

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library  
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century"  
Robert Factor (**RF**) interviewed by Elizabeth Van Tuyl (**I**) on December 3, 1997.

**I:** Mr. Factor, could you please tell me where and when you were born?

**RF:** I was born on the tenth of October 1921 in Warren, Ohio.

**I:** In Warren, Ohio.

**RF:** U.S.A.

**I:** And when did you come to Bridgeport?

**RF:** I came to Bridgeport at the age of a year and one-half. I can't tell you exactly when. There's some way of documenting it, but I've never tried to do it.

**I:** So you came with your family. What brought your parents to Bridgeport?

**RF:** My mother was a second generation Bridgeporter and the only reason I was born in Ohio is that when my father was in the Navy in 1919, he was offered a job in Ohio by his superior in the Navy so he spent three or four years in Ohio and things didn't work out and they came back to Bridgeport which was the only place they could go. He was originally from New York City but he had no desire to go back to New York. He hated it so he came back to Bridgeport where my mother had roots and went from there.

**I:** Now was he born in New York City?

**RF:** He was born in New York City and my mother was born in Bridgeport.

**I:** So, were your parents first generation or had their families lived in the United States for some time?

**RF:** My father was born in New York City. His father was an immigrant, probably from The Ukraine. I never quite knew where his mother was born in Poland. My mother's mother was born in New Haven and her family in New Haven goes back to the 1840's. So, on one side I'm like fifth or sixth generation and on the other side I'm third.

**I:** So how would you describe their--? Well, you've described your father's, but your mother's ethnic background?

**RF:** My mother comes from a group of Bavarian German Jews who were really the first Ashkenazi Jewish settlers in the United States going back from the 1840's and 1850's. My mother's father was born in Germany, but her mother, as I say, was born in New Haven, going way, way back.

**I:** Okay. Of course, I want to hear more about you. Once you arrived in Bridgeport, where did your family live?

**RF:** When we first came to Bridgeport from Ohio?

**I:** Yes.

**RF:** First place we lived was on Maplewood Avenue.

**I:** That's in what part of the city?

**RF:** That's in the West End, next to the firehouse. And then we moved to French Street which is the North End and to Helmwood Avenue which is back in the West End. And various places in that part of town which would be closest to my mother's heart, I guess because that's where she spent most of her childhood, around Wood Park. I know you don't know Bridgeport as well as the natives.

**I:** No, but that's what I'd like to hear from you. What were some of the neighborhoods like?

**RF:** I was always within walking distance of Wood Park, which is a little triangular thing [unclear]. So, I spend ten years at Maplewood School from kindergarten to ninth school and three years at Bassick High School. And never a school bus or never had to use transportation. It was always within walking distance, even lunch.

**I:** What was the housing like, where you lived at that time?

**RF:** Double and triple-deckers.

**I:** So your family would rent a floor of one of these houses?

**RF:** Yes, my parents did not have a freestanding single occupancy house until probably about 1936 or 1937.

**I:** Did you have brothers and sisters?

**RF:** I have one sister. My only sibling. She's lived in California since the Second World War.

- I:** So she left Bridgeport?
- RF:** She joined the Marines and her husband was also a Marine. They got married in the Marine Corps and they were both stationed in California and they decided there was no reason to come back to Bridgeport from California and they've been there.
- I:** In the neighborhoods that you lived in, since you really stayed in kind of the same areas for awhile, what kinds of people were living in that area at the time? Was it a big mixture or were there certain groups that dominated those neighborhoods at the time.
- RF:** I would say that the largest group was Irish when I think of the names of my neighborhoods. I think of individual families with Italian names. A couple of Armenian families that we were close to. But I think of people named Welch and Brennan and O'Reilly and Keefe and all these kids I grew up with. A few Jewish families, but very few. There was kind of a Jewish enclave but not too close to where we happened to live. That's farther west. You know, I went to school with these kids but I didn't play with them as a small child.
- I:** So, did that affect your family in any way? Now that you mention it, did you live near a synagogue that you could walk to the way you could walk to your school?
- RF:** Close walking distance, yes. Probably six, seven blocks. Always did walk, never rode then.
- I:** Were the synagogues at that time mainly Ashkenazi in the congregation or was it a mixture?
- RF:** Do you understand what the word Ashkenazi means?
- I:** I believe so. Sephardic or Jews from other backgrounds or maybe regions.
- RF:** Virtually nobody in this community of Sephardic background, that I know of --all Ashkenazi, but we had orthodox, reformed and conservative and my family was in the reformed.
- I:** Why don't you tell me more about your school? You mentioned you went to Maplewood?

**RF:** Yes, I went to Maplewood which was dominated by Catherine Fitzpatrick, who became, while I was at school Dr. Fitzpatrick after taking courses for many, many years at Columbia. All of a sudden, well not all of a sudden, but she eventually became Dr. Fitzpatrick and if you didn't address her as Dr. Fitzpatrick you were in very big trouble.

**I:** She was the principal?

**RF:** She was the principal of both the elementary and junior high schools, which were both in the same complex. The junior high was across the street from the others so it was a three-building complex. Grammar school number five and then the Maplewood Annex so called. They hadn't added on to it sometime around the turn of the century and then they build the junior high about World War I. So she was in charge of the whole thing and when I say in charge I mean literally no one got away with anything. Do you have time for me to tell you a story of Walter Peck?

**I:** Sure.

**RF:** You have to picture that the junior high school is facing Linwood Avenue and here is Wood Avenue and here is [unclear]. And Walter Peck lived on the corner of Wood Avenue and Linwood. So that he could go out his back door and go right into the school except that he couldn't because Miss Fitzpatrick made a rule that this was the girls' entrance on the Wood Avenue end and this was the boys' on the [unclear] end and no one could walk in front of the school. No boy could pass the girls' entrance and no girl could pass the boys' entrance. So Walter Peck, for all the years at Wood School, had to go up Wood Avenue to Beechwood Avenue, walk down Beechwood Avenue to Laurel Avenue and Laurel Avenue to [unclear] to the boys' entrance.

**I:** That was a friend of yours or a classmate?

**RF:** Yes, we went all through school together.

**I:** Who had the misfortune of living in the wrong direction from the school.

**RF:** Yes, I suppose it was healthy, but--.

**I:** So the school was very disciplined when you were there?

**RF:** Yes. Miss Fitzpatrick made another rule while we were there that when you change classes you were not to go directly to your next class. When you came out of the room from your previous class you had to turn right and go down to the end of the corridor and make a left turn and another left turn and everybody had to go around until they arrived at the door for the next class.

**I:** And what was the reason for that?

**RF:** To eliminate any kind of disorder in the corridor. Not a bad idea when you think of it.

**I:** Traffic flow?

**RF:** Yes, but I didn't have much of a feeling for civil rights at that time but looking back at it I can see where it's blighted my whole life.

**I:** What about the classes that you took? What kind of curriculum was there?

**RF:** Reading, writing and arithmetic and history and geography and penmanship. Are you familiar with the Palmer method of penmanship?

**I:** I've heard of it.

**RF:** Which was a big deal in those days and I was a failure at that. I was better at other things like mathematics but penmanship was really my bad spot.

**I:** You liked the math?

**RF:** The interesting thing, as I look back at it that virtually all my teachers were Irish spinsters. Of course, all devout Catholics. I can think of several that became nuns while [unclear] but they taught the prescribed WASP curriculum. Looking back at this, how these ladies could teach. You know how people came to this country for religious freedom at which point that people they came from had no religious freedom, but they were not aware of it or disregarded it. Sort of a strange kind of thing as I look back at it. They're teaching a Protestant philosophy which was directly counter to their own background and whether they were just ignorant or doing what they had to do because that was the job, is something I, of course, didn't know then and never will know.

