

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century"
Lavelle Lynch (LL) interviewed by John Soltis (I), 1998

I We are doing the oral history interview with Mr. Lavelle Lynch. Mr. Lynch, when and where were you born?

LL I was born in ((Fassins)), North Carolina, 1927.

I How old were you when you came to Bridgeport?

LL I was about four months old.

I Okay, so right. What was it like down south? I know you don't remember.

LL I never lived in, outside of being born, I don't know anything about it 'til after I became an adult.

I What brought you and your family here to Bridgeport?

LL Well, my father was already up here. My father was from Georgia and he had been up here ever since he was about sixteen years old from Hartford and Bridgeport. And my mother had an older sister living here and she came up here to visit my older sister, I mean her older sister, and then met my father. In fact my uncle introduced them to each other and they married and everything, and she's been up here ever since she was eighteen years old.

I Okay, and how many in your family?

LL There are six of us. I'm the oldest. And they were all born here in Bridgeport, except myself.

I Okay, what did your parents do up here in Bridgeport?

LL Well, my mother worked as a domestic and my father worked at the brass shop two years before I was born.

I And what year was this?

LL 1925.

I Bridgeport Brass?

LL Yeah.

I Okay, and whereabouts in Bridgeport did you live?

LL First I lived in the south end on Main Street, then I moved on Broad Street, then Lafayette Street, and then from there I moved up to the North End. That's where, I was about five years old, six years old, in between that time.

I So essentially you grew up here in the north end?

LL The North End was the biggest part of my life.

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I Tell us a little bit about what it was like here in the North End.

LL Well, the North End. I was in an Irish and Italian neighborhood, and it was a pretty good neighborhood. We got along good and everything. I attended Columbus School there, which was the grammar school there. And all the kids there, and it was all right. I can't complain about it. We had friends and we played ball together and etc. and it was all right. I did fine because I had some kids that grown up. You know I had some very good friends.

I You said it was predominantly Irish and Italian?

LL Irish and Italian neighborhood, it was mostly Italian neighborhood. The Irish was just a little on the outside on North Avenue, where St. Patrick's church was.

I Sure. So you said people generally got along?

LL Yeah, we got along.

I What was it basically a working class kind of neighborhood?

LL Yes, it was definitely a working class neighborhood.

I And you say you went to Columbus School?

LL Yeah, Columbus School. That was a grammar school in that neighborhood.

I Anything beyond that?

LL Oh yeah. From there I went to Congress Junior High and from there Central High School, but I didn't graduate at the time because my older friends of mine were being drafted into the service and I got a little carried away and I faked my age and I took off into the Marines.

I Oh, really?

LL Yeah. Without my parents' consent.

I In about what year was this?

LL 1943. December, 1943. I was sixteen years old.

I In the Marines. And how long were you in the service?

LL About two and a half years.

I You were overseas?

LL Yeah, I was overseas. I was stationed on Guam. I was on Saipan. And then from there I went to the Hawaii islands. I was on various parts there. And then from there we were getting ready for the invasion, the occupation of Japan, when the night they decided to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, then Nagasaki. And so that stalled, but we still went in for an occupation.

I So you were in Japan?

LL Oh yeah.

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I What division?

LL I was attached to the Second Marine Division.

I That was more of a personal question, my father was with First Marines in the Second World War, he was out there too.

LL Oh, yeah, oh.

I Okay, so then you came back to Bridgeport after the war.?

LL Yeah, I came back.

I Let's see, what was your first full-time job after the war?

LL Well, my first full-time job was Acme Shear.

I Oh, you were right there.

LL Yeah, after six months though, laying around, you know, resting, and getting myself together, I went there. It was right around the corner practically from where I lived at. You know it was near the brass shop...

I Oh, that's right, that's right where your dad was. Is your dad still working there?

LL No, my dad is deceased, but he put in 43 years there at the brass.

I How did you get that job?

