production. All Carpenter Steel was concerned about was production and you have to know exactly what you're doing.

I: About how many people were working there at this time? Is this about the mid-seventies we're talking about?

EJ: Yes and I would say about thirteen or fourteen hundred people worked there because they had three shifts and it was a busy place and it was about the best job in the state of Connecticut at that time.

I: How were the bosses there?

EJ: The bosses was very nice. Everybody was nice there. That shop was a union shop. The first union shop that I experienced here so therefore, at that union shop, you didn't have to worry about the boss. According to that union, the boss could not get on your neck and the boss could not force you to do anything. As long as you were doing your job, that's all that was required. To do you job and do it properly and right.

I: Which union was this?

EJ: It was the steel union.

I: The steelworker's?

EJ: Yes, yes.

I: So the pay was a lot better there?

EJ: The pay was terrific. After I started there, I experience fifty thousand dollars a year in the seventies.

I: The seventies.

EJ: When I experienced fifty thousand dollars a year, it was like the dream. I've never made this kind of money in my life. So therefore, I never missed a day. I never tried to go to work late. Everyday I worked in Carpenter Steel I went an hour early every day. And I worked as much overtime--. I worked seven days a week. Sometimes I worked twelve hours a day, sixteen hours a day and there was one time that I stayed there and I worked forty straight hours just to see how much money I could make at one time.

I: How about benefits there?

EJ: The benefits was great. There was hospitalization; there was dental care. We had the best benefits in Bridgeport. We had thirteen weeks vacation with pay after ten years. You had thirteen weeks vacation with pay. And believe me, when you say thirteen weeks vacation with pay, that sounds great, but believe me, try and find something to do or someplace to go for them thirteen weeks. It got boring after awhile. Even six weeks. When I got six weeks with pay. After the second week, I'm ready to go back to work. Unless you go overseas, out of the country and then that's when that thirteen weeks or six weeks is great.

I: Just a little more on the Carpenter Steel thing here. Can I submit during this time, your family was growing up. And did you move from the South End? I see you have this nice house here.

EJ: No, at that time I was living over on Union Avenue. I bought a house on Union Avenue.

I: On the East End?

EJ: On the East End. After the East End I bought a house over here. At that time I was experiencing a great deal of money and I had a job that was one of the best jobs in the state of Connecticut.

I: You were saying you had five kids when you started at Carpenter Steel?

EJ: Yes.

I: And you were able to support them?

EJ: I was able to support them. I'm going back quite a few years. I'm going back to the early sixties when I was working at G. L. Lucas [machine rebuilding]. I

worked two jobs at G. L. Lucas. When I worked at G. L. Lucas, I went to work at seven o'clock in the morning. I got off at three and I worked from six to two in the morning. I had two eight-hour jobs to support my family. Believe me, if you want to know what it's like to buy clothes for five kids, Easter time, Christmas time, you had to work two jobs. The pay scale was very little and in order for my family to survive, I had to work two jobs. I worked those two jobs for fifteen years.

I: What would the second job be, generally?

EJ: I worked in a bakery at night.

I: Which bakery?

EJ: Wonder Bread.

I: Oh, you worked inside?

EJ: Yes, inside too.

I: Was there a union there at the time.

EJ: No, there wasn't no union. I don't think so. I didn't pay no union dues. We didn't get those union scale---. So there was no union because I wasn't placed in a union for all my experience I had in there. But, I worked those two jobs in order for my family to survive. But I always says that those are my kids, I had those five kids so I have to provide for those five kids. I am a proud man to say that I never went to the state for anything. The state don't owe me nothing. I don't owe them nothing. And my kids learned that. Each one of my kids knew that their father worked and how I worked and how it is to go out there and get a job and go to work every day and be the type of guy that worked in a shop or wherever you work -- productive. Never go to work late. Respect people. I love people. That's how you're going to make it in this world.

I: That's a good philosophy. Just a little bit back more on Carpenter Steel. You said you were there until you retired?

EJ: Yes, sixteen and one-half years I was there until Carpenter Steel moved out.

I: And when was that?

EJ: 1988.

