

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project, "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century"
Ralph McAden (**RM**) interviewed by Mozella Burns (**I**), 1998.

I When and where were you born?

RM I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, January 1, 1918.

I And your full name is?

RM Ralph Leroy McAden, Sr.

I What was it like where you lived, in the neighborhood you lived in?

RM When I went to grammar school we lived in the north end on Lindley Street. There weren't too many Negroes in the area, but I got along well with my companions at school. In other words, there were occasions when they called you names, but that was typical of, you know, there were a lot of Italians and Jews and Irish, German. It was a mixed area and the group of fellows that I palled around with in grammar school, they called us the league of nations because we had, there was a Jewish fellow, a German fellow, there was a Russian fellow, Irish fellow, Italian fellow. We were just about well represented.

I Tell me about your family, your parents, how many brothers and sisters?

RM Well, I'm the oldest of five children. My parents had three younger sisters and then a younger brother.

I And what were your parents' names?

RM My parents were Henry and Carrie McAden.

I And your brothers and sisters names?

RM My sisters were Henrietta, Jeanette, Joan. My brother was Henry, Jr.

I I'm assuming both your parents were African-American?

RM Both my parents were African-American.

I Did both parents work?

RM Both my parents worked.

I Could you tell me where?

RM Well, my father worked in the Bridgeport Brass Company in the foundry, and then when times were slow he would work delivering coal. And that was hard work. My mother worked as a housekeeper for a family that owned the coal company where my father worked. And these people in this family, they weren't well educated in social life activities and they learned a lot from my mother. My mother taught them a great deal about how to conduct themselves. So we had a close relationship to this family. My father worked in the Bridgeport Brass in the foundry. And I went to Reed School, that was the old Reed School, that was on the corner of Remer and what's the name of that other street? It's on North Avenue. North Avenue and Remer Street, around the corner. And before I went to school each morning, I had to take my father his lunch. He had to have a hot lunch. So

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I had to take his lunch and stick it through the fence on Grand Street and wait for somebody to come out to get some coal or something and I would stick it through and I would give it to them and then I would go to school. And this was, I think,

when I was in the seventh and eighth grade. He just had to have...my mother wanted to make sure he didn't get sandwiches, he had a hot pan, hot food, to eat for his lunchtime.

I Is your family originally from Bridgeport? Were your mother and father born there? Did they move here?

RM My mother was born in Bridgeport. My father's from North Carolina.

I What made him move north and why did he decide to move to Bridgeport?

RM My father was in the service and that's where he met my mother. He was stationed at Fort Devins and that's where he met my mother, I think, when he was stationed here when he was in the area.

I That's why he chose to stay in Bridgeport?

RM After he married, he stayed in Bridgeport.

I Tell me about growing up here. You talk about the neighborhood. How did you feel about growing up in Bridgeport? What kind of activities were you involved in and the people in your neighborhood, were they white collar or blue collar?

RM Well, when I was in grammar school I had a paper route which was very large. I used to go all the way up to, way up Lindley Street and all the way down to Ives Court, Randall Avenue and Merriam Street. All the way down to even Washington Avenue. And I had a lot of customers. And at that time we were selling the paper for three cents. I think we paid about two cents for one paper and two and a quarter for another. So we made about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cent for a paper. And I think it come to about 12 or 15 cents a week. And when somebody owed me for two or three weeks I thought I was rich. And our main activity was on Main Street there was the Rialto Theater, and with this gang of fellows that I used to pal around with, I'd try to get finished early so we could go to the matinee on Saturday. I think it cost us about ten cents to see a matinee and to see the serial. We saw maybe three or four different movies for that dime. They had a couple of weekly serials and then a main cowboy feature. And I got along well with the people in my neighborhood. I think one of the reasons why I got along well was because I was always trained to be polite and respectful for elders and I got along well with the boys' mothers. And so because of this they were careful of the way they treated me because I had the respect of a relationship with their mothers and I went in and out of all these homes delivering papers, so I had an advantage as far as that was concerned, that people didn't bother me with the things they would bother other people for, they did not bother me.

I Where were you educated? How far did you go? And what about your bothers and sisters, about their education also?

RM Well, I graduated from Reed School in 1931. We then went to junior high school which

was on Wheeler Avenue which is now an apartment building. And that's where I went for 9th grade. And then I went to Congress High, which is no longer there. And that was in the middle of my sophomore year that my parents moved to the east end of Bridgeport. This was in 1932, they moved to a cottage on the east end of Bridgeport, right next door to the East End Baptist Church. And from there I walked, we were living at 58 Central Avenue. From there I walked straight up the hill to Harding High School. At that time the school was so crowded, they had afternoon sessions. We used to go from I think it was from about 12:30 to 5 o'clock in that year. And the reason for that was because the children that were being bused from the suburbs. Trumbull, Long Hill, Monroe, and all those surrounding towns where they did not have a high school. And the schools were getting so crowded that we had to have a double session for sophomores. And this of course lasted until the schools in Trumbull, Long Hill, and Monroe had to build their own high schools because Bridgeport could no longer supply their needs as far as educating those children in the high schools. So that's where the first busing started, really. The first busing was really from the suburbs into the inner city to the high schools.

I So how far did you go in school?

RM I graduated from Harding High School in 1935. There were five Negroes in my graduating class and we were the first graduation class to hold our graduation outside in the stadium. Then I took courses at the University of Bridgeport in accounting and business administration. And it seemed that I would just get going good in the class and then my job, my shift would get changed, and I would have to drop out. So this went on for a while. And then I also took a correspondence course from Franklin Business Institute in Accounting.

I What about your bothers and sisters? How far did they go in education?

RM My sister Henrietta graduated from high school. My sister Joan had, she went to Wilberforce University and then she went to Columbia University and she had a degree in social science and I think she was also a counselor in school. Joan went to nursing school for a while, but she didn't complete it. And my bother Henry went to Wilberforce University and he was ROTC. He graduated a lieutenant. He went into the service and he retired from the service as a major. He went to Vietnam. He was in charge of repairing the helicopters that were in Vietnam. I think he did two tours of duty in Vietnam.

I Tell me about your social activities when you were young. What kind of music did you listen to and dance to? And what kind of radio programs, TV?

RM Oh, we used to love the radio programs. All the radio programs on Sunday night. Fibber McGee and Molly and Allen and of course, Jack Benny. And what we did, we used to go to skating parties and we used to have a lot of...the Beach Street YWCA is where we had youth activities. We used to take part in plays and have dances and activities there and we used to go to roller skating parties. It was up over where the old firehouse used to be on the corner of Barnum and Central Avenue. That building there, the second floor was a hall and a skating rink. Then we also played basketball around the various teams in the area. I was never that great. They let me play once in a while.

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I Did you go to dances?

RM Oh yes. We went to a lot of dances.

I What kind of music was popular at that time?

RM We always liked jazz and in fact we had a group of...golly I can't think of it...Monarchs! There was a group of us called the Monarchs and at that time Pleasure Beach Ballroom was the best dance hall in the area. We promoted a couple of dances over there. We promoted one particular dance I remember we promoted. Over there was this band from New Haven that played just like the Count Basie Band and we hired them and that really was a great night over there at the Pleasure Beach Ballroom. We used to go over. Of course, then we had Savin Rock there at the time. No, not Savin Rock, Pleasure Beach, the amusement park was there at that time. And we used to go. Sometimes they used to have dances there on Sunday nights and they used to bring in a lot of the black orchestras sometime. And then also in Milford there was a place in Milford where they used to bring in black orchestras on Sunday night. And some of the best bands used to come up there. Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, Earl Hines, and so forth. All the best bands used to go through here. And then we used to go to New Haven a lot. We used to go to dances up in New Haven quite a bit. They used to have a couple of balls every year, the Elks and a couple of other organizations. They used to bring in great bands and we used to go up there quite a bit.

I Did you always read the newspaper? Were you an avid newspaper reader? Did you read it then when you were younger in high school?

RM Yes, as I say I sold newspapers so I always read the newspaper. I was always an avid reader, really when I was younger, I used to love books. Loved reading. I think that's something that stayed with me because if I see a book...I buy books that I don't even read, but I still buy them. But there was a time in my life when I would stay half the night reading a book, finishing it. I'd say, one more chapter, one more chapter. When I'd look up it would be three o'clock in the morning and my wife would be saying come to bed, come to bed. And it was three or four o'clock in the morning before I would finish.

I Did you participate in any after-school sports activities?

RM Not really. Just in the area. You know, we played football and baseball and things like that. But nothing organized, it was just amongst ourselves.

I Did you belong to any ethnic or any social organizations when you were younger?

RM I belonged to the Boy Scouts. We used to go to a Boy Scout troop at St. Mark's Church, which was at that time was on Wells Street in the north end of Bridgeport. And we belonged to Troop 38. And I stayed in there for a number of years. We used to go on camping trips and so forth.

I Why did you join? Did you hold any offices?

RM No I didn't hold any office, but I had friends of mine who were older than myself and they were in the scouts and so they got me interested in it.

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I What did you benefit from belonging to the Boy Scouts? What do you think you really got out of it?

RM Well, the Boy Scout troop made a great impression on me. I still remember those things I learned from the Boy Scout troop. I remember the oath. "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty for God and my country, to obey the Scout laws, and keep myself fit and strong, mentally awake and morally straight." But this is the one that really made a great impression on me that I always remember and I use it all my life. And that is... "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and above all, reverent."

I Did you attend church and where and what was the name of the church and who was the minister?

RM Well, I always went to Sunday school at Walter's Memorial AME Zion Church, but on occasion I would visit other churches because somebody in the neighborhood would take me. Sometimes I would go to St. Mark's and then during our teenage years we would go on Sunday nights to Messiah Baptist Church because that was right in the heart of downtown and during the forties, the thirties and forties, why, that was really like Broadway because everything was brightly lit. We had four theaters and we had hot-dog stands and it was really a bright light area there and a lot of girls would go there. That's where young girls and boys would go on Sunday nights. Not so much for the service, but for the social activities, to meet each other. And you enjoyed being down there where the bright lights were.

I When did you joined this church? What made you decide to finally join it?

RM Well, I was introduced to the church by my parents. It's like a family tradition and then I, by going to church and learning about what it taught and what it stood for, and believing in its principles and teachings, then I joined.

I Were you actively involved?

RM I used to, when I would go to Sunday school, yeah. At one time I was in the junior choir. I was a part of the junior usher board, and we always did a lot of things for entertainment. During that time is present plays of all kinds. And I was always one of those who had one of the longest parts in the play. I had a good memory and I could not back out because my parents would insist that I participate. So if somebody asked me they knew that I would have to take the part and I would try to do my best.

I What was your first full-time job? Describe exactly what you did and how you ended up getting the job, how did you obtain the job?