LL Well, I was just looking, you know walking around looking for a job and I happened to walk in there and the personnel manager, Mr. Kane who was, I forgot, he was in politics at the time and everything like that. He was an Irish gentleman, everybody liked him and he was very sociable and honest and so he hired me. He asked me did I like machines, and I told him, "Yeah, well, I like machines." And so he hired me. I worked there I think for about three or four years before I was laid off for about two days, three days, and then he called me back and I had continuous work.

I What type of work did you do when you started?

LL Well, I started I was a grinder, a grinder on the shears, which is --it's explained to..it had wheels made of, I can't think of it, well, grinding wheels they call it anyway, and you just, the roughness of the shear, you take the seams off and smooth it off, just smooth it off there. That was one job, and after that I had a chance to go for another job which was burnishing, it's to burn the roughness of the blades. You use a medium, such as a ball burnish, steel balls like BB shots. We use that, then we use stones, highly polished stones. So that was done in barrels about, oh, about this length here.

I About four or five feet?

LL Yeah, and you put water in there and then you put polishing compound and you let it tumble for about half hour and you take it out and it's all finished. And that's preparing it for the plater which is the next operation after that.

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I Okay. So these were like your starting jobs?

LL Yes, starting jobs, yes. Then after that, later on I was working as a lead man, but in the meantime I'd fill in like if somebody'd come in, I'd break him in on jobs, show him how to do the jobs. Then I worked with the foreman there, as far as setting up the schedule for the day. A little of everything. They kept me going.

I Was there a union there?

LL No, we never had it. As close as we came to a union, I can't think of what year, but we lost by two votes.

I So throughout the history of Acme Shear there was no union there?

LL No, never a union. At first when I got there, you know, at the time, everybody, we were a younger group of people, lots of ex-servicemen and everything like that, we were trying to get a union in there. And then it just fell through because lots of old-timers, they preferred not to have a union and everything like that. And so that's what knocked it down. But as the years went by, we found out that without a union we got by pretty good. It was a family-owned company at that time, and they were pretty fair.

I How large a shop was this?

LL Let me see, say two hundred people, say about two hundred people.

I You say that they in general did take care of you?

LL Oh, yeah, it was pretty fair.

I Could you tell me, not necessarily what you were making, but what like an average salary was maybe when you started?

LL Oh, when I started it was 56 cents an hour. It was 56 cents an hour, that was day work. Then you work yourself up to a senator on piecework and piece work will bring you about 70 cents an hour, or something like that. That's when I first started.

I Was it a forty-hour week?

LL Yeah, forty hours a week.

I And did they pay overtime?

LL Yeah, they paid overtime.

I And let's say towards the end of the time there, what did the salaries go on to?

LL I don't know.

I You know, just before you left Acme Shear.

LL Oh, before I left?

I About what were the salaries at that point?

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LL Oh, salary. There was people making thirty-five, thirty-six thousand a year. The salary was up very high.

I Okay, did you get benefits with this?

LL Yeah, we had profit sharing there and well, we had profit sharing and we got paid about ten holidays and everything.

I Was this even back in the forties?

LL No, this was before I left.

I Okay, let's go back to the forties, I'm sorry.

LL Oh yeah. Back in the forties, they had, well we didn't get, maybe about six days holiday pay and the salary at the time wasn't no thirty-six. The salary was just low then. Every year they gave you an increase, a few nickels, a dime or something an hour, in the forties.

I So it was still around that fifty to seventy-five cents or so area?

LL Well, yeah, but like piece work, some people were just more aggressive on piece work than others and they made more.

I Piece work is the more you make the more money you make, basically?

LL Yeah, well that's it, that's it, that's what the piece work is.

I And how about paid vacations?

LL Paid vacation we had at that time, you worked there five years' time and you got a week's vacation, and eventually they increased it to, if you worked there fifteen years you got two weeks' vacation. But eventually they went up. Past the forties, it was more than that.

I And how about things like insurance, sick pay, sick days?

LL No, we didn't have sick days, but we had insurance, which wasn't much. Because in my case I carried two insurances, one on the outside, you know, medical insurance on the outside and one with the company paying in order to even things off in case anything happened.

I So what the company was providing, you had to supplement.

LL Yeah, I had to supplement that.