- I: Tell us a little bit about what sort of led up to that and what it was like knowing that they were moving out.
- EJ: Well, we didn't know that. They didn't give us a month's notice or anything, we're moving out of town. They got a big plant in Redding, Pennsylvania, but after we had the strike, and after the strike, they gave us the notice, but the main problem why Carpenter Steel went out of here, they had an expansion program. A seventy-five million-dollar expansion program, but where they were located there was no way to expand because it was on the waterfront and one side was the water and the other side was thruway and you couldn't expand. So mostly that's why they wanted to move out of here.
- I: So, it's just the physical layout that's--?
- EJ: I'm only going by hearsay. I'm telling you by hearsay. Carpenter Steel was UI's biggest customer and they also -- this is hearsay. They were one of Bridgeport's highest taxpayers. They asked Bridgeport, they would stay if they would cut the taxes and they would lower the electrical rate and they refused. That is only hearsay, from a good source. And if they would have lowered the tax rate and electrical rate, I think Carpenter Steel would have still been here. Because after they didn't have any way to expand, for the seventy-five million dollar expansion plan, well they said, "What's the sense of staying here?" when they couldn't get that tax cut and the electrical rate cut.
- I: How many people were working there when they shut down and moved out?
- EJ: Still about the same. I estimate about one thousand people.
- I: So it was a large plant still?
- EJ: Yes, a large plant.
- I: You had mentioned there had been a strike there earlier. Could you maybe take us back? Had there been other strikes or just let us--?
- EJ: There was a strike there in, I think it was in '72 or '73. There was a strike there. As a matter of fact, I come in from G. L. Lucas to Carpenter Steel trying to get a job. But when I saw they had a strike I said, "No, I don't think I want that job

because I'm going to be the lowest guy on the totem pole." Therefore, I didn't even attempt to go to Carpenter Steel at that time. So I stayed on with the G. L. Lucas until later on and then I made a move and I made a very successful move.

I: Yes, I guess so. Was there just that one strike then?

EJ: We had another strike in, I think it was '86, 1986.

I: Could you tell us a little bit about that because you were working there then?

EJ: Yes, I was working and we had a strike. And all I know is I went to work and they were saying, "You can't go to work go into work when the company is on a strike." I had to obey to the union. I wanted to go because there was a time when I found out that we was only getting one hundred dollars a week.

I: Of strike benefits?

EJ: Of strike benefits so you compare that with a thousand to seven hundred dollars a week pay.

I: Yes. What were the strike issues? Why did they go out?

EJ: I didn't quite get the--. I don't know whether it was talk or something they did. I don't know. I didn't even get into it.

I: How long did the strike last?

EJ: The strike lasted about four or five months or something like that I think. I'm not quite sure but it was near there. Everybody had to walk the picket line in order to get the benefits.

I: So you were essentially out of work for four or five months?

EJ: Yes.

I: When you went back in, had there been an increase in pay or anything, or--?

EJ: No, there wasn't any increase in pay. The only thing we got, we got free insurance. We got lifetime insurance. We got more incentive. I don't think it was exactly what they asked for.

I: And that was after four or five months of being out?

EJ: Yes.

I: Was this the strike just before they shut down?

EJ: Yes, the strike was in '86 and they shut down in '88 and after they shut down in '88, I went over to W. S. Rockwell and I got a job at Rockwell.

I: And they are--?

EJ: They're located in Fairfield. And I got a job in W. S. Rockwell, building machines. I built machines from blueprint. And there were times that I built a fourteen million-dollar machine. I built a twelve million-dollar machine, a nine million-dollar machine and I worked in Rockwell until they closed up. Rockwell eventually closed up, too.

I: How big a shop was this?

EJ: They were little. I guess they had about a hundred guys. Might not be that much. Seventy-five to one hundred guys.

I: And why did they shut down?

EJ: Because of business. Things slowing down completely and they shut down, too.

I: When both these shut down, Rockwell and Carpenter Steel, how much advance notice did you get? Did you--?

EJ: We got about two months advance notice at Rockwell. And Carpenter Steel, I think maybe three or four weeks or something like that. Because at that time--. No, it was two months, I think it was two months because they brought in someone from Pennsylvania that was gonna give up a training program for any other job that we wanted. We was supposed to go on a training program.

I: Were these jobs that they were going to provide or just to learn a skill?

EJ: To learn a different skill--?

EJ: That guy worked for Carpenter Steel. Say that guy worked on swing grinders and gantry grinders, those jobs was only pertaining to Carpenter Steel. There was no other factory around here at that time where you could get a job working as a gantry grinder, swing grinder or a straightener unless you work on brass or something like that which they were closing down also.

I: You're talking about the Bridgeport Brass?

EJ: Yes, but there was very concerned about the guy that didn't have the skill and he was training for different jobs.