**I:** Since you also weren't of a Protestant background, did that make any difference to you at the time?

**RF:** Kind of fitted into it. I never felt out of place when we sang Christmas Carols or whatever. I was pretty secular also. You kept your religion and the school thing kind of separate. There was not undo consideration of it. A vast majority of my school mates were Catholic and they were released from school, I think, on Friday afternoons they got off a half-hour earlier and we had, like a study period. They were allowed to go for religious instruction, but not on our premises. They went to church, I guess.

**I:** So the school really did accommodate its population to some extent?

**RF:** Yes, I didn't think with any great breach of church and state. They just got out a half-hour earlier and whatever. It didn't bother me at the time.

**I:** What about more about your family life, specifically outside of school when you were a youngster? You mentioned going to--. You belonged to a synagogue or a reformed synagogue. Did you belong to, or your family belong to any local religious organizations or maybe just clubs or civic organizations?

**RF:** No, the synagogue had a sisterhood or ladies group in which my mother was fairly active. Also, a boy scout troop of which I was a member for a few years.

**I:** What were those called? Do you remember what the names were of the organizations or the clubs?

**RF:** Well, the Boy Scout troop was Troop Seven. The Sisterhood of the Park Avenue Temple, that's all.

**I:** How about your father? Did he participate in any similar--?

**RF:** No, my father just worked.

**I:** Now, what was he doing?

**RF:** He did a number of things. When we came back from Ohio the only thing he could find to do was to become a manufacturer's representative in hardware and household trades and he traveled around New England in Model T Ford selling to hardware stores, whatever, until the crash in 1929, 1930 and then what little money he invested in the stock market disappeared and his customers weren't buying anything. Not enough to justify his traveling anymore so he got three hundred and seventy-five dollars by surrendering a life insurance policy which was

his total assets in 1930. At that time the final bankruptcy liquidation of the Locomobile Company was taking place so he purchased the office furniture at an auction for the Locomobile Company and went into the used office furniture business.

- I:** Oh, that was enterprising. And then how did that work out? He established--?
- RF:** Yes. Well, he established a company that still exists, actually.
- I:** What was the name of the company?
- RF:** Universal Business Equipment.
- I:** And then, in that difficult era, as you said, starting in 1930 he did that during the Depression, how did he get business? Did he get a lot of customers or did he have to build up?
- RF:** It was a struggle and nobody had any customers in those days, but the first day he was in business somebody came along and bought like eighty dollars worth of something which was a revelation. He said, "It's a great business to be in." I mean, you spend about four hundred dollars for your entire inventory and whatever. And he continued doing primarily used office furniture, which he used to acquire by going to New York to auctions, and distressed companies. He'd get a whole truckload of this stuff and then stop at various places on the way home from New York and try to sell a little of this and a little of that and whatever. So he really struggled for quite awhile and gradually as the country emerged from the Depression, he diversified and started selling new office furniture as well as used office furniture and then expanded the supplies which the company still does and it's the only remaining independent office products company in the Bridgeport area now. They've acquired, my successors have acquired all the other dealerships the supplies that come here, all the expendable stuff comes from my company.
- I:** And they're [unclear]? We can't get enough of them actually. What were you doing before you got involved--? I take it you got involved in the business and we'll get to that, but as a younger man at this time, were you or your sister or your mother also working outside the home? Did you have a job that you did?
- RF:** My mother minded the store for my father, primarily and kept the books.

- I:** So she played a very substantial role in the business?
- RF:** Oh yes. That's practically the only job I ever had. I worked for a short time at a soda fountain at Liggett's Drug Store at Main and Fairfield.
- I:** Was that your first job?
- RF:** My first job.
- I:** What was that like?
- RF:** Oh, it lasted only a few weeks because the hours were very long and I was kind of, you wouldn't believe, undernourished at the time and I kind of packed it in after awhile. And other than helping in my father's business I never had much of any other job.
- I:** How old were you when you worked in the drugstore?
- RF:** Eighteen.
- I:** So you were just finishing high school, or--?
- RF:** Yes, it was right after I got out of high school and then I worked for my father's company for a year and then went away to college for a year and then came back and worked for another year just to save some money and then went back for a year. And then went into the service and then came out.
- I:** Okay. Let's hear about that. That sounds like an interesting period of transition. You graduated from which high school again?
- RF:** Bassick.
- I:** Bassick. And you didn't really say much. I asked you about the elementary school. What was the high school like?
- RF:** What was the high school like? I don't know quite how to answer that question. I guess it was a pretty good high school.
- I:** Were there a lot of students? How many students, do you remember?
- RF:** Yes. Maybe fourteen, fifteen hundred.
- I:** Quite sizable.
- RF:** Because, three grades and graduating class was slightly over four hundred so if you multiply it out, that's--. Virtually everybody graduated of course. Unlike

today where it's a victory to graduate from high school. Nobody dropped out that I--. I had one friend that dropped out to join the C.C.C.

**I:** So that was what year that you graduated then?

**RF:** 1939.

**I:** 1939. And then--?

**RF:** We continued to be actually very loyal. People who graduated in that area whether it still applies but we still cherish those days. I've been a member of our reunion, ongoing reunion committee ever since. We had our fifty-fifth, you know. We will or will not have a sixtieth. I'm not sure, but--.

**I:** And you've had a lot of participants, relatively speaking?

**RF:** Yes, we get sometimes close to two hundred including spouses.

**I:** Wonderful. And do those people mainly still live in the Bridgeport area?

**RF:** Many do. Awful lot are in Florida. And an awful lot are deceased.

**I:** You mentioned you went on to college. Did a lot of the people from high school plan to go on to college or to take courses to prepare them to go on from there?

**RF:** I can only guess. There were three curriculum offerings. It's probably still the case. There was college, commercial and general and I have a feeling it was about one-third, one-third, one-third. I have no way of testifying to that.

**I:** So you went on the college preparatory track and then what college did you go to?

**RF:** Clark University.

**I:** In?

**RF:** Worcester, Massachusetts.

**I:** And then you said, after the first year--? Or what did you study there?

**RF:** Well, as a freshman you study what they tell you to. My major was English Lit.

**I:** And you came back after the first year to work in your father's business? And then what role did you play--?

**RF:** Because I had run out of money.

**I:** And you worked in the office or out on the floor?

**RF:** No. There really wasn't an office per se. It was only a two or three person organization and it was as much blue collar as white collar.

- I:** Did you help customers?
- RF:** A little bit but mostly deliveries and assembly and that kind of stuff.
- I:** And how did you like working there? What was it like working with family members? Was that difficult or did it make it easier?
- RF:** No, it's just one more thing to contend with, that's all. No, I won't say it was a matter of great joy or something but I was otherwise pretty much unemployable and it was a way of getting enough money to go back to school which my parents understood and it would have been unfair, if not impossible, to ask them to subsidize my education when they were killing themselves working. So, that's what I did.
- I:** So your parents had not attended college?
- RF:** My mother went to Normal School for two years and she taught in Bridgeport from 1910 to 1917 when she got married.
- I:** Where did she teach?
- RF:** She taught at Weaver School, Bryant School. I guess those are the only two. I'm not quite sure.
- I:** You mentioned going into the service also. At the end of college or between college years?
- RF:** I registered for the draft in Bridgeport, of course. But then the government offered a program called the Enlisted Reserve Corps.
- I:** And this is in 19--?
- RF:** 1942. The conditions to enlist in the Reserve Corps is if you were in good standing in a college and you enlisted there you could go back to college until such time as they called you in and then you were transferred from your local draft board to the authorities at the college. What the governments motivation was for this I really don't know but I was to go back to college in the Fall of 1942 and then all of us from the college who were in this Enlisted Reserve Corps were called in as the same group into the service. We all went. Like one hundred and fifty of us all went on the bus to Fort Devens to be--.
- I:** Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

**RF:** Inducted, yes.

**I:** So that was then the Army? That's an Army base.

**RF:** Yes.

**I:** Oh, I thought that--. You said your father had been in the Navy.

**RF:** Yes.

**I:** Then where did you go from there? Did you have to go anywhere from--?

**RF:** Well, Fort Devens was just an induction place. Nobody stayed there. From there I went to Miami Beach for Air Force basis training. Of course, it wasn't the Air Force then, it was the Army Air Corps. The so-called Air Force was part of the Army until long after World War II.