I Something about the workers there? What was it racially, ethnically.?

LL When I first went there they were, let me see, Hungarian and Polish people there. They were the majority there. They were mostly Polish speaking, Hungarian speaking, and everything like that. Some of the fellows that were younger, that were in the service could speak. Some of them worked there as kids before they went in the service. They were sixteen or seventeen, and when they went in the service they came out and so they were foremen.

They made them foremen and everything because they could speak to the other people in their language and everything like that. But that was the first group when I went there. Then after that group we had the Freedom Fighters, the Hungarian Freedom Fighters.

I During the fifties yeah.

LL Yeah. Well they had some of them, I guess because they knew families were here or something. And they came here and so we hired quite a few of those there. So then after that we had Puerto Rican people start coming in there. They start coming in, then after that it was the Portuguese. The Portuguese were the -- mostly -- the most because of, I guess, families. They sent for their families and they had relatives. They had the whole shop locked up. They were hard-working people. They really, on that piece work, they broke some records working piece work. Sometimes the company said they were making too much money. They wanted to cut their rates, you know send that time study man around you know (laughter).

I How did folks get along?

LL Well, basically there wasn't too many blacks working there and basically they got along all right. Only thing you'd find some people that was fighting about their piece work, you know getting work and figuring they should grab this work here they grab this, that's about it. But basically they got along pretty good because we had picnics, annual picnics. We had annual Christmas parties in the shop and everything like that, and everybody just joined in together.

I Do you personally recall any experiences of discrimination on the job?

LL Well, in my particular job we had a foreman. He's deceased now. He tried to act like he's friendly, but he's one of these guys that figures he knows everything. Nobody knows anything else. I remember the time when he opened his mouth too loud, hollering and stuff like that. And that's something I can't stand. That set me off in a minute, if you're hollering at me and raise your voice. So I remember the time he was working and helping this girl in the plating department and he was just going to kill time racking the shears on the rack for plating. So he was just there, so I was down on the end down there and he calls me and asks me to bring him a box of blades. So he didn't say what kind of blades, he just said blades. So I brought him a box and he said, "I don't want this. This is not the kind I want." And so I took the box of blades and threw it down like this. Right then and there I just was ready to explode. I just was ready. 'Cause all this was building up. He was the kind of guy that just didn't know how to talk to people, you know what I mean?. And I guess it was just building up and I'll tell you the truth, I always said the Lord stepped in, because that second if he would have just breathed hard, I would have knocked the daylights out of him. And I'm usually a calm person. Because I remember one of the personnel directors, Don Quinn. He as a very nice person. When he left he wrote me a card. He lived out in Westport. He said, "I admire you Lavelle. The trouble you went through and everything and you held your cool. I'm mighty proud of you, to have known you." But I could have exploded, lost. I had made about twenty-something years there, or something like that at the time, maybe a

little more. So eventually this fellow he got messed up anyway, so they got rid of him, this foreman. And I don't know how true, but behind our backs he used to go upstairs to the office and they would tell them he can't take no vacations, he can't do anything cause nobody knows anything. But yet when he's out, who runs the department? I remember one time my brother, he was in the army. He came over to borrow my car because he was on his way up to Hartford. So he came to the personnel office and they told us that this foreman wasn't there. So he asked who's in charge? Who's the second person in charge? He said Mr. Lynch is in charge. But yet this foreman claimed he couldn't go nowhere, but eventually everybody found out that they depend on me as far as what's going on in the shop. The engineers when they want their samples done or anything like that, they call me or for anything else.

I So this guy didn't know everything?

LL No, he tried, he just tried. You know some persons just try to impress you. You know, they don't know half of the time, they just want to be smart.

I So, do you recall any other problems, you know, between the black people and the Hungarians, or anything between management and stuff like that?