RM When I graduated from high school, the first job I had was with my grandmother. My grandmother was a great cook and she was the cook at a place in Weston, Connecticut, called Cobb's Mill Inn which is still in existence. I went out there to work with her as a waiter for a dollar a day plus tips. We stayed there for quite a while. There used to be a lot of actors and actresses would come there because they had a big barn where they rehearsed these plays and they also had areas where some of them stayed. So I would have to wait on these people and what was interesting, the lady who owned the place...I

was only supposed to serve, but when they got finished with lunch, she always had these beautiful flowers around there and she'd get me out there helping her work on these flower gardens every day. And then at suppertime she would be all tired out. She'd sit at the table and fall asleep, but I had to serve all these people. I'll never forget one time, these actors and actresses had been there for a whole week and they left me a tip. I think it was \$30. That was the most money I'd ever seen at one time. They left me this tip, \$30, and I just was so thrilled. I really don't know why. I don't know if it was because of transportation or why, my grandmother and I left that job. Then I think after that, I think I worked with Joe Alsop. His brother, well I was good friends with the whole family, especially his brother Jake, and I went with him, worked in painting with him. And then, we had to paint a factory. It was right across the street. It was the old Bridgeport Roller Mill, right across the street from St. Michael's Cemetery. And after I worked there for a while painting, they needed somebody to paint a sign up on the roof. So they asked me if I would do that. And I did that. Then they gave me a job inside. My father had worked there many years before and the foreman knew my father. And so they hired me in the shipping and guard. I was a combination shipper and guard. It depended on what shift I worked. I'd work from two to ten and from ten to six. And I worked there for a few years until things got slow. I had a job that nobody else really wanted to do. But then when things got slow, some of these other people started complaining about the fact that I was working and they were not and so they laid me off.

I Was there a union?

RM No, there wasn't a union. There was a lot of foreigners that worked there, a lot of Russians and Polish, cause it was a job that required a lot of physical strength and so a lot of these people worked there. Then I left there. I had a friend of mine who had gotten a job in a Bambi Bakery. And I went to work in a Bambi Bakery and I did just about every job they had to do in the bakery. I learned all the jobs. I used to put up the orders. I used to operate the ovens. I used to run the divider. I did every job in the bakery and the last job I did was go out and wrap the bread. Another fellow and I, we used to wrap the bread. We'd run the wrapping machine to wrap the bread. I used to take care of the proof box. That is, put the bread in when it rised up. And sometimes we would have problems, the bread would get too high and we would have trouble wrapping it. I stayed there I guess for about five or six years. I always had trouble getting my raise. I think I was probably the first black person to join the bakers' union which was not very strong. I always had to fight for my raise. This family that I told you about that my parents worked for, they built a bowling alley. The lawyer, one of them is John Keogh, the other's name was Habansky. He was, I think, a lawyer for the housing authority. That was his brother-in-law. They built this bowling alley up on Pequonnock Street. I think now it's a paint store. I was having trouble with my job in the bakery. They didn't want to pay me. As I said, I was doing...there was only one person that probably could do as many jobs as I was and that was the boss's son who grew up in the bakery. So I was trying to get the raise that I was supposed to get and he didn't want to give it to me. They offered me...knowing me, because I used to work sometimes part-time for them cleaning their office, they asked me to go to work for them in this bowling alley taking care of maintenance. It would be something like the assistant manager. And they offered me a

good deal and I left the bakery and I went to work at the bowling alley. I was in the bowling alley a couple of weeks and they sent one of the head bakers down to see me, trying to get me to go back. And I told him no, I wouldn't go back, I was satisfied. So he told me they had to hire two men to take my place. I recall one time later on many years later, after I left the bowling alley and I went to work in the Bridgeport Brass because the war effort was about. My father was working in the brass shop. He did not assist me in getting a job there. And I at first could not understand why, but after I became employed in the brass shop, I realized that my father knew that it was a dead-end and there was not an opportunity for advancement and he did not want me to go there. My father had been the organizer of the union, one of the organizers of the union in the Bridgeport Brass, which changed things considerably. At one time at the Bridgeport Brass if you were a black employee you worked only in the foundry. And if there was a layoff you went out into the street, no matter how much seniority you had. But through the efforts of the union and my father and those who made the sacrifice they got something called plant seniority. Now if you had enough seniority you could go into another department and take a job. And through this effort also, they started hiring blacks in other mills in other parts of the company.

I So what was your first job in the brass company?

RM My first job was as a crane operator. I worked as a crane operator and many different positions and then when they built the new tube mill, I went up there. The general foreman asked me to go up there. I went up there to work and I worked there for several jobs and I finally wound up in the shipping department. An interesting part of it was that I had established the procedure as far as shipping was concerned, and then after I had established the procedures for doing the shipping, they brought in another man, of course, who was white. I trained him and he became the foreman. So I stayed there for a number of years. Got along well. I used to have a lot of time...on all the jobs I had I had a lot of time. I used to read a lot of newspapers. I used to read the Bible. I used to do my Sunday school work. So I had a great deal of time on my hands, which sometimes made the foreman very jealous. But I knew my job, I did my job. I knew how to plan it and that's what they, they knew that, and so they had to go along with it. I remember one time I was doing something. We were having problems with some scrap that we had to ship out to the mills and so I would go into the office and I would use the adding machine and add up all the weights and put it on tape. But one day I'm in there using the machine and one of the foremen said to me, hey, this man wants a job in the office. And I said to him, why shouldn't I have a job in an office? I'm certainly qualified. And he never made that comment again.

I How were you treated by your bosses and your co-workers?

RM I got along well with my co-workers because every job that I went, wherever I was a crane operator for every, any situation, I did my best to help the men. They were all on bonus and I always did my best to help the men get the work as fast as they could, the best way they could, so they could make as much as they could. So I always got along well with my co-workers. I didn't get along with some of the foremen because they used to tell me I was the most independent so and so. Because I always knew what my rights were, I knew as far as the union rules were concerned. I knew what my rights were, what I could do and what they could do. And so they could not fool me or put anything over on me and they didn't like that.

I Tell me about vacation time. How much vacation time did you get from the beginning until when you left?

RM When I first started, I think it was after a year or two years, we got a week. When I left there I was getting five weeks.

I What about sick benefits? What kind of sick benefits did you get? Insurance or sick benefits or health insurance? What other benefits did you receive?

RM Well, we had insurance, we got sick benefits. I don't know, I think it was thirteen weeks of sick benefit.

I Tell me about your salary. Do you think you were adequately compensated for the job you did?

RM All during this time... I might add that when I graduated from high school I was a first honors student, and they used to tell me that based on my knowledge of bookkeeping and accounting that I could go out and get a job anywhere. But of course, there were no jobs for me. But I continued to do bookkeeping. My uncle had a business and my sister was married to a singer and musician, Al Hibler, and I used to take care of his business, did all his taxes and so forth and I did a lot of small business people. I did work for a photographer. So I always continued to do bookkeeping and accounting and income tax work, all through the years, after I got out of high school. And then, what was interesting...I always wanted to get a job in accounting. What happened, as my family kept getting larger, I had five children, as my family got larger, my obligations became...I could not afford to go somewhere and start at a lower wage because I had a family with growing children to support. But then in 1969, I got a great surprise, a welcome surprise. I was working three to eleven and my wife was working part time and there were no more children at home. One of the men from the office came to me and offered me a job in the accounting department, in the cost department. They told me that they had checked my records and saw my qualifications and they offered me this job and I went there and interviewed with a man whose name was George Nash. He was the plant comptroller. After the interview he wanted me for the job and my bosses didn't want to let me go because they wanted to keep me where I was, but after I think about a month they kept after them. I left here and I started work in the cost department in 1969. I was the accountant for the sheet metal. My job classification was cost and budget accounting. For me, this was a dream come true. Something I never believed would happen. So now

I'm working nine to five. My wife is getting off at four o'clock. She would wait for me. I would pick her up and we were really living the life because most of my working life had been all kind of hours. I've had every kind of hours you can think of. When I worked in the bakery I worked twelve or fourteen hours a day and I worked every Sunday at that time. I only had Saturdays off. When I worked in the brass shop I worked three to eleven, eleven to seven. Only for a short time I worked seven to three. So this was really for me a dream come true. It was a dream come true. And I enjoyed it. I'm competing with men who are much younger than I am, who are white, supposedly better educated than I was, but I had experience which they could not match. Interestingly enough, the man who hired me was born the same year that I was, January 2. I was one year older than he was and I had two controllers that I worked for and each one was younger than the other one. So I was always probably the oldest person. Well, there was an old man who worked in the office with me who was an old-timer. He and I got along well because he could talk about the old Bridgeport baseball and so forth and he could talk to the young fellows because they didn't know about this, you know. So we had a great relationship. I got along well with the people. I got involved with the Junior Achievement program, I think about the second year I was there. The plant manager stopped me in the lunch line one day and he mentioned Junior Achievement to me and I said I'll think about it. The next thing I knew I got a letter to come to the meeting. So I said, well, I'll go find out what it's about and so I did. It sounded interesting to me. The brass shop was one of the oldest members of the Junior Achievement program and they had not been very successful with the people who had been operating it. So I got involved and I talked to people who had been in it. One fellow who was a metallurgist, Charlie Petrovich, he and I became dear friends and he helped me a great deal and others helped me a lot and I would say that I stayed in Junior Achievement for some seven years. The reason why I stayed so long was because the plant supported me 150%. I mean all the people, from the hourly employees right up to the president of the company. They supported me in everything I wanted to do. Then of course, when I first got involved in it was mostly all white children, teenagers. Then it started to become more integrated and I realized that this was something that a black child needed, the opportunity to learn about business, about stocks, about how a corporation works, and so forth. So that's why I stayed in it. In fact, I felt when I retired that I would probably go around to high schools, and try to solicit kids and try to get them interested. But the program changed completely. They were moving to the suburbs. And I recall, when I first got into Junior Achievement, we met at what was the old library on the corner of State and Fairfield Avenue. Then they moved to Central High School. They were going north now and the reason for that was they claimed was they got a different grade of people, youth. Then they left there after a couple of years because that was too much like school for the kids and you moved all the way to the Trumbull line, to a church up there. Right up to the Trumbull line. And that's where they moved. And in succeeding years I'd read about these kids and they were always the kids from Trumbull, Monroe. One of the things about these programs is they're competitive, for the supervisors and for the companies. It's very competitive. And they're concerned about their record and they want to do it the easiest way possible. I know in the companies that I had, sometimes if I got a kid that was very smart, they would try sometimes to entice the kid away from me. But one of the things I will say is that kids

have come into my company, wanted to be in my company. I've had kids where I had their sisters, and then their brother would come in and a sister would come in, and the whole family would come in to my company. I used to talk to their parents and they would tell me how great it was, the things that their daughters and children were being taught. One thing I learned about...I worked in a Sunday school in the 60's. I also was superintendent of Sunday school. I always had a great relationship with young people. One of the things I learned about in dealing with these teenagers, these teenagers in my church and dealing with these white teenagers in Junior Achievement, there wasn't any difference. They all respond to love. And I had a great relationship with these girls. I've written resumes for them. I've written job recommendations for some of them. Interestingly enough, I went to the doctor. I went to the cardiologist about two months ago and the assistant in there, she came to me. I told her my name. She said, you used to be my JA advisor. I couldn't believe it.