**I:** And how long did that training last? How much training did they give you?

**RF:** Eight weeks, maybe. Something like that. You know, it's close-order drill. And then I got sent to cryptographic school at Pauling, New York. The Army had taken over the Trinity Pauling School which is now a distinguished, or always was an Ivy League Prep School in Pauling, New York. The Army pre-empted it. I spent several months there learning military cryptographic systems. I wasn't allowed to tell anybody what I was doing.

**I:** Did you have much contact with your family at this time?

**RF:** It's pretty close. I don't know if you know where Pauling is.

**I:** Yes, I do.

**RF:** On Route 22. I remember getting a couple of three-day passes so I could hitchhike home and whatever but I wasn't supposed to tell my parents what I was doing at the school. Just communications work or whatever.

**I:** Did your math come in handy then or--? You were chosen for this particular type of work?

**RF:** Mathematics--. No, there's not an awful lot of mathematics involved in cryptography. Language skills help. Anagrammy kinds of things.

**I:** And were a lot of your friends from college or high school during this time also doing similar things in that they were being shipped around to various places due to the war and enlisted in different kinds of training programs.

**RF:** Yes. All different directions. I don't recall anybody that I knew from before the war who was doing the same thing I was. A lot of them went into weather and some went into actual flight training if they qualified which wasn't easy to do. I tried but I was turned down.

**I:** Were a lot of people interested in learning to fly?

**RF:** Oh yes. That was a glamour part. I was too light. I weighed one hundred and six pounds and I think you had to be one hundred and ten or one hundred and fifteen or something.

**I:** That's very light for any adult.

**RF:** You wouldn't believe it now.

**I:** Oh yes, I would. Now you made your way back to Clark University and graduated in what year?

**RF:** Forty-seven. I had taken two years off to work and two years in the service. So I first went up there in 1940 and then in forty-seven.

**I:** Was that typical of the time also especially because of the war where a lot of students maybe older than the typical undergraduate age student?

**RF:** Oh, very typical. Clark University first admitted women in 1942. It had been all male. During the war there were virtually no men there and then we all came back at once [unclear].

**I:** And so, English Literature was your major and then you moved directly back to Bridgeport to work in your family's business. And at that time did you take a more significant role in the daily activities? I don't know how old your parents were at the time or your father who had started the business.

**RF:** Oh yes, of course. At this point I was doing some of the selling and some of the buying which I continued to do.

**I:** And did you travel for that also, outside of Bridgeport?

**RF:** No, only for trade shows, conventions, trade association functions and whatnot.

**I:** And then this office supplies company really became your career, your profession. You devoted it to that. And why don't you tell me a little bit about the post-war

working climate then in the 1950's since you were taking a more significant role in the business and established yourself back in Bridgeport.

**RF:** Excellent time to be in business. A lot of people made a lot of money during the war and there were all kinds of technical innovations of every kind. Every product was redesigned and improved and new products of all kinds [unclear] affordable and at that time industry was going strong so it was quite easy to make a living, actually.

**I:** For those of us who are lay people to the office supply world, you mentioned some of the product innovations or the products that became popular in the post-war environment. Can you just tell me more specifically about some of the things that you were dealing in?

**RF:** Yes. I will try. Manual typewriters became electric. What had been adding machines became calculators with additional functions. You could multiply and divide which had been--. With a printing function. You're too young to remember this but at one time if you had an adding machine it was a treasure and all you wanted to do was add and you had to pay extra if you wanted to subtract. Then the Olivetti people came along with one that would multiply and divide and give you a printed tape instead of just a displaying kind of thing. Electric typewriters with the correction feature and then primitive copying machines were huge and became more and more sophisticated. Miniature calculators. The nature of furniture changed. Plastics, for instance. Like people think these things are common place, but at one time if you had a metal desk and a linoleum top and then like the formica came along, plastics and simulated wood finishes so that if you went to purchase a wooden desk you would not necessarily have to pay the price of actual wood like this table, formica top, simulated wood finish was like half the price of most moderately priced furniture made that way. And then there were surfaces made of particle board instead of solid wood so technology changed and made things much more affordable and made the public conscious of what was available and the public wanted at least better looking things instead of purely functional things. At this point we faded out of really specializing in used furniture

because attractive new furniture became affordable. So it's the kind of transition that the person wouldn't notice from the outside but to a professional it was very important.

- I:** Now, who were your clients?
- RF:** Just about everyone really. We had a substantial business with churches and non-profits. Did a lot of business with the University of Bridgeport and Sacred Heart, professionals. Physicians and dentists. We did waiting rooms for professionals. A lot of lawyers and industry, of course.
- I:** That was still a time of active production for a lot of industries in Bridgeport. Do you remember anything about that time in terms of the factories that were operating here? Did you know anybody who worked at any of those companies? Did they affect your daily work or have any interaction with them?
- RF:** Well, some as clients and some as personal friends, but I can't say anything particularly significant. Just people. I know what you're trying to get at but it's difficult for me to--.
- I:** I just want to hear about your own experience.
- RF:** Yes, you talk about the industrial climate in Bridgeport. All I know is that it was a busy, prosperous, happy place.
- I:** Right. So it was not a period of great unemployment in the city?
- RF:** No, we had some labor troubles. A big General Electric strike, I remember and Bryant Electric had a strike. You know the electrical workers [unclear], but otherwise it was a fairly tranquil labor period as far as I remember it.
- I:** Well, you were always more or less in business for yourself or involved in the family business. Were there any associations or anything like these labor unions for some of these large industrial workers or groups? Were there any kind of work-related organizations for people who operated their own businesses or entrepreneurs?
- RF:** Yes. There's a National Office Products Association of which we were members and Connecticut Valley Office Products Association of which we were also

members. I was president of that in 1972. We'd meet once a month, a dinner meeting with a speaker and a golf tournament and social convention kind of thing.

**I:** So that was a mixture of business associates or fellow colleagues?

**RF:** Well, you'd meet your colleagues from other cities and also the manufacturers' people, the sales people who used that as a medium to interact with their clients.

**I:** And how did you come to become president in 1972? Had you had several offices in that organization over the years?

**RF:** Yes. It's not difficult to become president of an organization like that, believe me. The first thing, somebody asks you to be the secretary or the treasurer and you do that for a couple of years. Nobody wants those jobs. You do that, then you're vice-president and then president and so on.

**I:** What were your duties?

**RF:** Not much. Just preside at the meetings and make sure you have a program.

**I:** That's interesting.

**RF:** Yes. And when the National Association had a business meeting or convention or something, you went as a delegate and they paid your expenses. That was the perk.

**I:** And now that you were a business man in your own right and established back in Bridgeport, where were you living at the time?

**RF:** I was living in Fairfield.

**I:** You had chosen to move from Bridgeport to Fairfield?

**RF:** Well, I got married during the 1950's and rented a house in Easton for a couple of years during which time we looked for a place to buy which we could afford and the place we bought was in Fairfield.

**I:** And did you have children?

**RF:** Yes. I have two daughters.

**I:** And they attended the Fairfield schools then?

**RF:** That's right.

**I:** Of course, you didn't work in a large company, but would you say that some of your friends perhaps who had their own businesses also were living outside of

Bridgeport at the time? Was that more typical than in the pre-war period when you'd been working for your father's business?