- I: And was there any severance pay and things like that?
- EJ: Yes, there was severance pay and if you didn't take the severance pay, you still could... you, like a benefit...you know, you get the severance pay every month, you know.
- I: Okay. And severance pay. About what would that be equivalent to how many years salary, or--?
- EJ: It depended on how many years and according to your salary, and I was so, you know, I never knew I was so glad at that time and I was getting on in age. Before Carpenter Steel left Bridgeport, if your age added up between seventy and eighty, you got full benefit so at that time, my age and my over work, I made that scale, between seventy and eighty. So I got full benefit.
- I: Just so I understand, it would be like, if you were fifty-five and you'd been there twenty years, you would have been at seventy-five. That's how that came about.
- EJ: Right. That's how that came about. And as long as you were between seventy and eighty, you got full benefits. Say if you worked at Carpenter Steel at twenty and you worked there for twenty years and if it didn't add up to seventy or eighty, you didn't get your full benefit. So I made that scale. There was a big argument about it because guy says, "I've been here twenty years, this guys been here sixteen years." But the age and the time added up to full benefit. So therefore, you were able to get your full benefit and at that time when they closed up I was a few years I would reach retirement age anyway.
- I: Okay. And how about Rockwell. When they shut down, did they have severance pay or anything?
- EJ: No. They didn't have no severance pay, no benefits, no nothing.
- I: No union?
- EJ: No union, no. I was sort of happy when I went to Rockwell because I didn't have to pay union dues. At Carpenter Steel, the money was good. I'm not complaining about it. The money was good. But the union dues was high. It was the highest union dues I ever seen.
- I: What were the union dues?

EJ: I was asked to pay thirty-five dollars a month for union dues sometimes. Most of the time it was thirty-five dollars.

I: And it was a union shop, right?

EJ: It was a union shop, yes. Very strong union shop.

I: Let's see, we covered--. I guess to wrap it up--. As I said, this tape is going to be stored—[tap on/off]. We've covered a bunch of stuff, but as I said, this tape is going to be at the library---over a hundred years from now it will still be here, so if there's anything we've missed, or anything you'd like to say for posterity, feel free.

EJ: Well, the most, one thing that I would to say and what I experienced and I have found out that the most important thing of all is you have to love people, you have love yourself. You have to have respect for people; you have to have respect for yourself. You have to love your job and love your family. You have to be a family man. And I always says, this has always been my motto, "I had five kids and those were my kids, nobody else's kids. I had to raise my kids and take care of my kids no matter what it took and I experienced it. And today I've got five kids that have never been trouble. I've got five kids that have respect. I've got five kids; they all got good jobs. All the kids got good jobs. All the kids are very respectful. None of my kids have been in trouble with the law or nobody. And when I stop and think about it, I am one proud man in the state of Connecticut.

I: I looked around the room here this--. How many grandchildren did you say--?

EJ: I have twelve grandchildren. And I'm teaching my grandchildren the same thing. And we attend--. And the most thing, I'm happy that I got my kids into church. We will belong to Holy Tabernacle Church on the East Side of Bridgeport. I got all my kids into church. We attend church regular. Any my grandkids attend church. And none of my kids have been in trouble. None of my kids is on drugs. None of my kids are alcoholics. None of my kids, they don't smoke. But you've got to have love for your kids. You've got to have love for your fellow man.

I: One thing I guess that we didn't touch on that you just mentioned now is the importance of your church life. Has this been something throughout your time here in Bridgeport?

EJ: No, it wasn't nothing throughout my time in Bridgeport. I got into the church, it was the sixties and our church had a singing group and I ---being me, loved to work with kids. I got into there being a supervisor because I love kids. And I started working with the kids singing in the choir. We had a choir going all over the country. And by me being a young man, I loved to work with kids; I was a male supervisor. And then that was my step for getting into the church.

I: So your helping the kids brought you to the church?

EJ: That brought me to the church.

I: And what church is this again?

EJ: The Holy Tabernacle Church of Love on Stratford and Central and Bishop Kenneth Moles is the bishop.

I: Okay. Anything else?

EJ: Well, there's nothing else that I can think of, but just like I says, it would be a better world for everyone of us if we could learn to love one another. I don't know whether religion got anything to do with this tape, but I'm telling you, the only thing God wanted us to do is to love one another. If we would love one another, there would be no problem. The bible doesn't teach hate, the bible teaches love. And I love you, as my brother. And God bless you.

I: God bless you.

END OF INTERVIEW