I Isn't it something.

RM That's right this lady said you use to be my JA advisor.

I The Brass company. How large was the company? About how many people worked there?

RM Well, the brass shop at one time had three or four thousand people at one time, maybe more than that.

I What was the racial mix?

RM Well, it's hard to say. In later years they had a lot of black employees.

I When you started it was...

RM When I started it was all in the foundry. That was Department 322. That was the foundry. That's where they were. The foundry was the heart of the industry. Whenever you saw things slow down in the foundry, you knew things were going to slow down elsewhere. That's where things began, that's where things end. When things started up there, you knew it was going to pick up elsewhere. What happened, eventually it became the best paid area in the company, the foundry, through their activity in the union. At one time there were only blacks in there. Now when some of the white fellows found out how much money you can make there, they started taking jobs in the foundry. Some of those that did not mind working, were interested in a good income, they got jobs in the foundry.

I How long did you work for the Brass company in total years?

RM I worked for the Brass company about 39 years.

I Were there ever any strikes or lock-outs while you were there?

RM Oh, yeah, we had strikes.

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I Tell me about some of the strikes, some of the big ones, and what prompted the strike and how did it end?

RM Well, the strikes were always mostly about wages. They never went out for too long. A week or two at the most, I think. They usually settled.

I Did you experience any discrimination, racial discrimination or harassment on the job?

RM Well, I don't know whether...I think probably the foremen in the tube mill, that's where I worked before I went into the office, I would say they were prejudiced because they would try to treat the black employees differently, you know? And what they resented was independence. Some of them wanted you to be more subversive, submissive, and if you weren't that, they didn't like it. I know instances where one time when I was supposed to...they called me to work on a Saturday and we had agreed in the union that if you got a call you did not have to go in and they did not charge it to you because we had a schedule for working overtime and you followed the roster. You take turns working overtime. This particular Saturday that I didn't go in, I called up and told them I couldn't go in, I really couldn't come in. I was doing something at home. Interestingly, I was working on a room in my attic. When I went to work that Monday, he had told all the guys, all the other employees, that he was going to charge me with this time and that I was going to be sorry, and so forth and so forth. So when I went in Monday I saw that I had been charged with the eight hours. I pointed out to him that he was wrong. I got the steward and I showed him that he was wrong and that he would have to remove that and leave my name on the list to work the next time there was an opening to work. And he had to do that. Of course he resented that, but he had to it.

I How active were you in the union? Did you hold an office in the union?

RM I really wasn't active in the union. When I went to the office I was active in a lot of areas. One of the proudest things my father had was he was a member of the Quarter Century Club. I mentioned to Charlie Petrovich who became my dear friend. He was a metallurgist. I was nominated to become a part of the board of governors for the Quarter Century Club. And then we had a meeting and Charlie Petrovich said I would be proud to run for president with Ralph McAden as my vice president. So I became vice president and it was an automatic progression. If once you were vice president you automatically became president the following year. So in 1973 I became the first black president of the Bridgeport Brass Quarter Century Club. Which was very proud for me because I knew my father was looking down. I knew so many employees that I knew that had worked there and they were presently working there. They were so proud of it. Then what happened after that, a buddy of mine, Al Zera, was chairman of the nominating committee and he and I became great friends. And from that point on he and I worked together and we changed the whole set-up. Previously, all the officers had been salary employees. There's a man who worked in the sheet mill office and he used to work with me, he used to bring me my daily reports. He was a real gentleman, Joe Lenkowski. He begged me, he said, I'd like to be president, I'd like to be president. I said, well, I don't know. He said, well I know you could do if you wanted to do it. If you would do it, you could do it. So then I talked to Al and I found out that they had never had an hourly employee as president of the Bridgeport Brass Quarter Century Club. So we get together and we

nominated Joe and Joe became vice president and then he became president. I used to bump into Joe and his wife and she would say to me (he and I had a picture taken together, him coming in and me going out) and she used to tell me, she says, I look at your picture everyday, it's on the wall in my bedroom.

I Isn't that great!

RM Then what we did after that, we put the first woman in and then after that I felt, well, it's time to get another black employee. So I went to the mill. We got a man in the mill, Neil Jones. He was a roll operator. He was a deacon in Messiah Baptist Church. And so we put him in. Since I got involved in the Quarter Century Club, the man in charge, Kenny Bowden, used to always confer with me about what to do, what was going on and so forth, when he was sending out. So Neil Jones became the vice president and now he retired that year. So now he called me up in the office and he said, what am I going to do? He says he can't be president if he's going to retire. I said, why not? You have his number, you have his address, you just call him and let him know he'll be here for any meeting that you have. So now he became the first person who retired and was president of the Quarter Century Club. Neil used to thank me every time he saw me.

I Tell me about when you first started at the brass company, what changes did you see from when you started and when you left? What kind of changes as far as jobs, women coming in, roles changing?

RM Well, I'll tell you, when I went into the office, we always had the impression that Bridgeport Brass was a progressive organization. But the men in that office I saw who started there as mailboys, started in the mailroom, went to college and worked their way up. The first minority person hired in the mailroom was hired the year after I was there. Oh, another thing I might point out to you that I think is very important.... During the war years they had a system where you had to hire so many minorities if you had government contracts. When I went into the office there were half a dozen black women working there. Now, the way the system worked, if you hired a black woman you got two points. You got one point for her being a minority and one point for her being a woman. Now, if you hired a black man you only got one point, so you can see why they had a half a dozen black women working there and no black men. Oh, gee, there are so many stories I could tell you about, I don't know which one you want.

I This is what we're interested in. This is oral history about labor.

RM Our company closed down every July, two weeks in July for vacation and plant work, whatever they had to do, inventory and so forth. And Herbert Steinkraus who was president of Bridgeport Brass before it became part of National Distillers, and then he was one of the organizers and founders of the Barnum Festival. We had in our company a men's club and they always had a float. And on this float they would have the sun goddess from Florida and her court would be different secretaries from the office. This particular year when we come back, this was about my second year there, we come back and some of the black secretaries called me and they wanted to protest because there wasn't any black on the float and they wanted to do all kinds of drastic things which I didn't think was wise. So I told them, listen, don't you do anything, let me see what I can

find out about it. So I went down. I knew the young man in the mailroom was one of those. And I went down to see him and he said, oh, no it's not me, he says. You got to go see Kenny Bowden. Now Kenny Bowden was one of the most powerful men in the Bridgeport Brass shop. He was in charge of public relations, and he was in charge of the Quarter Century Club, and he was in charge of so many different things. So I went up to speak to him and I asked him about, you know, told him that we would like to participate. He became very angry. Told me, you're not going to tell us what to do, we'll do it the way we want to do it. We won't have a float if that's the way... and so forth and so on. So I told him, I said, Kenny, we don't want you to stop it, all we want to do is be a part of it. And I left. A couple of days later I went back up there to speak him. His whole attitude had changed completely. He didn't make me any promises, but he started going for things for the United Way. He started taking a couple of the black girls with him for United Way. The following year there was a black girl in our office. She was a phone operator and she was really a clothes horse. Had a nice figure. Black girl. The following year, she was on the float. Eula Williams was on the float. Kenny Bowden and I, he became one of my best friends. I could get anything he had, I could get. And he had all kinds of things. He had access to all kinds of things. When I was involved in Junior Achievement, some of the guys lived out of town who worked with me. I had a committee of about four or five people. I would be able to get a voucher and buy my people who worked with me dinner. I'd get a dinner voucher every week. We used to meet on Tuesday nights. I'd get a dinner voucher every week. If I wanted to bring my kids over to have a meeting with me, I could take them through the cafeteria and I'd charge it to him. Sometimes I would need to get some kind of a gift for somebody, he would buy it for me.

I Do you have any idea what changed his mind, how he changed from his initial attitude?

RM I really don't know. I don't know. I don't know if he talked to the plant manager, he talked to the president. I imagine he talked to somebody. I imagine he talked with somebody. I'm sure he did.

I Now throughout the years, did any minorities rise in rank in the brass company to have positions that they never had before?

RM Well, they had some black foremen. They had black foremen in the casting shop. We had a black foreman in the tube mill, a black fellow who became... Well in fact the fellow who became...((Tape is turned over.)) ...mathematics than any of the foremen who worked there. But he had a degree in civil engineering from Bridgeport Engineering Institute, but he couldn't get a job in engineering at the Bridgeport Brass Company.

I He was a minority?

RM He was a minority. He was a Portuguese fellow, a black fellow. One of the things that I used to be proud of, though, is...see, we used to have to help the payroll out once in a while. See, we'd have a double payroll sometimes, a salary payroll and a regular payroll. And so the fellow in charge of the payroll for salary people, for hourly people, he would need some help. So once in a while they asked people from our department to fill in. So I'd be going through the mill with this payroll. We never had that happen before. One thing that made me good is, one thing I'm proud of, when I worked as an hourly employee I had many friends and when I became a salary employee I had new friends, but I still had my same old friends. I would go through the mill and I'd wave at the fellows and they'd wave at me and I could just see the pride on their faces when they see me going through there with this payroll. A lot of white fellows that I used to work with, they used to say to me when I come through with the payroll, how they treating you up there? If they're not treating you well, come on, come back with us.

I So it was not really a bad place to work?

RM As far as personal relationships, for me personally, no, I had a lot great relationships...when I was in shipping I made a lot of friends with the truck drivers. I used to get presents from the truck drivers at Christmas time. I used to smoke a pipe and cigars and I'd get all those kind of things, and liquor.

I Did they have a credit union?