**RF:** Far more typical.

**I:** What do you think some of the reasons were?

**RF:** Continuing process, of course. People moved out of Bridgeport. I think it's only more recently that people moved out of Bridgeport for negative reasons. Most people moved out for positive reasons. They wanted more space. They wanted a better school system. Wanted to be near their friends. Various legitimate, positive reasons, as I look back on it. Not people who moved out of Bridgeport because of high taxes or for race problems or fear or whatever. [unclear].

**I:** You mentioned some of the negative reasons for things that you see now. At what time do you think did the climate start to change in terms of--? Did that affect your work and your business, some of these negative things that you see now occurring in the city or the living patterns and so forth?

**RF:** Yes, I would say that it affected my work to some slight extent. We had an arson fire. Our building was burned down. A few little things like that.

**I:** When was that?

**RF:** It was definitely was a set fire. They never caught anybody. In 1975.

**I:** And at that point you'd say that the working environment in Bridgeport, from your own experience, had started to change?

**RF:** Probably.

**I:** Things were less prosperous or--?

**RF:** Yes, except that there was no substantial migration of our clients from the city of Bridgeport. For instance, we had substantial business with large law firms downtown. The only large law firm left downtown is Pullman and Connelly. The others--. Well, [unclear] is still here, I guess but [unclear] were a good customer in Southport. A number of others. And the same thing with the banks and insurance people and doctors. There used to be a number of buildings in downtown Bridgeport that were occupied by physicians as tenants and there are

practically none of those now. They'd rather buy a Victorian house somewhere and practice out of there rather than a downtown office building.

- I:** So with the arson, you don't really know why your business in particular was targeted?
- RF:** No, because so much was destroyed it was very difficult to know what was taken. Most of the stuff we sold was of no great value to steal except for the office machines which were a small part of our business. But nobody's going to haul away furniture or reams of paper.
- I:** What did you do after that happened? How did you rebuild the business? What measures did you take?
- RF:** Fortunately we are a company that's very well regarded in the trade so we got all kinds of cooperation, both from our suppliers and our customers and our colleagues in the trade. All the other dealers that existed at that time all helped us in many different ways. So we operated from a temporary location and rebuilt the building, added a second story on, got a zoning waiver for certain exceptions and redid the whole interior, a whole different concept and actually won a prize for rebuilt stores from the national association.
- I:** Where was the building located?
- RF:** Porter Street. Does that tell you anything?
- I:** For the record, what part of the city is that in?
- RF:** North End. Southern part of the North End. Do you know where Saint Patrick's Church is?
- I:** Yes.
- RF:** Well, Porter Street starts opposite North [unclear]
- I:** Okay. Well, we've gone through some of it. Just continuing. You were mentioning the facility in the 1970's that you rebuilt up on Porter Street in the North End. Where did your father first have the business located? Was it always there?
- RF:** No, his first store was at 1640 Main Street which is [unclear]. You know where Washington Avenue comes down to Main Street? The Turnpike is there now.

- I:** Right. And then was this the only other location, the Porter Street location?
- RF:** There were a number of them. The next one was at Broad Street. Broad and Prospect Street. Thruway's down there, too. And then upstairs at the corner of Broad and John.
- I:** Very close to the library.
- RF:** It's now a parking lot. There was a building there. The Gates Carriage Factory was there.
- I:** And how did you come to choose these locations? Was it just because the business expanded or you needed a place to store supplies, or--?
- RF:** A combination. These were all rented places of course and sometimes the landlord wanted it for his own purposes and sometimes it was a matter of expanding.
- I:** By the time you were off of Porter Street, how many people did you have working for you?
- RF:** Four or five when we started. Now there are more. Since I left it has grown even more. Ten or twelve.
- I:** When did you leave?
- RF:** I left in 1980.
- I:** In 1980. You retired from the business and then you sold the business?
- RF:** After we rebuilt and moved back into the new place, my father by this point was eighty-nine years old and still working.
- I:** Oh, he was still involved in the businesses? Tell me more about that.
- RF:** I was in my fifties and my father and I decided why don't we just sell the business and sell the building and it would give him enough money to live comfortably for his remaining years and I would have a cushion and I could always do something else so we put the business up for sale through business brokers. Two people came along who had some interest in buying it. I suddenly had the impulse that I didn't really want to retire. I just wanted some relief. I was working too hard. So I got these two people together. One had a background in the industry, worked for another dealership and he was unhappy. The other one had been a prominent corporate executive who had to leave corporate work for personal reasons. So I

got these two guys together and I said, "Why don't we form a three-way partnership?" One had management skills, one had industry experience and I was part of the community here so I thought it would be an ideal thing so that's what we did. Sold two-thirds of the business. One-third each. [unclear]. My father retired and so we operated this partnership for five or six years with the [unclear] with the idea that I would eventually retire and I would be the first because I was much older than the other two and we had contractual agreements as to how this transition was going to take place and the payout and all that kind of thing. At the appropriate time I retired and they continued the business.

- I:** And so when the actual retirement after you got involved with the partnership was in the '80's?
- RF:** Yes, I was sixty-two which would have made me--. Let's see, when was I sixty-two? Nineteen eighty-two, eighty-three.
- I:** You mentioned something interesting. I hadn't realized that your father was still involved in the business all those years. Can you tell more about what that was like?
- RF:** It was his only interest.
- I:** What kinds of roles did he play? When you arrived at work, who did what? What was the typical day like?
- RF:** After a certain length of time, my father devoted himself primarily to the financial side of the business. Scheduling payment of bills. Collecting delinquent receivables, that kind of thing. He lost interest, really, in acquiring product knowledge which was really my specialty and wasn't capable of doing any of the buying at that point because he didn't have the rhythm of what was selling and inventory and that kind of thing. So I was basically running the day-to-day part of the business and he was doing, I guess, more or less by default, what I wasn't doing --and which I was perfectly glad to allow him to do because he was good at it. He was a good money man. He only had a seventh grade education but a great mind for organization I guess you might call it. His hobby, when he was young,

was taking civil service examinations and I still have clippings at home where he came in second or third in New York State for civil service exams for auditors.

- I:** But he never pursued a civil service career?
- RF:** He just took them for fun, that's all.
- I:** Probably the best position to be in.
- RF:** Yes. He was a great reader and a thinker. You realize this after your parents are gone. What their resources were.
- I:** In your home life or with your contact with him as an adult, once you moved back to Bridgeport, did you share any of those interests outside of the office? Did you have times where you could participate--?
- RF:** Not really. We were opposite poles politically so we just, after awhile, stopped discussing that.
- I:** Why don't you tell me a little about that? Tell me about some of your political interests or activities as an adult in Bridgeport. Or maybe start with your family when you were a boy. What were your parents' political interests if any? Were they active in a particular party?
- RF:** I came across among my father's affects after he died, either a calling card or a piece of stationary which indicated that his was president of a young Democratic club in the Bronx when he was a very young man. Why he didn't burn that years later, I don't know.
- I:** He had a change of heart?
- RF:** I remember having a Herbert Hoover picture in the window in 1928.
- I:** Well, that sets the tone for at least those years.
- RF:** And it wasn't based on that because Al Smith was Catholic, you know. It was just his ideas of who was a good American.
- I:** Did he participate on the local level in actively supporting any local candidates of that same ilk or--?
- RF:** Well, not doing anything about it except talking and voting. But then I became acquainted in high school with some real left-wingers. Card-carrying Communists, actually. In high school.