LL Well, I know one case, one old gentleman. When I first went on this burnishing in the barrels there, they needed help. So I left grinding to go there to work a couple of days. This fellow, he seemed like I was going to take his job or something, so he just said, "Take it easy, take it easy." But in the meantime this foreman, he seen what was going on, and he knew this guy was taking his time, taking his time, so when it was time for the time to be made out he said, "See, we didn't make nothing." But the foreman knew what went on, something like that. So any way he found the guy was just gold bricking. Other departments, I can't really say about any other experience they had at the foundry and most of the blacks work in the foundry there, blacks and Portuguese in the foundry working. So I don't know. And Puerto Ricans. Those three worked in the foundry which was a tough job. All foundry work is tough. There's nothing easy about foundry work. That's something I would never get tangled up in.

I I know you didn't do that, but briefly, what did they do in the foundry?

LL In the foundry, it's cast iron scissors. See, steel is --as long as I worked there, I don't think I got any scissors around here (laughter), no kidding! I had bought scissors for people. Yeah, this is the cast iron. And this is made in Japan. We got to the place where we could not compete with import so we was importing scissors. This is China, someplace in China. This is cast iron. But when we were making cast iron, they make molds out of sand. Here's the mold here. It's made of sand and everything like that and it's put onto a machine, like a pressing machine. They press down and they get the form of a blade, not together

like this, but a single. And you get that formed and then towards the end when the mold is made, the hot metal, they pour the hot metal into the molds and that gives the form of the blade. From there it goes upstairs to the picking room, they call it, and they grind the roughness off and everything like that. Then the next operation is they gotta be inside grind, the edges got to be done and everything like that. But it was just too much for the company. They weren't making any profit, so they started importing. I remember some years ago we were hollering about importing, they wanted us to write the Congressman about all this import coming in, but yet they end up likewise.

I So Acme Shear was importing scissors?

LL Oh yeah, they imported scissors. We had scissors from Italy. Beautiful scissors made in Italy, oh yeah, beautiful scissors. Because any time I gave Christmas presents out, I'd go to the office and order some Italian kitchen shears and other kinds of shears. They did beautiful work.

I Okay, let me just back up for a second about this, because Acme Shear, I think this is where they make the scissors?

LL Yeah.

I When they started importing the scissors.....

LL They imported some, but they still made some here. But they imported quite a bit from.....

I Did workers here in Bridgeport have anything to do with assembling them or anything?

LL Oh yeah, they had some assembled here.

I So they would buy the unfinished product.

LL And we finished it up.

I It's interesting. I never thought about that.

LL Yep, well, they had quite a few. You'd see trailer trucks come in loaded with them.

I When did that start?

LL Let me see, '60, '70, let's see. Maybe about the end of the '60's or something like that. Around the 60's something like that.

I Did that affect the number of, was there a layoff or anything?

LL There wasn't a layoff, but it was like, see they hate to layoff people at that shop, because once you learn how to work on it, because it's a job that you got to have patience and take time and everything. It's nothing easy. And so they try to keep help. They might knock the hours down. Seven hours a day or four days a week or something like that. They might do that, but they try to keep everybody working. That's one thing about that company, they try to keep their help.

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I So what would happen instead of working a forty-hour week, you might go down to thirty-five?

LL Thirty-five, thirty hours, something like that. Thirty-five would be about the lowest.

I So essentially they kept the same number of workers, by and large?

LL Yes. They kept the same.

I Okay, so we just got off a little bit. Back to the foundry. This was the hardest job in there? It was hot?

LL Oh, yes it was hot. All foundries. Like my father, he worked in a brass shop for forty-three years on Housatonic Avenue, you know where Housatonic Avenue is. In that section there. That job was so dirty, when I was a kid I remember he used to have to wear long underwear, you know what the Italians used to call muja.....I forgot. I used to speak Italian pretty good when I was a kid because I had a tutor, you know. But now I can't. It's all past me. Well anyway, they used to wear that, the fellows there, and because of the fire, the sparks from the metal, they used to hit you or something like that. Lots of people got scars from there.

I All up and down your arms got hit?

LL Oh, yeah, because it would be flying and at that time there was no OSHA there, you know, and these companies did work without any government behind them, as far as safety is concerned. The foundry was sometimes so black in there, the dirt, the dust and everything. But what gets me, I had seen some black fellows that had college degrees that came out, maybe around after the war or something like that, where they couldn't find a job. You know, a decent job, or anything. They worked at the foundry in order to live. They had college degrees and everything like that, it was rough.