RM Yes, they had a credit union, and in fact, one of the things that I got involved in...our credit union. What happened was that once I became a salary employee and we had our annual meeting, we were allowed an hour off. All the salary employees would go down to the cafeteria and we'd have that hour off and they used to give door prizes. So this particular year one of the men in our office was in charge. The door prize was going to be a trip to Puerto Rico. This would mean that none of the hourly employees would be able to be at this meeting. And so the guys on the union... in fact they were constantly in the union meetings raving about the credit union. A lot of people, because there were mostly salary people involved, they placed the credit union as part of the company. And so what happened was, they were going to have a walk-out and the plant manager came into our office and said, you can't have that, you can't have that meeting here, no more meetings here. So what they had to do was, they had to have the meeting on a Sunday and we went to Notre Dame High School. That was the last meeting we had at the plant. We went to Notre Dame High School on a Sunday afternoon and that's where we had our meetings. The man who was the general foreman in the sheet metal, the mill for which I was the accountant, was president of the credit union and he appointed me, in order to try to resolve the differences between the union and management, he appointed me personnel director of the credit union. What I was trying to do, was what did was, when we got an opening I grabbed the man who was making the most noise and appointed him to that position. Then he appointed me chairman of the nominating committee. Now previously what they would do, they would put in the names at the nominations. It was just cut and dry. I had two hourly employees working with me. What I did, I had every one of these

people who wanted us to support them, I found an empty office. We set up an appointment. We brought these people down and had them explain what their duties were and why we should support them. There's no question they did a good job and the two hourly employees that were with me were very impressed with them. This is something I'm sure had never been done before. And I did that with each one of the candidates. We met and we talked it over and we let them explain to these men on the nominating committee what their responsibilities and duties were. After some time, I think a couple of years later, they were talking about the plant shutting down, and we had no black officers in the credit union. We had an opening on the credit committee and the plant was getting ready to close down. So I told the other two men on the committee, I said, I'm going to nominate myself for member of the credit committee and they thought it was a great idea. The woman who was manager and treasurer said, oh no, you can't do that, it's not right, you can't do it. You're going to have to have a ruling. So she went to the president. And the president said it's OK. Sure, he can nominate himself if they want to nominate him, it's OK. And there was no question once I was nominated that I would be elected. So I became a member of the credit committee. After some time on the credit committee, we had a plant in Norwalk and I could always tell when we had our meetings the manager, the treasurer, would read off the credit applications. She always made these remarks. I could always tell it was a black employee that was making the application. She always made different remarks that didn't relate exactly to the application. So I began asking her questions. And the more questions I asked her, the more nervous she became. Finally I asked her a question and she blurted out, oh, I'm not being prejudiced. And I had her right where I wanted her. I said, you used the word, I didn't. I said from now on in this committee, this is the way it's going to be. If you read the guidelines for an application, you get the loan. If you don't, you don't. That's the way it will be. And I turned to the other members on the committee and they said yes, that's the way it is. Once in a while she would slip, but we never had a problem with her from that point on.

I Was there a lot of dissension between the salary and the hourly employees?

RM You see, what we had when the company started talking about closing down...I guess it was about six years before they closed, they started talking....they had a wage freeze, an hourly and salary. So this was one of the big problems because they had the wage freeze and so some of the hourly were suspecting that the salary people were not observing that. One time we did have in the salary, instead of getting paid overtime, you got time off. I went there in '79...'69...and we had that merit review and I would tell them. I felt as though these people had been in there and had an opportunity, and this was new for me. I tell them, I had to have a raise. I gotta have it. I would tell the plant manager, I mean the comptroller I said if you don't want to talk to them I would talk to them myself. So every year I got a raise. And I had some dear friends in my office that would tell me the different people who were getting a raise. One other thing, well the plant manager and I, Paul Bellgo, became very good friends because he was a member...he was also a member of the board of directors for the Junior Achievement program and he was always the captain for the fundraisers. And anything he got involved in, I had to be on it. So I was always on his team. Anything that came up, any changes came up, whatever it was, he always put me on it. So I use to have to go around to different companies trying to sell them on the idea of creating a Junior Achievement company from their company or

supplying us with some funds to support the companies that were in existence. Then they were building a center down in the south end on the corner from our church, on the corner of Lafayette and Myrtle Avenue and Sheehan Center was one of the sponsoring agencies. The executive vice president of Warnaco was the president of Sheehan Center board of directors. So we had a meeting at our church just to give some input on what was going on. I expressed myself. A couple of weeks later I got a call to come down to the plant manager's office and I couldn't imagine what it was. When I got down there he told me that they wanted me to become a member of the board of directors of the Sheehan Center. So I became a member and when I got there the plant manager was the secretary. So he and I used to go to the meetings together. I remained on that board for some five years. I got involved with their boy and girl of the year program, their summer program, their fundraising programs. We sponsored a Duke Ellington sacred concert at the theater in Stratford, the Shakespear Theater in Stratford. The day that they dedicated that building, one of the top executives in town picked the plant manager and I up at the office, we went to the ground breaking, and then he took us to lunch at the Algonquin Club.

I Okay! Were you ever in the armed services?

RM No, I always got...I was working. I was a steady, reliable worker, I would work overtime, and so they kept giving me deferments. And then I got to the point where I was I think I was 27 and had children and they were no longer taking them.

I What impact did the war have on your family in terms of work, housing? Did your family suffer any during the war?

RM I remember we tried to get an electric clock. And I remember a man had a store on Stratford Avenue and he had one clock in the window. And I went in there to buy the clock and he said to me, what nationality are you? I said I'm Scotch, and he sold me the clock. Then I remember we needed a refrigerator and you couldn't get a refrigerator. The gas company had refrigerators, so I bought a gas refrigerator. And we kept that for a long time.

I Do you remember anything about the Great Depression?

RM 1930-31? I remember that very well.

I Tell me what kind of impact it had on your family and Bridgeport.

RM I remember, I remember... well when I moved from the north end I had a lot of dear friends. I told you about this gang we used to go around with. They were my buddies. I used to be in their house all the time. There was a Russian fellow lived on the second floor. His family owned the house. He had two sisters. He was my age and his two sisters were my sisters' age. A fellow on the first floor was an only child. His father had fought for Germany in World War I. His parents used to work. I would be with them constantly. What was interesting about this...I don't know, we're jumping around a little bit...but Nick, his name was Nick Bikowsky, he had two sisters. Nellie worked in the Bridgeport Brass. She worked in the sales department and when I went to work in the Bridgeport Brass office, she found out who I was. It was me and she remembered me. She came into the office and she told everybody how we were like sister and brother, how we grew up

together. And it kind of eased things for me. Oh, she and I, we were great friends, And Nellie was a very sensitive person, so the guys used to tease her about me and our friendship. They used to like to tease her. But Nellie really helped me as far as breaking the way for me. But I made a lot of dear friends and I worked with a lot of good people.

I Tell me something about the Great Depression. What do you remember about it?

RM Well, I remember my father got laid off from Bridgeport Brass and he had to drive a coal...he was driving a horse and buggy delivering coal. He was selling it by the bag. That's how tough...people couldn't buy more than one bag of coal. I can remember how kids used to go down to where the cars would unload, where the bottom of car with the coal, roaming around and picking it up. When we first moved to Central Avenue in my sophomore year in high school, U.I. used to dump coke in the back there, piles of it, as high as you could see. Kids used to go out there. This was the coal they burned which would turn to coke. So we used to go out there and pick bags of coke. You'd see mounds of people out there, picking the bags of coke and burning it in your furnace. I picked many of them. My last two years in high school, I was kind of alone because as I said there were only five blacks in my class and I was kind of lonely because I didn't know any of the people. These other kids I had gone through from kindergarten right through, now I knew nobody. A lot of these people were from Trumbull and so forth. I really didn't know anybody and maybe that's why I spent more time...I did better in my junior and senior years than I did in any other years. In my junior and senior years I did very well scholastically.

I Now we're going to go back to when you were a young adult, before you got married. We want to know a little bit about your personal life. Some of your dating experiences. Did you date a lot? Where did you go? What activities were open for you when you started dating?

RM What happened to me was that when I got out of high school, I started working. And the work that I did, it didn't give me too much time for a social life, it didn't give me too much time for socializing. I didn't have too much time for socializing. When I went to work in Weston, I worked every day. I think I might have had one day a week off and sometimes I didn't get any days off so I worked there continuously. Then I used to work part time. When I was painting I worked part time at...oh, what's the name of that place? I can't think of it. It'll come to me. I used to do work waiting tables. I used to work waiting tables for banquets sometimes with my uncle. The hours that I worked didn't give me a lot of time for social activity, It was kind of limited. Mostly on weekends.

I So tell me about your marriage. Who did you marry, when, any children, any grandchildren? How did you meet her?

RM Well, I use to work, what happened was...Well, what happened was, three friends of mine were going...my father had a car, in essence and I had just gotten my license. We were going to Joe Louis' training camp to see him train in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey. There was no turnpike. It was the Post Road and we were in Rye, New York, I think it was, or Portchester. It was a rainy day. The brakes locked and I went across the road, smashed the car. So we never made it to the camp. We went to New York to the Apollo Theater,

came home on the train. And I had to tell my father about the car. But one thing about my father...one thing my father always said to me, son, be a man, and he always showed me that he was a man. It didn't bother him that much. We went and got the car the next day. Then I bought a Ford convertible. My first car. My father didn't have a car. I bought this when I was working at the bakery. And so I used to let my father take the car and I waited up many Sunday nights. I'd have a date and he'd go to church with the car. He'd drop me off at work and then they would go riding in the afternoon. I never knew what time I was going to get finished so sometimes I'd get finished before he would pick me up. And now I'm rushing to go to New Haven for a date or... Saturday nights we used to go to New Haven, my buddy and I, Louie Monna, we used to go to New Haven to dances to a couple of clubs they had up there. That's where we met the different girls. I think I probably met her at one of these dances.

I And where did you meet your wife?

RM I think I probably met her at one of these dances.

I And when did you decide to get married, I want to know about your children and your grandchildren.?

RM Oh, I don't know, a lot of things happened. I think it was 1940, 1941, 1940 I guess. We decided we couldn't live without each other, I guess. So we got married.

I And you have children?

RM We had a daughter first, Judith. Then we had another daughter, Jean. Then we had our first son, Ralph, Jr. Then we had another daughter, Joy, Joycelynn. And then we had our young son, William.

I And do you have any grandchildren?

RM We have several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I Could you tell me about the changes that took place in Bridgeport on the whole, the Bridgeport you grew up in and the Bridgeport you see now? How did that evolve as you were growing up? What did you see, good things that are happening and what are some of the bad things that you think were not good for Bridgeport?

RM When I was growing up, when I was a teenager, when I was young we almost knew just about every black person in town. You know, there weren't that many and you knew just about all of them. And then it got to the point as more of the influx came in, especially through the war years, that you just knew the ones that were almost in your immediate group. You didn't know everybody like you once did. There were a lot of changes and, I don't know, especially in the east end where we live right now. There used to be two theaters on Stratford Avenue, there were three hardware stores, and it was a busy area. You could get anything you wanted, right on Stratford Avenue. There was a department store.

I When did you notice the change and how did you notice? What did you see happening?

RM Well, let's see. The changes started, I think...it's hard to describe what causes the change or what made these changes started I think. Oh, let's see, it's hard to describe what causes a change, what these changes come about. It seemed like it was a gradual change. Different people were moving out of the area and different people were coming in and the drug stores closed down. At one time on Stratford Avenue I think there was about four drugstores on Stratford Avenue. And I think one of the things that happened was that businesses became larger and the small businesses became smaller or else they had to close down. That's one of the big things that happened. They got swallowed up. There used to be a Logan, the A&P Logan Brothers Store. They closed that down and opened up a big one somewhere. And another thing that changed things a great deal, I think, is that more people had cars. We became more mobile. At one time you were just about confined to your neighborhood because you depended on buses for transportation, or you had to walk to where you went. And now as more people became mobile and had automobiles you were no longer confined to your neighborhood. You could go out of your neighborhood to seek where there was lower prices or better deals or whatever. So that kind of hurt the local stores, I think, a great deal. They started building larger theaters downtown. I think the first big one downtown was the Warner Theater. Of course, they had the theaters downtown always. But the neighborhood theaters lost out.