- I:** And was that unusual at the time or was that a fairly significant factor of interest for students of that age?
- RF:** In our high school, no, not fairly significant, but you got to know them citywide --who were the two or three schoolteachers in the Bridgeport system.
- I:** So they were members of a local Communist...?
- RF:** ...fellow travelers. Of course, the Communist party was a public thing and there were many people who had no reluctance about admitting they were Communists. It wasn't a stigma at that time.
- I:** What attracted you to those students? Were there political activities that [unclear]?
- RF:** Primarily probably the charm of the few individuals with whom I became acquainted, the circle of people. Like a gang, you know. You feel like it's a second home.
- I:** Did you meet anywhere to discuss--?
- RF:** Nothing formal about it. We did meet. One of my friend's widowed mother had a little grocery store in the West End. We used to hang around the back room there and talk politics.
- I:** What were some of the issues at the time? This was when you were in high school in the 1930's.
- RF:** Yes, the Spanish Civil War for one thing, but primarily abstract consideration of the class struggle. Doing great things in Russia and everybody suffering over here, kinds of things. We were [unclear] deluded of course. There's some merit in it. I've been way on the left side of the spectrum ever since, although, I never carried a card. I never became a Communist, but when I've had a choice, I've always taken the left-wing position.
- I:** But your father and your family really was involved in running its own business so you may not have run across some of the more typical or generic worker issues that were being discussed at the time. Did you take a particular interest just because of activities in the Soviet Union or events in the Soviet Union and world politics or were you interested also in the Bridgeport business climate, the many

large industries here that had blue-collar work forces and maybe companies with unions?

**RF:** We always talked theory and idealism. We never connected it with our next door neighbor. It's the class struggle, the big cosmic thing. You never bring it down to the individual.

**I:** The dialectic? When did you clash then in your discussions with your father? You had different political views when you as an adult in the post-war period, when you were working in the business together?

**RF:** We stopped discussing that kind of thing and he very quickly, I'm sure, came to realize that I was more than capable of doing what I had to do in the business. The business kept growing. And I think the business kept growing largely through my talents and my efforts and as he became older and older and less capable of doing the day-to-day things that made the business grow, I eventually had practically the entire responsibility for running this and he was perfectly willing to defer to me and we never talked politics.

**I:** What about your mother? Did she express any views while the earlier discussions were going on?

**RF:** Not really, no. She kind of stayed in the background.

**I:** Was she still involved in the business after the war?

**RF:** No. As it grew, of course, we needed full time bookkeeping help so she retired from that.

**I:** So whom did you have working for you? Did the people mainly come from Bridgeport? Did they have different educational backgrounds?

**RF:** Yes, mainly people who resided in Bridgeport, I guess. Individuals. They weren't all natives of Bridgeport, of course because thousands of people came to Bridgeport during the war and stayed here.

**I:** But was it hard to get good employees for your business?

**RF:** It's always hard to get good employees. It really is. Good people have good jobs so you have tremendous turnover, particularly on the blue-collar side. Somebody

comes in for two days and then never shows up again. It happens over and over again over the years.

- I:** Did you have any employees who stayed with the business for many years the way you did?
- RF:** Yes, we had one man who was with us for over twenty years. He passed away and we had a bookkeeper who lasted maybe fifteen years and finally she decided to retire after her husband died. She was probably pushing eighty at that time and still doing great.
- I:** What was it like since you had this family business you were operating, you weren't this large employer like some of the large manufacturers or maybe a university in town? How was it terms of offering competitive wages or providing benefits? Did that change a great deal? Maybe when your parents started out there probably wasn't any discussion of--.
- RF:** It was only after we formed the partnership when we decided to do business in a really business-like way and, as I say, my one partner had who had a lot of experience in corporate work innovated a lot of things. A profit-sharing plan and medical insurance and retirement benefits which he knew had to be done to be competitive.
- I:** And that was in the 1980's?
- RF:** Yes, around 1980.
- I:** So prior to that what provisions, if any, were made for perhaps health insurance or maybe some things that were offered by other companies?
- RF:** Virtually none. My father and I had health insurance which we bought with company funds, but we really didn't provide it for anybody else. We used a lot of temporary people. You know you're not obligated to do that.
- I:** Right. And so was that ever an issue even in your work place? People didn't expect it or didn't ask you for it?
- RF:** No, I don't think so. I guess it became more and more universal. People wouldn't consider working for us without those things. That's the pattern, of course. It's the universal pattern today and it was pretty much of a pattern even back then.

- I:** You were mentioning that you, as an adult, as a retiree and as a before working adult, hard working business man, that you've had many outside, non-business related activities and interests that you've been involved in here in Bridgeport.
- RF:** Until recently, I've always been going to school. I've attended every one of the colleges -- Fairfield and Housatonic and Sacred Heart, and UB -- at one time or another. [Fairfield University, Housatonic Community College, Sacred Heart, and University of Bridgeport]
- I:** Okay. So University of Bridgeport. And what kinds of courses have you taken there?
- RF:** Anything not connected with my livelihood.
- I:** Can you elaborate a little?
- RF:** Yes. At the University of Bridgeport I took a course in anatomy and physiology, if I remember. At Housatonic, the only thing I took was swimming pool management because they have a swimming pool up there and they maintain it.
- I:** I didn't know they offered a course in that. That sounds very useful.
- RF:** Years ago when I was with my other family. At Fairfield I've taken all kinds of stuff. A lot of history, philosophy, religion. History of the Orient and the napoleonic era and the Balkan wars and the area of colonialism. All kinds of stuff in Fairfield and many religion courses. Literature courses, music, history of art, architecture.
- I:** Wonderful. So what kinds of religion courses are you interested in? What areas of religious study?
- RF:** I took a course on the history of the Vatican tomb, for instance. And another one on--. I'm trying to think of how they termed it. Kind of off center religions. We studied the Quakers and the Shakers and the Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science and all that kind of thing. Because at that time my younger daughter was involved in what we considered a dangerous cult and Sally [wife] and I and my first wife were very concerned about this so it was appropriate. We learned a lot and eased our minds. Fairfield has something they call the IRP. I don't know if you're familiar with it. Institute for Retired Professionals. The program they have.

If you're a certain age, whatever it is, fifty-five or whatever. If you join this, they meet once a month, generally on a Thursday with a speaker and you're able to audit any course in the entire education department. So it's a very inexpensive way and you make new friends or whatever so as a result of that we've taken many courses.

- I:** Now, how about outside of taking courses? Are there any other civic clubs or different organizations that you've been involved in?
- RF:** Yes, there are a number of things. Binai Brith which is the [unclear] Jewish organization. I'm the past president of the local lodge in that. I'm also the president of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Bridgeport.
- I:** Those are substantial positions.
- RF:** Yes and I'm a wetlands conservation commissioner for the town of Easton.
- I:** How long have you been doing that?
- RF:** For about ten years now.
- I:** Has been there been a greater awareness? Is that a newer organization compared to some of these others?
- RF:** It's not a [unclear] organization. It's part of the town government. We have to protect the wetland, watersheds. People who want to do anything that impacts on wetlands and watersheds have to come before us for approval.
- I:** Is that something that the towns around here have been concerned about for some time or is that a more recent development in terms of town government taking action?
- RF:** The Conservation Commission in Easton is probably about twenty years old. And I think every municipality in the state has a conservation commission which was mandated by a state statute, by legislation at that time. We have our own regulations but they're based on a set of prototype regulations that are issued by the state Environmental Protection Agency.
- I:** And that enjoys a wide base of support from the town citizenship?
- RF:** Oh yes, except the developers. That's the whole idea is to make developers behave.