I Yeah, I guess so. You say you were forty-odd years at Acme Shear. Tell us a little bit about what eventually, did you stay there right 'til they closed down?

LL Oh no. I retired about nine years before they retired. In fact, maybe nine years that I've been retired.

I Okay. So it was still going pretty well when you left?

LL Yeah, it was going pretty well. But see what happened, this company came into a corporation. They had plants in Canada, they had plants in England, they had plants in Germany. And the main place where they moved to is down in Fremont, North Carolina. That's where they moved all the operations from here, down in Fremont, North Carolina.

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I This happened after they were bought out?

LL This happened, let me see, say about five years ago, they started moving. But they already had the plant down in North Carolina. And they already had a plant in England and in Germany and everything like that. That's where they formed a corporation. And so the family, they lost their hold, they started selling stocks. They started selling stocks and people were buying stocks and everything. So now it's run by stockholders.

I Okay, so they moved down south and overseas?

LL Yeah, that's where the company moved, that was here. But they got their headquarters still in Fairfield. Yeah, the headquarters were still here.

I Oh, I see, but the jobs that were being done here in Bridgeport are now down south.

LL In North Carolina.

I Okay, let's see what else do we have here, interesting. I guess now we'll talk a little bit about your life here as a young adult and what it was like living in Bridgeport right after the war for you and your family.

LL Well, like I said before, my father was already established because he had been here ever since he was about sixteen years old and my mother had been here about eighteen and everything, so we were pretty well established. But as far as jobs are concerned, some place you go, they look at you and say we're not hiring and this and that and everything. And right after the war jobs were kind of tough. Even before the war at some of these companies here, they didn't hire blacks.

I Really?

LL Yeah. Some big companies. If they hired blacks, they were cleaning toilets or janitor work or something like that. There were quite a few companies that were very prejudiced. I know that from as a kid. And, like I mentioned before, how some people had college educations, graduated from college and everything, the kind of jobs they had to work in order to survive.

I Do you recall some factories that may have been worse than others?

LL As far as that, I didn't work in those factories. But I know.

I What is their reputation?

LL They could say they weren't prejudice or anything like that. But I know like Underwood was one when I was a kid. I remember that, they didn't have no blacks in there. Underwood. And G.E. had them as janitors and janitress, something like that. Those were two that I can recall.

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I How about the others? Were there any factories that had a better reputation? Were they all pretty much...?

LL All pretty much the same. Some of them, where they figured they needed you for a certain job, if you happened to be at the place at the right time, they would hire. But to me it was all the same.

I Just some were worse than others?

LL Yeah. That's it. Because there were lots of underhanded things. Because the white owns the factories and everything like that, and they hire who they want.

I Over the years, at least at Acme Shear, did that change much?

LL It kind of changed, but just like, people have said I should have been a foreman, but I could see why I couldn't be a foreman, because they had a combination in one department of plating and burnishing. I was into burnishing and plating was the side with people who knew about chemistry. There wasn't that many workers in that department to have two foremens. The one that had been there, he had been there for years. So I was placed like a leadman or something like that. In the office we had a timekeeper, a very good friend of mine. He was a timekeeper, a black fellow. He was a very smart fellow, and everything like that. And worked and knew his job, but he just got so far. They let him go so far and that's the way it went.

I Okay, thank you for that. A little more upbeat --what was it like here in Bridgeport in the late `40's? I mean, where did you go when you wanted to go out on a date, let's say?

LL Oh, late `40's.

I Or the `50's.

LL Well, when I was a kid they had Pleasure Beach. Pleasure Beach was an amusement park there and had all kinds of entertainment there. We used to walk. I didn't have no car then. I was young and walked over there. You could walk all over Bridgeport. Nobody'd bother you, or nothing like that. We went over there. And later on before, they had Ritz Ballroom where they opened up to the blacks and everything like that. And then they had Roxie Hall. That was a place they had for blacks to go dancing. And the roller skating rink. There used to be one on State Street. They didn't allow blacks in there at that time.