I When did you notice jobs leaving Bridgeport?

RM The jobs started leaving, I think, right after the war. After 1945, after the war ended, I think factories started closing down, different ones. There were so many based upon the war and a lot of them did not convert to civilian production of any kind. So a lot of them closed. Or what had happened to a lot of the companies, just the same as happened to Bridgeport Brass, a lot of them had opened smaller companies in other areas of the country, probably in the south or Midwest somewhere where the labor market was cheaper. So when they decided to close, they closed down the factories that were in the Bridgeport area where the labor was higher, the costs were higher, and transferred their production to other places where their costs were lower. I know Bridgeport Brass did the same thing. They opened up plants in Georgia, and so forth, where the wages were lower.

I What are some of the positive things that you've seen happen where Bridgeport is now and what are some of the negative things that you've seen because of the factories disappearing, and the people moving out to the suburbs, and the crime and the drugs? What do you think brought that about? I know there has to be something positive.

RM I think there's no question that members of the black race haven't been able to get more of them to go to college and get educations and get professional jobs, particularly in education. If more of them had done that... I think that was a big change from the war. I think the war years made it possible for a lot of people to get better educations so naturally they could get better jobs. I think you see a lot of that. And I think they got involved in politics which is a big change. I remember my father...McLevy, Mayor McLevy, was a good friend of my father's. In fact, he was a neighbor of ours.

He lived only a couple of blocks from us. When my father passed he was one of the first persons that come and visit us. When I was in the fourth grade, his niece used to live with him, and she was my school teacher.

I What difference do you see in politics then and politics now, or do you see them really basically as the same politics?

RM A lot of people who cater to blacks as far as politics were concerned we usually call communists. A lot of them were accused of being communists if they offered blacks opportunities. And perhaps some of them were. The union that my father belonged to, that they started, Mine, Millers, Smelters Workers Union was accused of being communist. Some of them probably may have been, but they were the ones who as far as jobs and so forth was concerned, they were the most liberal and believed in equality. You can hardly blame somebody for joining something that's going to give you a better opportunity to earn a living and provide for your family. My father actually joined the Socialist Party. In fact, I at one time was a member of the Socialist Party because one of the men who worked in our company was going to run for mayor. And he came around and asked different ones, and I just signed to help him because he was a decent guy. And then of course after he didn't run I changed my registration.

I Do you think politics as usual, like from a long time ago to now, do you see the same mindset, I guess is the word I'm looking for, in politics?

RM I can remember when I was going to Shelton High School, Buckingham was the mayor of the Mayor of Bridgeport. He lived in a big house on the corner of Wheeler Avenue and Main Street. And we used to see him every morning and a big chauffeured policeman would come and pick him up and he was a real sharp dresser with a straw and so forth. And then of course, another thing too in those days where things have changed, first we had trolley cars and you wouldn't see any black conductors, they were mostly only Irish, were the conductors. And then I remember a buddy of mine, his father was a trolley conductor. And then when the buses came in him his father had a tough time. He had a lot of accidents driving. I guess they had black bus drivers, maybe ten years, maybe fifteen years before, they had black bus drivers in the city of Bridgeport. I don't know if they ever had a black trolley car operator who was black.

I Were there more black businesses then than there are now?

RM No, I don't think so. I think we have more black businesses now. There are more opportunities now and blacks are better able to get the capital they need in order to operate a business, where at one time they probably would have had a very difficult time doing so.

I Has the black church always been an influential power in the community?

RM The black church has been the **main** power in the community. The black church has been, not only for spiritual guidance, but for social activities. All the social activities were built around the church and came from the church, all your social activities. You know, I might mention something to you, a couple of things to you. I should mention about my relationship in the brass shop because I had some...I made some very dear friends, whose

friendship I value. We had a lady who was the office secretary. Her name was Gladys Espanski. I hope I get Gladys' name right. And Gladys was a beautiful person to work with. Whenever her name came up I always said, one of the world's beautiful people. I remember, I think it was about the second or third year I was there, Gladys and three or four of the other women were standing around all dressed up. It was Christmas week. And so I says to her, Gladys, where are you gals going all dressed up? And she says we're going to have a...we always go out at Christmastime to celebrate. We go out to lunch together. So I took out a bill out of my pocket and I said, here, have a drink on me. And I never thought about it. We went to lunch at twenty minutes to twelve. That was our lunch. We had a staggered lunch period. And so I went down and I come back and about a couple of hours later...my desk sat in the corner near a window. It was an old building. It was all windows on one side and the inner offices, they didn't have any windows. So someone used to come over to look out windows to see if it was raining or sun shining or what. So after a couple of hours there were about ten or eleven women who came around my desk and started singing me Christmas carols. One of the old guys from the office, he kept shaking his head. He said, nobody in this office ever done anything like that before. He just couldn't get over it. Well, from that point on I had it made with the women in that office, believe me. They used to say I was the only man in the office. And anytime they wanted something they would come to me and not only that, but all over that whole building. I don't know how things spread and how they grow, but I know that a lot of times things get exaggerated. But as far as the women were concerned, I was the "A" one gentleman. I used to get invited to showers, office parties. I don't think there was anything happening around there socially that I didn't become a part of. And many times I'd be the only man there. You know, somebody would say, so and so is getting married, we're going to have coffee so come on up. So I would go up.

I Do you think that's because of the way you were raised and you just carried that into your life and your work?

RM I think I treated these women with respect and they understood that. When I used to bring...you see, every year when I was in JA here's what we would do. Every year, on Armistice Day I would bring our company over to the plant. We'd have a plant tour. Now I would get together with the plant manager's secretary. She would be my secretary for this week. She would write letters to all the executives of the company, inviting them to come. I never forget the first time...I enjoyed making friends and I was good friends with the lady in charge of the cafeteria. And I told her that I was going to bring the kids over. She said, you should go to the executive dining room in the back. She said, I'll fix the luncheon. You know, do it at the right time and I'll fix the luncheon and I'll serve them there. A lot of people didn't even know they had an executive dining room. It was kind of in the back, like an alley in the back. So I went to talk to the plant manager and I told him I'm bringing the kids over and we're going to have lunch. And he says to me, well, they can go through the cafeteria and I says no, we'll have lunch in the executive dining room. He looked at me and he was shocked. But that's where we ate from then on and we would invite...we'd have the president would be there, all the officers would be there and I would relate their...we would send the kids up french fries, hamburgers, milk, and stuff like that. You know that's what we would have and they'd all come. They all

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enjoyed being a part of it and I would have the president of our company sit next to the president of Bridgeport Brass, and so forth. We sold stock...Kenny Bowden would bring a photographer in from the Bridgeport Post and we'd take pictures of the president of our JA company selling stock to the president of Bridgeport Brass and so forth, right along the line. And then we'd go around and sell stock to different ones. Everybody would want stock, but we only had a certain, you were limited only to a hundred dollars worth of stock you could sell. Then I would bring the kids to our office. I'd introduce them to the people in our office and I'd take them around. We'd make a plant tour, you know.

I That appears to have been a very, very important part of your life.

RM It was a very important part because I was able to do a lot of things. Going into that office gave me a lot of opportunities to do a lot of things. Before my main opportunities for expressing whatever talent I had was through the church. Now I've got another opportunity and as I said I got involved with the credit union. I got involved in Junior Achievement. I was a part of the Sheehan Center. You know an interesting thing (chuckle), in the office next door to me where Nellie worked, they always had birthday parties with cake or something, you know. If I didn't happen to go in there, because my work related directly to them every day, if I didn't happen to go in there they would set up a plate and bring it to me. So one day one of the young girls in the office she had a plate of cake and cookies and everything on it. And the other guys were in the office and I was kind of embarrassed. So I said to her, aren't you going to give them any? And she said, no, they're too cheap! So that's what happened. That's the way it was.

I Let's talk about your going to the office. What do you think happened that they decided to put you into the office?

RM Well, I'll tell you what happened. Every year we'd have a banquet for Junior Achievement. That was our awards banquet because we're competitive. And we used to have it at Frederick's, it's a big place. And before we would go there Kenny Bowden would take some executive that were going and we would stop at this tavern. I can't think of it...it's a big, well-known place...and we'd have a drink, cocktails, before we'd go. So I'm talking to the man who's the division salary employee in charge of personnel director for the division. So we got to talking, you know. So I told him, I said, if it hadn't been for this affirmative action I probably would have never had a job in this office. He said, oh no. Oh no, no, no. We looked up your record. I said, well, listen that's the record I had for the thirty years that I was in the brass shop. But I didn't argue with him. I just let him know that I knew that...because if I had gone there, so many of them I know had gone there and went to school...and if I had gotten there early I would have gone to school at nights just like they did. There's no telling how far I would have advanced.

I Did you have anyone working under you or were you just in charge...?

RM I was in charge....my big thing was that I was in charge of the physical inventory. I was in charge of the physical inventory. Every, one year we'd have internal auditors come down out of the New York office. The next year we'd have the Price Waterhouse auditors working with us. I would sit down with...the plant controller and I would sit down with the superintendent of the mill and his assistant. We'd go over the procedures, what they would do. Weighing up all the material and so forth, what we would go by. We give

tickets to be used and so forth. They have to sign for all this. Unless everything is weighed up, I'm in complete charge. Nobody could do anything without my OK. So it came to writing up tickets. One year an interesting thing happened. We didn't have any women working. The plant manager, of course, was involved, as I said, with Sheehan Center, and he had one of the college girls working at our scale house. And so because the trucks were shipped down she had no work, so he assigned her...he could have assigned her to any of the mills, but he assigned her to work with me, as a clerk. So she worked with me and then after about three days, I went in that morning. So I said to her, Kathy, I said, we're going to finish up today, I don't think I'm going to need you. I thought she was going to bust out crying. She said, I've got to work. She said, you can help me, I'm sure you can if you want to, you could do something for me. I'd appreciate it. I need a job. I've got to work. And anytime a kid seeks employment, they always appealed to me to my better nature and so I said, I'll see what I can do. Shortly after that the plant manager came through and I grabbed him and I told him, I won't need Kathy anymore. What can we do for her to give her something to do so that she can continue working? So he said, well, I'll see what I can do. Here's what they did. He went and told my boss who was the plant controller and they assigned her to me to work with me to do whatever I wanted her to do. We had a lot of extra desks. Once you do the inventory, we have to compile an inventory book. Everything has to be cost and that's where all the work is. Everything has to be separated. You have all these tickets that have to be separated and so forth. And so I had her work to me for the whole week and that was great. She was my assistant. One morning she came in late and she was all apologetic. It seems that she had gone to help some girl who had got involved smoking marijuana and she was trying to help the girl and her mother out. Well Kathy left. She graduated from school and they brought her back. They gave her a job in the sales office. That just was not for Kathy. It shows you how things can change. All these people who were my friends in the office, they were all complaining to me. They said your friend doesn't want to work. She can't do this, she's lazy and all. I took a lot of flak because of Kathy not being able to...so Kathy only lasted a couple of months. I think about a year and a half later I bumped into Kathy downtown. She told me that she was now a probation officer and she had been selected as probation officer of the year, the youngest person ever to receive that award. Which goes back to what she was doing with this girl, trying to help her out. So that was the work she was really cut out for.