- I:** And has it been successful on the whole? Have your efforts--?
- RF:** It's very difficult to deny a developer the right to do what he wants to do. Property rights are vital to everybody. Basically what we do is insist that people comply with our regulations and modify their plans in such a way that they do comply and most of the developers that work in Easton are pretty well disciplined to anticipate in advance when they bring a set of plans before us. They show how they have attempted to bypass or mitigate any damage to the wetlands.
- I:** How have you seen development change in Bridgeport? You've lived in and around Bridgeport for many years. Have you seen certain kinds of development in terms of building or the parks and protecting the environment? Has it become dirtier, cleaner?
- RF:** Dirty. Short term it seems to be [unclear]. What can I tell you? I lived through the pattern, the redevelopment thing where they tore down whole neighborhoods around here long before--.
- I:** What were some of those neighborhoods? Can you go into detail?
- RF:** Well, the entire length of State Street for instance, from Main Street up to Park Avenue which is almost all like public buildings now. [unclear] for professionals and the other side all kinds of shops, whatever.
- I:** So downtown used to have a lot more businesses as well as these smaller buildings?
- RF:** It's the only place business was. Well, I shouldn't say that. There were business neighborhoods elsewhere like [unclear] East Main Street in the North End. Downtown was where everybody did the major part of the shopping obviously. You've seen the postcards [[unclear].
- I:** Yes.
- RF:** A whole different city and certainly a better city.
- I:** So you don't view the tearing down of some these neighborhoods as a mistake? Just part of a normal process or development?
- RF:** I don't see that anybody benefits by tearing down a residential neighborhood and putting up an office building. [unclear], no problem.

- I:** Yes. Were you ever displaced by this kind of development or you had already left those areas of Bridgeport, your business and your residential--.
- RF:** No, I don't ever recall being forced to move. Never happened to be in the right place at the right time or whatever.
- I:** And the parks and things. Has that changed a lot over the years, the use or the redevelopment?
- RF:** I don't think so. I don't recall ever using the parks very much to be honest with you. It is known as the Park City and I spent some time in the parks but there's never been a central park in my leisure time. I ice skated at Seaside.
- I:** Oh. Was that on a rink provided by the city or a pond down there?
- RF:** Yes. The pond froze over.
- I:** Well, how about some of your other volunteer activities. You mentioned you were the president of the Jewish Historical Society. Is that a substantial group here in Bridgeport or is that a community-wide organization?
- RF:** Well, it's in greater Bridgeport. Of course many of live in the suburbs. We have about one hundred and twenty dues paying members and at our public meetings we get one hundred plus people usually.
- I:** What are some of your main activities?
- RF:** We run three public programs a year. That's basically what it's all about. Generally our spring program is a--. We try to do a musical program sometime and I think Jewish music of some kind. Otherwise we try to have a program on Jewish history, either national or international or local if we can do it.
- I:** Are the members all different ages?
- RF:** Yes, but it's really skewed toward the older. We don't have many young people. We have a lot of quite elderly people. We meet on Sunday afternoon which is a good time for these old folks. They'll go out and eat and it's a chance for them to meet their old friends and whatever and talk about old times. When we have a speaker on a local thing, of course, the speaker is just buried in questions and comments from these people. He can't get away.
- I:** What were some of the local topics that were discussed?

**RF:** We had a program on local kosher butchers, for instance. And another one on pharmacists and another one on physicians and some of the fraternal societies, burial societies, church societies and these groups that own cemeteries and whatever which are gradually fading away, there's a lot of nostalgia. The Free Loan society and that kind of thing. Institutions which are gradually disappearing because they are no longer needed.

**I:** Can you tell me more about the Free Loan Society?

**RF:** Very common among the Jewish communities. Every city had one and everybody paid modest dues and then every member could borrow and at no interest. It was just a way of neighbor helping neighbor. A business-like, non-threatening way.

**I:** Was that aimed toward newly arrived immigrants, or was it just something community-wide participants for anybody who wanted to--?

**RF:** As far as I know, the founders, the first generation of organizers were probably immigrants themselves who were here long enough to understand American ways so they could organize something and get the necessary credentials and open a bank account and keep books and that kind of thing. If you look at the old books and ledgers of these organizations, most of them are written in Yiddish. Some of them aren't translatable.

**I:** At what point did they stop writing them in Yiddish and start writing them in English?

**RF:** Well, when the son of the immigrant, he became a lawyer or a CPA and he took over for his father and his father died and he said, "Let's get this thing organized."

**I:** You mentioned that your family attended a reformed synagogue? Were any of these kosher butchers or other, maybe Jewish owned businesses an important part of your family life or did you make less use of them than perhaps some other members of the Jewish community of Bridgeport?

**RF:** No, the reformed group does not respect the dietary laws.

**I:** Right. So those businesses were not really part of your daily life growing up in Bridgeport?

**RF:** No and also there was a, and still continues, a dichotomy between the German Jews and the Eastern European Jews. You probably have seen evidence of this here and there.

**I:** Yes. And what did you experience in that--?

**RF:** In New York they call them the uptown Jews and the downtown Jews.

**I:** But that was also true, you say, in Bridgeport. You experienced that?

**RF:** Absolutely.

**I:** Can you go into that a little bit in terms of your personal experience?

**RF:** My associations--. Let me get this right. I had a group and acquaintances within the synagogue, --people who were in the same class in Sunday School and that kind of thing. But these people coincidentally were not close neighbors so I knew them from the boy scouts and the Sunday School proper, but I didn't socialize with them, just because we didn't live close enough to do that. Other Jewish friends I had from the neighborhood were really orthodox or conservative and I always thought their lifestyle was a little bit peculiar.

**I:** And did they have a more Eastern European background?

**RF:** Yes. One family in particular, my closest friend's. I still remain friends. I mean I still see them a few times a year. We went all through school. He's lived in Los Angeles for years, but his family kept a kosher house and he had to take Hebrew lessons in preparation for his bar mitzvah, -- all these different things -- which my mother of a German background, and really a bit of a snob about these things, didn't have very much respect for this kind of religious observance -- not ever to the extent of saying when these people are doing something that's valuable to them. Now that I look back on it, my mother, because of her own background was a bit of a bigot I guess. You know the reform movement was started in Germany in the 1840's. When these people came over they brought it with them and disseminated it throughout the United States, so my mother knew nothing else and my father, I guess was brought up in an orthodox household, but very quickly abandoned it completely, no interest in it. So my father is of the generation where it was very important to be one hundred percent American. He didn't change his

name. He never said he didn't want to be Jewish. I'm sure he was brought up in a household that spoke Yiddish but he would never speak Yiddish to us. And my mother spoke only German in her home until she went to school because her father insisted she learn that language before she learned English.

- I:** How did your father change his name?
- RF:** He didn't change his name.
- I:** Oh, he didn't. Excuse me.
- RF:** He didn't know, and of course I don't know what the name really was in the old country. It could have been anything. In fact I think I have a pretty good handle on my mother's genealogy, but zero on my father's.
- I:** You mentioned also that you're now currently president of the--. Could you say the name of the organization?
- RF:** Binai Brith? No I'm past president. A number of years back.
- I:** That must have been a very substantial position of a large organization. Was that the local chapter?
- RF:** Yes. Just the local lodge.
- I:** And does that also draw upon Jews from this community of different backgrounds or are they mainly all different congregations?
- RF:** It was founded by German Jews to provide a vehicle for accommodating waves of the immigration of Eastern European Jews. But now it's pretty much of a catchall. There isn't anything of this dichotomy that shows up in that [unclear]. Of course, Jewish society is dominated by the Eastern European Jews at this point. The German Jews are insignificant at this point.
- I:** What kinds of activities did you involve yourself in then when you were active in that organization?
- RF:** The local chapter is relatively limited as to what it can do. The organization has substantial national programs like elderly housing and youth education programs and support for Israel and that kind of thing. What you do basically in your local lodge is try to keep things together to raise money to send to them. But there are social activities and certain amount of fellowship. And we do some local projects,

like every Christmas we get a group together and work in the hospitals to let other people go home. We've been doing that for a number of years and we've had blood banks and various kinds of interfaith activities. And many things over the years. Like many volunteer organizations, it's not getting stronger. Younger people don't want very much to get involved in organizations. I don't know if you've become aware of this, but speak to anybody from a fraternal or charitable organization and they all have trouble recruiting young people.