I Was that The Mosque?

LL Yeah, The Mosque. Then eventually, when things got where they needed money, they started opening it up. The doors then, you know. That was the main place where we went for dancing or roller skating.

I So back then, let's say in the `40's, or `30's and the `40's, there were places like the Ritz Ballroom and The Mosque that were whites only?

LL Yeah. Definitely so.

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I Up here in New England.

LL Yeah, up here in New England. You'd be surprised how many places were prejudiced. Even some bars. Well, I wouldn't go into no bars at the time. Even some bars, they didn't want blacks to go into the bars or nothing. I had heard people experience going into a bar, they would break the glass behind you. If you drink out of a glass, they'd break the glass.

I Okay, I keep trying to get to this part. So the Ritz Ballroom eventually did become integrated and you would go roller skating.

LL Over to Lordship. That was another place they started out prejudiced, but they did allow blacks to go there. In fact, the YMCA, when I was a kid, the YMCA had special days for us to go swimming, to use "the Y" like on a Sunday I think it was. They didn't allow the blacks at that time, the YMCA.

I YMCA, on State Street?

LL Yeah, on State Street. They had a Sunday set aside for the blacks.

I About when was this, like the '30's?

LL Oh, this was about '30's. '30's '39, before the war and everything like that.

I And about when did that start to change?

LL Well, I guess it started to change after the war. After the war it started changing.

I I remember I was a member of the YMCA when I was a kid in the early '60's and we swam with everybody.

LL Yeah, well '60's yeah. But this was after the war, like in the '40's.

I Would you care to comment or say anything at all about your personal life? Did you ever get married? Have kids?

LL Oh yeah. I don't have any kids. I got married in 1950, '48 or something like that. I was twenty-three years old, I think, at the time I got married. And I met my wife. She's from Georgia. I met her and I married her about a couple of years after that. She's deceased. She died in 1985. She's been deceased for about twelve years now. We didn't have any kids or anything. We used to go, I used to take her to football games at Harding.

I Hedgers Stadium.

LL Hedgers Stadium. Walk over there, cause we were rooming over there. At that time it was hard to get an apartment there, because so many people migrated here that you couldn't get an apartment. And some places they didn't want blacks as far as the apartment was concerned. And so we roomed in a private house, a home rather. And so we used to walk at night. When they had night games and walked over there from the East Side to Hedgers Stadium. Then we used to go to Pleasure Beach and everything like that. That's about all.

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Once in a while go to a dance or something like that. Which I wasn't a dancer, but I just, you know, I just went. Just to kill time.

I I want to thank you, Mr. Lynch. Before we close, though, because this tape is going to be in the library archives forever, I guess, is there anything you would like to add or say, message for posterity?

LL Well, one thing I would like to say. The Marines. It was June, 1942, the first black marines were allowed in the Marine Corps. They didn't have no blacks during the modern days and so that was the first black marines they had. So when they went in there it was hard. The whites gave us hell. The white Marines. We had lots of southerners. White southerners who was in there before the war, you know in there. And we had them as trainers and they gave us hell. They gave the blacks, especially the first ones that went in there, they told them they didn't want you in there and this and that and stuff like that.

I Where did you do your basic training?

LL I did Moffett Point, North Carolina. Camp Lejeune. That's where they sent all the blacks troops at that time. So after that they formed two defense artillery outfits, all black with white officers. There were all kinds of white officers there over the outfit. They had ammo outfits, different ammo outfits, and different depots, like one unloading ships, and all that, work like that. But since then it's come a long way, the Marine Corps. It came a long way.

I Okay, that it?

LL Yeah, that's it.

I Okay, thank you, sir.

LL I would like to say to the young black people, you got to remember: education is the most important thing in your life. Get all the education you can get. And realize that you have to earn your way through life. Nobody's giving you nothing. You know, it's twice as hard for a black man to achieve things because you have one strike against you to begin with. So you really have to really pull hard.

I Thank you.