I It amazed me. I remember you saying that when you got into the office you never lost any of your friends from the factory. How were you able to achieve it? That's very difficult not only when you move up to that status, people become jealous and...

RM Well, see when I used to bring these kids, as I told you, I used to bring these kids every year on a plant tour also. With my job I used to have to walk through the mill. That was part of what I was supposed to do. Walk through the mill, observe what was going on, see what I could do to help the superintendent improve operations. That was part of my job. So I would go through the mill, and sometimes I'd go through other areas of the mill and so when I'd go through, I'd speak to the guys, I'd wave at them. The guys would come and tell me...and if I didn't speak to some of these guys, they'd be very upset. One day I walked by a fellow and I didn't speak. The next day I came by, He said, what's

wrong with you? You come by here and you didn't speak to me yesterday. I said I'm sorry, I was in a hurry. So I used to speak to all the guys. I had a great relationship with them and I used to travel all through the plant. I used to go through every department and I would see different guys because our sheet mill had work that we did from the casting shop, work that came through, work from the scrap room. So I went through all areas of the plant and I saw all the guys. Another thing I used to do where I would see the guys...every holiday they would pay the guys. The guys could come in and get their pay ahead of time. So then we'd open up a pay booth. In order to operate this pay booth they would get different ones from our office and I used to do that. And that was another thing they never saw a person of color do. I would be in the pay booth with all these checks for everybody in the plant. All by department. And the guys, they would come with their stub and I would pick out their pay check and give it to them and put the stub in the box. So that way I would see a lot of guys I normally didn't see. Guys who worked eleven to seven. Guys that I knew, they'd come in and I'd see them. It was another way that I would see a lot of my friends. I remember one time, the man who broke me in, he was at that time assistant controller, he broke me in on my job. It was about five years later, he was leaving to go to Florida. He wanted to get a job that was easy. He had taken a week's vacation and that same week...Every year we had to make out an annual book for, yearly report for our Junior Achievement company. And they brought all these papers up and I knew I wasn't going to have much help that day. So Rose Durant who was in charge of the billing department which was on the other side of our office, she had one of these electronic staplers, so I decided I'm going to put one of these together to see how it was going to look. So I put one together. The next thing I know, another woman was helping me. The women in the office and I were putting these, were collating it and putting it together. There's a guy in my office I know. As I said, the comptroller was on vacation so nobody was really in charge. You do your own work, you know what to do. Another fellow called up and told the man who used to be our controller who was now the assistant to the president, come down and see what's going on. I know he called. So while we were working, he comes down, he comes in the office. Now the women looked at me to see what I'm doing to do. To see if I'm going to stop. But I didn't. I kept on going. They kept on going. He came down the office one side, went into the office, stayed there a couple of minutes, came back around, right by where we were, he kept on walking, I spoke to him. We kept right on working, we finished it up. A couple of weeks later I'm sitting down at lunch with the controller, he's back from vacation. Often we would sit down after. He says to me, I hear you had the women working. I said, yeah, they were kind enough to give me a hand. That's all that was said. You see, I think they couldn't get over the fact that these people were willing to help me. I don't think they ever got over the relationship. But I'll tell you one thing. The plant manager, he raved about it. Because sometimes he would come into my office and he would say, I wonder how many more jewels we've got out in the mill. I'd say, all they need is an opportunity, you just got to give them a chance. And I would never let them tell me...sometimes they would like to tell me that I was special or I'm different. I would never let them tell me that. I never let them tell me that.

I They gave you an opportunity.

RM Yes, that's all they gave me, Then I remember a dear friend of mine, Jimmy Morton, called me up. His son was in college. He wanted me to see what I could do to get a job for his son. So I told him sure. I called up over to the personnel office and the assistant answered the phone. She said, oh no, oh no, we're not hiring. I said let me speak to Jimmy. Jimmy had just been put in that position only a few months before. I said, Jimmy, this is Ralph McAden in the cost department. I got a young man that's been coming to me and looking for a job. I expect him to receive special consideration and I hung up. So I called Jimmy up and I told him to have his son Billy Morton come in and be there at two o'clock. Now I know he went around there asking somebody, talking.... See, what I was going to do, I had some cards to call in that the plant manager owed me and if I had to do it, this would have been one of them that I was going to call in. So I know he must have talked to somebody else. But anyway, the kid came in and they hired him. And he went out, they gave him a job, and then the kid did a good job. Interesting, at that time I was chairman of the building fund of our church and at the end of the summer the kid wrote me a beautiful letter that I treasure and he sent me a check for the building fund. Interesting thing, right after this, I'm sitting at lunch with one of the men and he said, just got a directive from New York. You can't hire...nobody who is an employee in the office can hire a relative. I almost slipped and told him. But this is really the story of my life. Every time something got to me, it seemed like it ended. When I got a chance to take advantage of it, it ended right there. I remember when I retired. I returned in 1980. I was supposed to leave in August, but they asked me to stay another month. So I stayed 'til September. So I stayed another month, I stayed through October. So now they wanted me to stay in November to help them close. See, I had left mine...I had gone over and taken over another mill. Another man had to leave so I took over the rod mill as the accountant. So what happened, men had been collecting their retirement and also their pension. They were collecting both. Now it gets my turn. The controller said to me, tell you what we do. We want you to work. We'll pay you your regular salary and I would start collecting my pension. But before I could even sign the paper, the plant manager comes in and says, just got a call from New York. You can't do that anymore, it's double dipping. So it just happened that I had some time, some vacation time. So I figured out for the boss how we could do it. I said, I got vacation time and there's Thanksgiving, there's three days there. I'll work and I'll take my two weeks vacation and that will take care of the month. So the last day I worked was November 14, 1980, I received a month's pay for November... ((Tape ends.)) I left on November 14, and I got paid for November and December and I got eleven months pay in January. And so I was just at the right age for retirement. And by being born January 1, with January 1 a holiday, it reverts back to the previous year, so that made me a year older before I actually became of age. So that helped me very much. In 1981, the first year I didn't work, I made more money in 1981 than I ever made in my life.

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I The year you didn't work?

RM The year I didn't work I paid more income tax.

I Would you say that the brass company was really fair to you as you look back on all the things that happened?

RM They were fair to me during the time that I worked in the office. No question about it. They were fair to me during the time I worked in the office, they were fair to me. I went all over the...you were apt to see me anywhere in the office building. I did things...if I had to go off, I would do it. I had freedom to do what I wanted to do, what I needed to do. I had to have meetings sometimes at church because I was chairman of the building fund. And all I'd have to do was tell them I have to go and I would go. I would never have any problem. One day a year we used to have a picnic for all the people who were JA advisors. One year I had this fellow I had working with me. His superintendent told him he couldn't have the day off. He told me. I went to the plant manager and he got the day off.

I When you were asked to take the job in the office do you think they knew you really were qualified or because you were the first one and it was more like a test, or did you really think that you were going to succeed or do you think...I know it wasn't a set-up...or did you think it was like, we'll see what he does?

RM One thing that impressed them was that I had a lot of seniority. That's what they liked. Because of my age, I had a lot of seniority and I knew my way around the plant. I had a lot of seniority and that I think was important to them. And then when I showed the ability. That was very impressive. I did a great thing for them. If it was an experiment it turned out to be a very successful one. A very successful experiment I think far beyond what they could have imagined, the things that I got involved in because as I said I was president of the Quarter Century Club and I got involved in that. I conducted their Junior Achievement program for seven years. I was involved with the credit union. I did a lot for them.

I So it made them look good.

RM I made them look good, right.

I Do you think had they not closed down there would have been more minority men in the office?

RM I think I was at the point where I could have helped somebody get a job and I was unfortunate...I'm sorry that...I told you about me getting this kid a job. Prior to that every year these foremen used to bring their kids in the summer time when they were out of college. And they probably earned enough to pay for their tuition, you know. Well now, you're in a position to do something to help somebody and it's cut off. The door is shut. And that I think is typical of what the black race is up against. You know, when they talk about leveling the playing field. The playing field is never going to be level because they got too much of a head start.

I Exactly. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

RM Well, I'll tell you another thing I was going to tell you about. Remember Gladys. Two things that I'm proud of. Gladys Espanski was our office secretary. She and I became very good friends. I'll tell you what people would do. People would go different places and bring me things that they thought would be a good product for us to manufacture, you know. I knew everybody and I had a great relationship with people in data processing, keypunch, the people in the cafeteria. I could go into the cafeteria. You're supposed to not get coffee after nine o'clock. I could go down there anytime and go in the back and get coffee or something you know. My allergy used to bother me a lot and I would go down there and get hot lemonade, hot water and put lemons in it and come back and drink it. I had a great relationship with the people in the cafeteria. We used to have two lines, a sandwich line and a dinner line. When we first went there you could get a whole meal for a dollar. And everybody stood in line. And sometimes I would go there and they would tell me, want us to fix you something special, you tell us. So sometimes I'd tell them to fix me a salad. I like my cole slaw a certain way, tuna fish. So they'd make me a salad plate. They'd put it in the refrigerator. Now you got a line there. I would come. The girl would see me coming, they'd go and they'd get my plate. I'd put it on the tray and I'd be sitting at my table eating and the other people are still in line. This would be mostly days when you got your pay and you had to go to the bank. I know a few times they'd wonder. Nobody ever said anything to me, but I imagine there was a lot of thinking. By the time they'd come to the table I'd be just about finished and I'd be shooting off to go to the bank.

I It's all in the way you treat people and the way you carry yourself.