- I:** Where do you think the problem lies in doing it? I take it you've been involved the organization for several years. For many years. Also before you retired?
- RF:** Yes, for a long time, but awfully hard to get young people to join. If you interview somebody who's active in Masons or the Knights of Columbus, which are counterpart organizations, you'll find exactly the same things. I remember when the Masons had a three-story building on Broad Street where the Chase Bank building is now. Storefronts in the basement, but three stories above there and there must have been a dozen different Masonic lodges in the Bridgeport area and each one had a clubroom and they had all kinds of elaborate activities. Now you never hear of Masonry anymore.
- I:** Where do you think the problem lies in--?
- RF:** I don't know. Everybody who's involved in these organizations tries to come up with his own diagnosis of it. Some people say it's suburban living. Some people say it's television. Some people say it's golf.
- I:** People are more disbursed. Not as concentrated or focused on community life in the city, or--?
- RF:** I think it's a deterioration of social values or selfishness, less unselfishness. People get wrapped up in their own family and maybe it has to do with aspirations. You know how people are. More interested in working hard and saving their money for their kids' education or working hard to buy a bigger, better house to show off to their neighbors. I don't know. I'm just speculating, but we talk about it all the time. Every organization I've ever been associated with. How will we find young people to join our organization and keep it alive?

- I:** Does that correspond to the general changes you've seen in the city? You don't live directly in Bridgeport now but you certainly participated in community life through the years.
- RF:** It's universal. This particular problem has nothing to do with Bridgeport. You get the national magazine from Binai Brith and that's a big topic all the time.
- I:** Now you've also been a volunteer at the Bridgeport Public Library for how many years?
- RF:** Oh, about fifteen.
- I:** And what are some of the things that you've done while you've been working at the library?
- RF:** I classified and indexed, or whatever the term is, the McLevy papers and also the Locomobile collection. Each one of those took several months to do according to the standards I was told at the time. They haven't stayed that way, I know.
- I:** For the record then, the McLevy papers were papers from Jasper McLevy, the mayor of Bridgeport at one time.
- RF:** Yes, his own collection of documents which includes, I'm sure you know, a lot of correspondence from his interest as a Socialist before he became mayor. National Socialist Party and then after the Norman Thomas era, the United Front and all that kind of stuff which is part of the [unclear] League.
- I:** Yes, you mentioned before that your political views usually tended to the left. Is that a project that working on the McLevy papers interested you? Do you remember much about his period as mayor? He was mayor from 1933 to 1957?
- RF:** Yes, I remember. I met him. I was hitch hiking once and he picked me up in the car.
- I:** Where was that?
- RF:** Up on Route 7. During high school days I used to hitch hike up to Tanglewood in the summer and listen to music for a weekend. So Jasper picked us up in his old Ford and brought us as far as the turnover from Bridgewater where his farm was [unclear].
- I:** Did you have a conversation about politics or anything:

**RF:** I don't remember what we talked about. It was like 1938.

**I:** How about later when he was mayor? You were a working adult in the city here. What was the climate like?

**RF:** I used to attend the Common Council meetings now and then. Very little criticism of the integrity of the local administration. Just about zero as opposed to--. Every mayor we've had since McLevy has had enemies and they don't hesitate to point out things that they think should be questioned. This virtually never came up with McLevy.

I used to attend the Common Council meetings just for fun when Jasper was presiding.

**I:** What was that like?

**RF:** He was a master. Really a man with a limited education but tremendously astute and always told everything exactly as it was. I don't think the man ever told a lie in his life. He was incapable of it.

**I:** And did that endear him even to non-Socialists? He was mayor for a long time.

**RF:** Yes. Well, of course he was in bed with the economic interests of the city as well. For the economic health of the city. I think his first official act when he took office was to prevail on larger industries and utilities to pay their taxes in advance which was the way he got enough cash flow in the city to pay the back wages and [unclear]. He was always hand in glove with the Warners and the [unclear] and Company and the General Electrics.

**I:** What about the climate for small business? Businesses or family-owned businesses like yours?

**RF:** Well, of course, he established central purchasing. Previous to his administration each department did its own purchasing and what really got him into office was the coal scandals in the early 1930's when every member of the Board of Education was getting free coal in exchange for its contract with the school system. You probably read some of those old newspapers. If you haven't, you should. There were indictments and people went to jail and whatnot and that's what put McLevy into office. So he established a central purchasing office and if any department or

library wanted to buy a table they had to bring a requisition for the table to central purchasing, put it out to bid and that was that. Our relationships with the city of Bridgeport were always on the up and up. The only problem sometimes was collecting.

- I:** There were delays?
- RF:** My father made a friend in the comptroller's office where he could go down and have our bill moved up a few [unclear]. They were always slow paying the bills but you never had the feeling that you were treated unfairly.
- I:** Was there ever a problem with some people winning favorable contracts over others? --favoritism in the city awarding business to particular businesses?
- RF:** In those days we never had any real evidence of it. We got our share of the public bids. I don't recall ever losing one unfairly. I think there was just one time when Remington Rand had a factory in Bridgeport at that time making carbon paper and typewriter ribbons and I guess they leaned on the administration to purchase those requirements from them since they were a local industry and taxpayer and so on. So the smaller bidders got frozen out on that one. That's the only instance I remember where the low bidder wasn't respected. I remember another instance at a Common Council meeting I went to and there was a contract for a firehouse and the low bidder who was the low bidder by a very substantial amount. Obviously there had to be a mistake because there were five or six around here and this little guy was way down there and did petition the city to allow them to withdraw from the contract which they told them they had made a mistake. They'd left out the line item for the structural steel or whatever it was that was a big part of the contract. Jasper brought it before the Common Council and said that it certainly wasn't the intention of this city to force someone into bankruptcy because of an innocent mistake and he asked the Common Council to approve giving the contract to the next low bidder with the understanding that the other bidder who had made the mistake not be allowed to re-bid, that he be excluded from participation. The [unclear] was Solomon-like. That was Jasper. A combination of rigid honesty with plain common sense. They could have forced this guy to go

through with the contract and he'd wind up cold broke and the city would suffer and the thing would never be finished. Do the right thing; that's all.

- I:** Was it your job in the business to keep abreast of these public bidding offers when there were maybe contracts available? Was that something that you kept abreast of?
- RF:** Yes. You didn't bid on everything if you didn't think you had a decent chance, if you knew your competition was stronger in a particular area or sometimes they would specify a particular brand name or equivalent and there wasn't any equivalent and you knew perfectly well that the thing was--. Legitimately, you know.
- I:** You mentioned attending Common Council meetings. Did you ever run yourself for an office or--?
- RF:** Never did.
- I:** And also not in any of the other towns that you've lived in?
- RF:** No. I always registered as a Democrat but never participated otherwise.
- I:** Do you think the political climate here in Bridgeport--? You must still follow Bridgeport politics.
- RF:** Can't help it.
- I:** Changed a lot over the years? Do you see any new trends on the horizon?
- RF:** I haven't quite digested [unclear]. I really don't know. I think that what we have now is such a mix of federal and state and local milieu all mixed up in various proportions that it's very hard to form any sound idea what the economics in any particular community is. Not just the daily functions of government. Let's take welfare -- ADC and all these programs. Tens of millions of dollars come into Bridgeport which do not pass through the city government or some of them pass through the city government for the block grant and are redistributed. And the state, of course, kicks in a substantial amount, particularly to the schools. But you don't how much that the state gives you is actually federal money which just goes through the state for political and other reasons. So there's no such thing as a kind of autonomous community that you used to have where you had a budget and this

was the money that ran the city and you raised that amount of money and spent that amount of money and that was an end to it. But it's a whole different ballgame today.