RM One day we were sitting with the controller and he said to me, you know Gladys is leaving. I said where's she going. He says she's going upstairs. I said we're going to have a party for her? And he says I don't know. So I got up and I went upstairs and I talked to a couple of the other women in the office. So now I'm chairman for this event and we're going to have a party for her. We're trying to keep it a secret. Gladys was a well-loved person. So I'm talking to the guys on the side, we're going to have the party, we're going to have coffee and stuff. So each time we're talking the controller comes by and he says, you can't get nothing from downstairs. You can't have no coffee, nothing from the cafeteria, that's out. So he said it to us enough times that the women said to me, look Ralph, if you can go around and borrow a coffee maker, we'll make the coffee. So I go around to all the offices to see if I can borrow a coffee maker. Everybody's willing to loan me one, but no one had one large enough. I get down to the personnel office and one of my dear friends in there, Dottie Tito, she's the office glamour girl, she says to me, why don't you go ask Don? I didn't know why she kept asking me. She said go ask Don. So I go in and ask Don. Don Cogwell is the personnel director for the division. And what I didn't know, he had just been placed in charge of the cafeteria. It seemed like you had to have so many people working under you to get that salary, you know. So I go in and I told him. What happened, I had his son who was a young engineer there work with me as one of my advisors which gave him exposure to a lot of things. So he appreciated that. So I said to him, Don, I got a problem. I got to have coffee and things for a party for Gladys that I'm having. So he says to me, why don't I call Marge and tell her to do it. I

said, well that would be fine. So he called up the cafeteria and he said, Marge, Ralph McAden will be coming down. Give him whatever he wants. So now keep in mind that my boss has told me that you can't have this. And the afternoon of the party we had two black guys who worked in the cafeteria as porters, they cleaned the offices and worked in the cafeteria. They worked in the office building. So they came in. They brought the coffee and everything. I'll never forget that. Gladys was sitting there. We had chipped in to buy her a charm bracelet and we gave her the bracelet and we had this big cake and everything and Gladys sat there and the tears just kept on running down. I'll never forget this, I kept handing her napkins and the tears just kept running down. Gladys, she really appreciated this I know. She got a job upstairs in one of the vice presidents' office. More money and less work. And I didn't realize it. She had arthritis in her fingers very badly. She never complained. Then the man who's now the comptroller, he's leaving. What happened was, GE opened up their new building and they got some of our operators to go up to GE. And the people wanted to have a party for them. Kenny Bowden was in charge of the operators. He said, no, you can't have no party, nothing for her because she's leaving to go to GE

I This was when GE opened in Fairfield?

RM When GE opened up the Fairfield office and they took at least one of our girl operators, head operators. So now my boss is leaving and he had gone to college with some of the guys...the man who was in charge of payroll, the payroll, the paymaster and so forth. And so I told these guys, I says...they were afraid to do anything because of what had happened. So I said, look you guys, if you're not going to do anything, I'm going to do something. If you guys don't want to do something, I'm going to do something for him because he deserves it. He's been a friend to me. So I went down to see the man who was the general superintendent of the mill and he said, sure I'll support you. So then I got it started. Then after I got it started everybody came aboard and we had at, I think we had it at Testo's. Everybody said it was one of the best parties they ever had. You know we gave him a watch.

I Talking about Testo's, was it political trying to get into the brass company? Did you really have to know someone or could you just come off the street?

RM I think you had to know someone at one time. Oh, definitely. Definitely because a lot of people were from families working there. There were a lot of brothers. Oh yeah, definitely, no question about it. You had to know somebody. And guys went in there pretty young. Guys went in there right out of high school, eighteen, nineteen years old, you know. That's an advantage that a colored person did not have. He did not have. Did not have. They had one black man that worked there that was an elevator operator in the office building. That was the only one. The only black person. He was the elevator operator.

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I And the Brass Company paid better than other plants in the area?

RM No, they didn't. Even the people in the office were underpaid. I can recall one time we wanted to hire somebody and in order to pay that man what he was worth, they had to increase the wages of a couple of other people. No, we were all underpaid. I feel as though we were all underpaid.

I Now what factory do you think was the best paying factory in Bridgeport?

RM I think Sikorsky. Avco was good. You know it was those companies that had those big contracts. GE might have been pretty good too. But I think Sikorsky and Avco were probably two of the best. Bullard used to be a very good paying company too.

I Now did you have a pension on your job or just social security?

RM Oh yeah, I had a pension. In fact, one time we had in the office a stock plan which was very good. You could put a certain percentage of your salary to go into stock and they would match it. So you could either buy stock or you could buy bonds. So I bought stock for a while. And then our stock went bad and then I split and I bought stock and I put it in the bonds. I still have bonds in the bank. What I did was, I bought a car. I think I bought my car in '79. I think I sold my stock and I bought a car. I think I bought a '79 Cutlass Supreme Oldsmobile. So that was two that I was chairman for. Retirement parties. When other guys use to have retirement parties, I use to get, Kenny Bowden was in charge of the Norwalk plant and we used to make golf clubs there. Brass golf clubs. And sometimes if I knew somebody I would be able to get him to get me golf clubs.

I What did the brass company manufacture?

RM The brass shop, what we made it was not what you'd call a finished product that you could sell to a retailer, to a customer. The product we made went to somebody else. Like, we rolled sheet metal that people would stamp out to cigarette lighters, all kinds of compacts, anything that was made out of brass they would stamp it out. Because many times what we would do...see, one thing about the brass industry, there is not any waste. You buy back the scrap. It is recycled. See all the scrap is recycled and you have different kinds of brass. That's what's important to know in the industry. You have to know different kinds. I used to have a lot of code books that we had to use. For each kind of metal that went out we had various codes. The codes would take care of the production cost. And it depended on how much labor was spent on that job, was the value of it. Then we also had the metal value. Copper fluctuated quite a bit. So you had a special price. You had a basic price for copper and then you had the copper adjustment whether it was going up or down.

I Did they export any of their brass, or was everything used in the United States?

RM No, no they did not. I don't think they exported anything. In fact, we imported some things. The copper sometimes came from copper ingots.

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I Were there any language barriers? I know there were a lot of different types of immigrants.

RM No, I don't think so. There weren't any language barriers that I'm aware of.

I Everyone spoke English?

RM Everybody spoke English. Some of them spoke broken English, but they spoke English that you could understand.

I When did the Hispanic influx come about?

RM I don't know that they had that many Hispanics in the Brass. I know that one of the first people we hired in the mailroom was an Hispanic girl. But I don't know that we had that many Hispanics in the plant itself.

I So it was mostly Caucasians and African American? Portuguese?

RM Yeah.

I What do you think was the dominant group? What did you have more of or was it like, pretty much an even mix?

RM Well, it would be hard to tell because sometimes with white people you disappear. Irish doesn't always come through. Italians sometimes come through. There were a lot of Italians there. And there were Irish too, but I don't know that there was any one that was more dominant than the other. It's possible there were, but I don't know that there was.

I So when you were young the trolley cars were here then at that time? Where did they go?

RM When I was a boy and I had to take my father his lunch, the brass shop office building was a gray wooden building. They had one truck that had hard rubber tires that just went through the yard and they had a train engine that pulled...you used to get all these things by train. They had their own engine that moved the cars back and forth in the yard and back out on the track to be taken away. I think the brass shop bought their trucks...I think there was a trucking strike, I don't know, maybe in the '60s or something, and the brass shop started buying trucks, I think. At first they had bought these small street jobs and then they wound up buying trailer trucks. And so they did a lot of their own shipping throughout the state because of the fact that there was a trucking strike and I think that caused them to hire truck drivers. They had one person of color who drove a truck. Before that they had two. One of the black fellows drove a truck, it's a big job. And we had another fellow drove a tractor trailer.

I How long were your hourly weeks? Was it more than forty hours a week? Did you work more than forty hours a week?

RM I usually work more than forty hours a week, if you were a crane operator it was a staggered basis. That was one of the things that got some of the foreman in our,...see when I first went into, I got laid off from the casting shop and I went to the office, the employment office for reemployment and I was a crane operator. I had seniority to go to any mill that I had seniority over another crane operator and become a crane, and take over that crane. So when I go the employment office they want to give me a job as sitter

hopper. They don't want to give me a job as a crane operator anywhere. So I go to the union and I go back and forth 'til finally the assistant superintendent from tube mill where I was going to be assigned come up there and he said well they gave me a chance, but I think I had to sign to work for, take a half an hour cut in pay. Which he promised that I would get it after a couple of months. So I'd go over and I'd report at the eleven to seven shift. And they have a different type of crane that what I'd been used to operating. So the foreman let me go up there and sit with the guy, I didn't touch the controls. The next night the man stays home and I gotta, this was all planned so I gotta run the crane. So I ran the crane. And then this man's name was Freddie Mullins, he was the general foreman, but he's one of the most honest men you want to meet. After that, I worked, I did that job for quite a while. A job opened up at the finishing department, he put his brother-in-law on the job and his brother-in-law didn't have any where near the seniority I did, but that was the job that work six days a week and I got a family. So his job worked six days every week and so I kept after him, you know some of the black employees told me you're going to lose your job you shouldn't be doing this and all that you know. It was an interesting thing, that I use to wear my Harding Class Ring at that time and so finally, with the union's help and so forth, I got the job and went down there. So then one of the fellas that I, him and I belonged to an organizations and my ring was a symbol. But this man was a fair man. When the tube mill opened up the new mill, they built a new mill. He came to me and asked me if I wanted to over there, they would pay what they called average earnings. If I wanted to go over there, take a job over there, which I did. So I was one of the first ones to go other there. Then when there was a job open up in the finishing department, he came to me and offered me that job.

I That's good, they were fair.

RM Many times, like if he needed somebody to come in, like somebody's stay out on the seven to three shift. He'd call me up, I was working three to eleven, he'd call me up and say what time can you get in. I'd say, Oh I can get there by ten o'clock. He'd say, okay come on in, don't punch the clock. He paid me for seven o'clock. He done that to me more than once. More than once. Freddie Mullins was a fair man.

I Because I think you stood up for what you knew was right.

RM Well, yeah, I had a lot of arguments with him and he....I always try to argue the point and not use any language or anything that was not on point. He and I got along well, I just feel that he was an honest individual, he appreciated honesty in somebody else.

I Before we finish is there anything else you'd like to say?

RM Oh, golly, there are so many things, let's see. (long pause) Oh, I think I can tell you this story, I don't know if this fits in with what you're doing. When I first went to the orientation for the Junior Achievement Program, I noticed everybody was on a first name basis. The kids, the supervisors and everybody. And when I formed my group I told them, I says, "My name is Mr. McAden. I said nobody's gonna call me by the first name." Well, these teenage kids are calling me by my first name and so when I would go, we use to meet in the old library. I would go in there, we went on Tuesday nights and I would go in there and I always had my arms full of the supplies, you know. These teenage girls, the

door was way down the end of the hall. When I would come in, they would come in, they'd come running, "Hi! Mr. McAden! Hi! Mr. McAden! Hi! Mr. McAden!" and they'd come running to me, grab all my things and carry them and some of these kids weren't even in my company. So this went on for several weeks and I noticed the director and the others that they would be hanging around there, you know. They would look up, so I noticed later on they were being called "Mr." The director was being called "Mr." I appreciated that because that let them know that that's the way it should have been anyway. These kids should have had proper respect for these people that were older than they are. Now the kids use to always ask me, "Why can't we call you by your first name?"

I What was your response to them?

RM I would tell them, the age difference and respect for your elders. I would here them call me Ralphy behind my back or something, you know. You know, teenage girls, sometimes you can't be too careful with teenage girls. Some of them can be very grown in their activities and actions, so you have to be careful as far as that's concerned. I had very successful, there was a girl that I had, I trained her, she was a 'Treasurer of the Year'. At the banquet they gave out awards. For the best company, the best officers of each areas office and I was very successful as individuals. I had a girl who was the "Treasurer of the Year", the next year her sister came into our company, she was a 'Treasurer of the Year. We have had other individuals who had done things good. One year, I don't know how much you have on here, but I remember one year, I had this fellow. His name was Anthony Thompson, he was in my JA company for two years and we had made the plant tour and he had take pictures with the president of the company and this man was president of Bridgeport Brass Metals Division. He's a vice president of National Distillers, one of the top companies in the world, you know, where chemicals and alcohol and so forth, and so this young man's a senior in High School, now he's president of our company. So I sit him next to the president of the company, so everybody, we say okay we've taken pictures and everything, prayed you're liking him. Everything is quiet, so this young man says to the president, he says "I have problems with my company, what kind of problems do you have with your company?" Well, everybody was just quiet for a while and then everybody just shocked. I think I busted all the buttons on my shirt, I was so proud. I was so proud.