- I:** Do you see a difference in the kind of poverty and unemployment that you see now in the city versus an earlier period that you mentioned before in the early 1930's in the Depression.
- RF:** Oh, absolutely.
- I:** What are some of the differences?
- RF:** What was considered welfare was not distributed primarily in the form of money in those days. It was distributed in kind. I've had friends tell me about going to a central place to get a pair of shoes. The food being distributed, not by voluntary charities, the way it is now, food bank and Burton House and all that stuff. Food was distributed, but tiny amounts of money, but not nearly enough to survive. There was no such thing as a climate of welfare. Well, I don't recall ever knowing that any of my friends or neighbors in those days was a beneficiary of charity, either government, public, or private. And there must have been, with all the people I went to school with, there must have been some of them.
- I:** You mentioned you had a friend who worked for the CCC?
- RF:** Yes.
- I:** That was a little later?
- RF:** Yes. But I've had people tell me now, like at a high school reunion when you talk over old times and people tell you how desperately poor their families were.
- I:** So it was more private.
- RF:** Yes, in those days. But I don't remember ever coming to--. We were poor, too but I didn't think of myself as poor. Everybody's middle class [unclear]. My father represented one company who would send him his commission check immediately upon receipt of an order. Not waiting until the order was shipped, until the customer had paid for it. In other words, as soon as he sent in the order, they would send him his commission so this was like his welfare. I remember my mother telling me that there would be times he'd go out on the road in his Model T

Ford with one dollar. He'd leave one dollar with my mother to support the family for the days he was going to be away with the expectation that he would get one of these miniscule commission checks that would come in the mail. They were like a dollar or a dollar and one-half or whatever it was and that's what they lived on. So we were poor, too. Never thought of it as being poor.

- I:** Where did he stay? Just by way of interest, where did he stay when he went on the--?
- RF:** He would stay in YMCA's for fifty cents. Model T Ford didn't take much gas.
- I:** Gasoline was a lot less expensive, too.
- RF:** Well, this thing I'm doing now, with this Davis collection, there's a lot of records for purchase of gasoline, of course--.
- I:** For the Locomobile?
- RF:** Gasoline was like thirteen or fourteen cents.
- I:** Well, those days are gone. Of course, that's been inflation all the way around.
- RF:** My father replaced a--. I can't remember. A Model T Ford for another Model T Ford and I can remember his paying like six hundred dollars or so for a brand new car.
- I:** So as long as you can remember, your family had a car, though?
- RF:** But then he got behind in his payments and had to turn it back, until he got together enough to buy another used one.
- I:** So he did have to get another one for the business.
- RF:** As long as I can remember, we always had a car, yes. Which was not true of everybody on the street. A third of the people on the street had cars.
- I:** And you mainly traveled by foot or maybe by bus or trolley in the city.
- RF:** You could take a bus downtown for five cents.
- I:** And did they have a lot of buses then? Was there a good network?
- RF:** Well, there were a half dozen small independent companies. The Gray Line and the Barnam State and the one we had on our corner was the Brooklawn Plaza. They were all a nickel. And then the Connecticut Company which was [unclear] was a statewide company, a network, trolleys, of course, and then when the

trolleys were replaced by the buses, they continued with same routes with the buses. They were on all the main streets and the other bus lines just serviced the neighborhoods. Went up and down Main Street and up and down Fairfield Avenue and whatever. The Connecticut Company, they were ten cents and three for a quarter, tokens.

- I:** Now you mentioned you have relatives in New Haven. Did you have much occasion to leave the city or were you pretty much staying in Bridgeport the whole time?
- RF:** We went to New Haven quite frequently because my mother was an only child, but her mother was one of nine children so she had a whole bunch of cousins. And she grew up there very close to them so we'd go to New Haven.
- I:** Would you take the car for that?
- RF:** Yes, but not on Route 1. We always went--. I don't know why when I think of it but when you look on a map it's about the same distance when you go through Shelton and Derby and down Route 34 which is the way we went. I don't know why now we went that way instead of the other way.
- I:** Of course, the Turnpike was not in existence at that point.
- RF:** The Parkway didn't exist in 1930's.
- I:** When those were built--. For instance, when the Merritt Parkway was built, do you remember that being a big topic of discussion in Bridgeport? How it was going to impact the city or did it really affect you?
- RF:** No, I don't think it represented any particular impact on the city. I remember before it was built when my father would come down to visit his mother and his siblings in New York, I remember going down on the Post Road, back and forth many times, several hours.
- I:** Well, you've given us a great deal of interesting information. Do you have anything you'd like to add about your work experiences, your experiences growing up in Bridgeport?
- RF:** Everybody likes to talk and you've done a pretty good interview, so--.

- I:** Well, I appreciate your patience. This is my first time around. The information you've given is really fascinating. We're glad to have it.
- RF:** Run the tape sometime and if there's anything you want me to--. That deserves elaboration, I'll do that.
- I:** Okay, then. We might come back another time just to World War II. You were mentioning the different ways that businesses had to operate or cope during that period. So, I'll make a note of that.
- RF:** One thing that I'm finding out that's particularly interesting is that millions of us who went into the service and we had war time experiences to talk about missed a lot of what was going on at home while we were away. While we were abroad. I think this is something that I think a lot of the service people have yet to learn. You hear about Rosie the Riveter and stuff like that but day to day life with the rationing and all that stuff.
- I:** And you didn't really experience that?
- RF:** Well, we weren't exposed to it. There was always plenty to eat in the Army and three-cent cigarettes and you know.
- I:** You weren't stationed abroad though, were you?
- RF:** Yes.
- I:** Oh, you were?
- RF:** Yes, I was with an Air Force bombardment crew in England.
- I:** How long were you there for?
- RF:** From Christmas time, 1943 until April 1945.
- I:** That's a long time. And then you were sent home? That was after--. You were there through VE Day?
- RF:** Yes, we were the first organization to be sent home as a unit after VE Day. It just happened to be our group but of course, the talk was that we were going to be prepared for the Pacific Theater. But, of course the company knew about the A bomb and stuff like that so they broke up the group a short time after we got back to the country and just disbursed us. Sent us all over the country in different places. For expediency they sent me to Detroit, an air base out there.

- I:** What did you do there?
- RF:** Well, I was in the data central communications office where the cryptographic work was being done, but there wasn't any cryptographic work ready to do necessarily. So they told me how to use the Teletype, sending and receiving of messages, but they had full time people there and it was just busy work.
- I:** And then you came back to Bridgeport after that?
- RF:** Yes, they discharged me. Came to Bridgeport and hung around for a little bit because college was in session and I had to wait for the term. I was discharged in September, October and I went back in January.
- I:** So you worked in the business.
- RF:** No, I didn't. I enjoyed myself.
- I:** Good.
- RF:** You know, your friends are gradually coming back and I remember going visiting. I had friends who lived up in Massachusetts, up around Boston and Maine. Hitch hike up there and whatever. You came home with a pocket full of money after the war. They had what they called a fifty two/twenty. You've heard about that?
- I:** Why don't you explain it?
- RF:** Anybody who was discharged went automatically into this register. I've forgotten where it was. You got twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks.
- I:** Something to tide you over.
- RF:** A little bonus kind of thing and of course, the GI Bill was quite generous. They paid your tuition and I think seventy-five dollars a month.
- I:** Now you were able to apply for that even though you had participated in the program before that you mentioned?
- RF:** No connection. There were no benefits from the program before. That was just the convenience of the government. I don't know why they didn't let people go with their local draft boards. Maybe they felt that college students were a silly group in some way. I have no idea. It certainly wasn't fair to a lot of people. Very fair to me but wasn't fair to a lot of other people.
- I:** Why don't we finish up for today then, unless you'd like to add something/

**RF:** No, get a couch and we'll really get into it.

**I:** Well, thank you so much.

End of Interview