I I know you had to be.

RM I was so proud, really. That young man now, I had him in Sunday School, he's still a member of our church and he, a couple of years ago he was superintendent of our Sunday School and he's still one of my dearest friends.

I That Junior Achievement seems like it was a very, very, very, important, inspiring part of your life.

RM It was very rewarding to me. Very rewarding. Well, it gave me an opportunity, I had always worked with kids even in the Sunday School. My Sunday School experience helped me do well in Junior Achievement, because they were always amazed how I got along with these teenage kids. Well, as my experience and background in Sunday School meeting kids that made that possible.

I So did you always bring the groups back to your job?

RM Every year, every year on Armistice Day, the kids would come over for a grand tour and once a year we would bring them over to sell our product. What would happen to me sometimes I would back my car up to the door and be bringing the products in and my co-worker would see me, they'd all wanted to buy 'em, you know, before I even get a chance to set 'em up. So that's what we would do, we'd bring the kids in.

I It was good, it gave them an opportunity to see the real world.

RM Gave them an opportunity to see them learn, you know we would have different conventions we'd go to. We had a lot of activities that the kids could take part in and then broaden their view. Then we also, Bridgeport Brass had a Boy Scout Troop that they sponsored.

I Um. Hmmm.

RM When they started out, of course, it was all white. And in the latter years it was probably mostly all black you know. They would come over once a year to sell their products. What I would usually do, I would wait until the cafeteria was full and then I would go over and buy something, let them see me go over and buy something, then a lot of them would follow.

I Good Strategy. Good Strategy.

RM I tell you I enjoyed, it was the most enjoyable, it was the most enjoyable ten years of my life. I enjoyed those ten years very much, working and the freedom it gave my wife and I. I'd pick her up, if we felt like going home we would, if not we'd just go out and have dinner somewhere or go to a show or do whatever we liked to do. We had that freedom for those ten years and I really enjoyed, I enjoyed the relationships. I was doing something that I thought I would never have an opportunity to do.

I I can't think of a better way to end your working career.

RM I never though I'd have an opportunity to really do it. And I've made many great friends, many people that I would see, I'd bump into in the street somewhere. Often they would come up to me and I remember sometimes I would go, I was treasure of the Sunday School during the latter years and I use to go up to the bank and sometimes the girls from the office would be walking home and walk back to work together.

I I remember how proud your children were, when they first told me, Jean was the first person to say “Guess what my father is working in an office now” and you just feel the proud in her voice. So it just permeates. It’s just not you feeling good, it made your family feel good for you.

RM Well, I think one of the things was my age, which first made a big difference in my relationship with people. Knowing how to get along with people and having dealt with people on different levels I think was important. I use to go up, now another thing, that sometimes a young person might’ve reacted to a lot of things differently, you know. I remember sometimes we’d all be sitting at a table together, usually the different departments sat together and I would say, somebody would say to me, pass me the salt and I’d say I gotta pass you the salt and pepper this is an integrated table. (chuckle). There was a fellow him and I were buddies, John Bennett, he was my buddy. We were like we were always together and between the two of us, there wasn’t anything that went around there that either one of us wouldn’t know about. We knew whatever was happening there. If he didn’t know, I knew. His wife was a secretary for one of the Vice Presidents and we usually knew anything that was happening around there, we knew. We knew where the parties were, we knew who was doing what, anything that was going on, we knew. And he worked with a lot of the black guys in the casting shop, he was a baseball umpire and sometimes he would sit next to me. He would say “you know the boy who works in...” and I’d say “oh, you mean that man down there...”. He would never catch on, but so many guys really did, he would never catch on. If I ever suggested to John that he was being prejudiced, he would be hurt, because I know he never, he never had no intention of offending anybody, so I never. I would correct him sometime, I would just say “Oh, you mean that man that works on such and such.....(Tape ends). Some of the foremen where I was leaving from were saying, I remember one time I told one of my coworkers, I says, “you know I’m going, I’m gonna take any job in the office.” He says to me “well, it’s about time.” That’s the kind of relationship I had with the guys I worked with. One of the general foremen said “well, you’re going to have to start wearing a white shirt.” I never liked white shirts, and I never wore a white shirt and I think I kind of set a trend. I know they always used to compliment me. The women use to always compliment me on how I’d dress. They always said ‘Oh, your wife dressed you this morning?’ My shirt and tie matching and so forth. I use to get a lot of compliments on the way I dressed. But I never wore a white shirt. Maybe I wore a white shirt, I think, when we went to the Quarter Century Banquet or something like that when we were dressed a little bit for the black/dark blue shirt on. But other than that.

I Did you ever wear suits or did you, just shirt and pants?

RM Oh, no, no, no, sometimes, I very rarely wore a suit. In the summertime you’d where short sleeve. Some of them, like George Nash, well he wore short sleeve all year round.

I So when did the Brass Company finally move out of Bridgeport, totally what was the final year?

RM When they left, what happen I left a year, as I said in November 14, 1980. In December they moved their office downtown, they opened an office in the mall. They had an office in the mall, for a while. I use to go down there and visit. I'll never forget one time I went down there and some of the guys were retiring and I was standing there, they thought I was just retiring so I stood there, they were all shaking my hand, you know, wishing me well and so forth.

I Tell, me and when did that office finally leave?

RM Well, I think they left, that office left sometime in '81. They didn't stay long.

I Did they move the company to another location or did they just?

RM No, what happened, the summer of 1980, the Bridgeport Brass must have spent a half a million dollars, which is what they usually do, doing summer repairs, fixing things up, preparing to open up. And I'll never forget, that August we went down to the cafeteria, the president wanted to see us, we went down there, he told us the plant was shutting down. And they had spent a half a million dollars that summer. Just threw away, people stole stuff, stuff went out of there, I was suppose to get, they were getting things, I was suppose to get things. But, I don't remember if he died, you know, another guy took over and he changed everything. He changed everything. If there was some of things you wanted, then all you had to do was write your name. You know, let him know what you wanted, cabinets and desks and all those sort of things. But I understand there was a lot of stealing, people took a lot of stuff out of there but.....

I So they moved, did they shut down or did they moved?

RM The just shut down.

I So they're not in existence anymore?

RM No, no. Oh, no, there's some other companies in there now. There's a steel company in there and somebody else is in there now. 'Cause they had this big what they call extruder, that they came over from Germany that was in the tube mill. And one of those things that they never operated the way they should. One of the big problems with the brass shop that I find, I think their engineers were a big problem because we would get equipment in there and they would try to make it do something it wasn't built to do and then they couldn't make it do what it was suppose to do. That was our big problem with engineering. In the mill that I was in, that we had different things that we got that would've, see I'd worked, the tube, the sheet mill had the best margins of any of the mills, we were the only profit making mill in there. A lot of them use to try to tell me that I was responsible for it. But I knew that I wasn't, though I did a lot of things for them I know. Inventory control was so very important that was a vital job. I remember one year before I came there, see we had what we called in-transit metal, we got a lot of raw material we bought from our Indianapolis plant and when they ship it out of their plant, that's gone and then it's on the road, so we haven't got it yet. So this is on the road you maybe got, and maybe four or five million pounds of metal on the road and you're taking an inventory

and you don't have this metal, then nobody's got it and so when you come up with inventory your value is short so they had that happen a couple of years, but that was something I was able to control.

I How many factories did they have, not just the one in Bridgeport?

RM Oh, no they had a plant in Norwalk, they had a plant in Seymour, the Seymour plant was one that was sold to the employees, but it didn't work out. You know the employees bought that plant but it never worked out. They had a plant in Moxie, Georgia. Their biggest plant was in Indianapolis. Indianapolis did the same thing that we did in Bridgeport. It was a newer plant. They were kind of favoritism. See one of our problems we had, we had our division offices were here on the fourth floor, so they were looking over our shoulders at everything we did. Lot of the times I would go to the fourth floor, one of things how I got along with people, one of the things I always did, I would go to the fourth floor and I'd talk about how relations, how a younger person might react. I would go up there, we had this copy machine that did all kinds of things. If you weren't at all familiar with it you couldn't operate it. So I'd go up there, somebody'd always run over and they would help and we would talk. So this would happen every month, I would have to actually at the end of the month there were some things I would have to reduce in order to put it into the file, they would have to be in a certain form. And so I would go up there and maybe somebody'd be working, somebody would always want to come over and they would help me. I got to the point where I could do it myself, but I mean if somebody came over to help me I didn't tell them "look I don't need you anymore, I can do this". It was a way of a social thing, so I let them come over and help me and we would talk. This was the division, what I would do. When I would leave there I could have just turned around and go back down the steps, I would go all through the office, all the way around speaking to everybody. I'd go all through the office and speak to everybody and come out the other way. I always did that. I always did that because, you know, treat people, I never wanted anybody to think that one person was more favored than others. I remember one time there was this little Irish young lady that worked in our office. When I first went in there they use to tell me "watch out for her, she's got a sharp tongue, be careful with her". When Dottie MacMurray, she and I became great, great friends. Dottie MacMurray and I became great friends. She and I use to work together on inventory, we use to have to run, do the tapes, she and I worked together for the very first year I worked there. When they start letting women help on the inventory. Dottie worked with me. I remember one time, we had some kind of affair in the conference room and Dottie.... I sat with the young girls from Data Processing. They're all young girls, and I sat with them, we were laughing, joking. So when I got back to the office she says to me, "oh you don't want to sit with us old broads, you want to sit with the young chippies, huh?" So now I gotta explain to her why, I said "well I was with you people for eight hours a day, it's just an occasional thing so I sat with them." Al Zera was a fellow I told you about, he was a dear friend of mine. He worked with me one year on Junior Achievement. Al was a purchasing agent and that's where I use to get a lot of help from the purchasing department. If I needed something, a tool or something for JA well I'd have to go over there and ask them for it and they had a lot of people they dealt with, they would get it for me. I use to have the men in the carpentry shop, I use to have them cutting things for me.

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I needed, we were making these little wagons, I had, one time I contracted to the box shop in Harding High School. They were making things for me, and I remember that's when Judy was working in the office there. And then after the end of year she told me, I ask her where I could do, so I had to buy the kid a basketball and something else for Christmas. Gave him a nice Christmas present, this was when Kenny Bowden got.....

I Well, it sounds like, well we appreciate it, really you gave us a lot history about Bridgeport and about the Brass Company and about yourself and this is what this is all about. Oral History of Bridgeport and I want to thank you very much.