

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library  
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"  
Richard Fewell interviewed by Mary Witkowski, November 26, 1997.

## Transcript

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I: Hi, Richard.

RF: Hello, Mary. How are you?

I: Can you give me your full name?

RF: Richard -- no middle name -- Fewell. That's it. That's all they gave me.

I: And your date of birth, if you will?

RF: February 2, 1937.

I: Where were you born?

RF: In Rock Hill, South Carolina.

I: What was growing up in Rock Hill like? Where were your parents from, originally?

RF: My parents were also South Carolinians. Perhaps not exactly from Rock Hill. Maybe one was from Beaufort, I think. My father was from Beaufort. I'm not sure.

I: South Carolina?

RF: No. He lived there for a while. He was actually born in a place that was -- it's now known as Ebenezer. It's part of Rock Hill. It's a section of Rock Hill. Well, before that, all of that was probably Indian territory.

I: Oh?

RF: It was all part of a reservation.

I: Do you have Indian heritage?

RF: I don't know. Well, perhaps. Who knows? We're so mixed up in this society. But it was Ebenezer -- it was called Old Point at that time. What I've been able to find out, that was listed as his birth place on his military records. Old Point, South Carolina. But there was actually no Old Point. When I asked people about it, they tell me that is the section known as Ebenezer. That is actually where he is buried out now -- in that section.

I: And your mother was also a South Carolinian?

RF: From Rock Hill.

I: What did your father do?

RF: He was a stone mason. He was a stone cutter. That's what he did, mostly. He did some brick work, but he was mostly employed as a stone cutter, who would cut the archways for doors and windows and fireplaces and all that kind of stuff.

I: Did your mother work at all?

RF: My mother was a domestic. She took care of kids and cooked and all that kind of stuff.

I: How many children in your home?

RF: We, let's see. [laughs] There wasn't that many, but --

I: [laughs]

RF: There were four sisters and one brother, but then you have to consider that there were also half-brothers and half-sisters and all that stuff, that came into [unclear]. I have two half-brothers. One, who now lives in Philadelphia, and another one -- my brother died. I had another brother who lived in New Jersey for thirty-five years and then he moved back down to South Carolina.

I: Did your mother remarry?

RF: No. There were funny kind of relationships during those days. I don't think anything was too official in those days. They didn't do paperwork on all this kind of stuff, you know?

I: Not like today.

RF: People just married, and if they couldn't stay together, they'd just walk away and marry somebody else. And the kids were just -- whoever could take care of them. It didn't matter who was your actual parent -- your mother or father, or not. We, at certain times, had different kids come and live with us who were just like my brother and sister.

I: Almost like foster children today.

RF: Yes, yes. It didn't matter. There weren't homeless kids in those days. Everybody had a place to be. Somebody took care of them. And it was like a village, like they say now, it takes a village to raise a child...

I: [laughs]

RF: But then, at that time, that really worked because everything -- in this town -- the church, the school, the businesses, the people -- everybody worked together to make sure that all the kids were taken care of. There was nobody starving.

I: What was the name of the town?

RF: Rock Hill.

I: So, did you go to grade school in Rock Hill?

RF: I went to grade school. I went to the same school from first grade to the twelfth grade.

I: Wow!

RF: It was in the same building.

I: Was it just a small, very tiny school, or did it have --?

RF: No, it was pretty big. Because in a town like that, at that time, you had the black school, which was Emmett Scott High School, and then you had the white school, which was Rock Hill High School, and it was just those two schools. So everybody went from kindergarten, actually, all the way to the twelfth grade, in the same school.

I: Wow.

RF: So you were there all that time. You didn't get shifted from an elementary school to a junior high school or anything like that. You were just there.

I: So, did you think it was a pretty good education?

RF: I thought it was a very good education, considering what you had. I mean, you had not a lot of support system that you have now. We didn't even have new books or anything like that. We had books that were just thrown out from some other schools, and they'd give them to us and we'd use them. But everybody got a decent education there because they taught you more than what was in the books. They taught you how to survive in life and how to use what was in the books and all that kind of stuff.

I: So, what did you do? Did you work at all during high school?

RF: Well --

I: A lot of people took jobs.

RF: What was my first job? My first job was carrying newspapers, I think. "The Evening Herald." That still exists down there. In fact, I've gone back -- I know some of the editors down there, and people who run the newspaper now. The last time I went down there and they did an interview with me, I told them that that was my first job working for this newspaper, delivering it in my neighborhood. But also, I used to clean up churches.

I used to go into the white churches and clean them up so they would be nice and clean for them on Sundays.

I: [laughs]

RF: [laughs] It was kind of weird.

I: Yes. Interesting. So, then, when you graduated from high school, did you have a clear thought of what you wanted to do?

RF: No.

I: I don't think anybody does.

RF: Most of my classmates -- when the teachers would come out and ask them, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" -- they seemed to have an idea. I used to envy them. "I want to be a doctor, I want to be an architect, I want to be a nurse, I want to be a teacher." I'd always get around them and I'd say, "I don't know." I didn't really know. I had no idea.

I: What year was that, that you finished high school?

RF: It was grade school, more or less, when they first start asking, "What do you want to do when you grow up?"

I: Right.

RF: But even in high school, I didn't have an idea.

I: And what year did you actually graduate from high school?

RF: 1955 was the year I graduated from high school. At that time, most of the people who got out of school, who graduated from school -- and most of the people who started school, graduated. I didn't know anybody who dropped out, unless they had to go to work in the fields or something like that, with their parents, or something like that. Unless there was a reason like that, they went all the way through.

I: Thank goodness.

RF: And a lot of them were able to go on to college, or --and the way to get to college if you didn't have nay money was to go in the Service, and that's what I did. We knew they had the G.I. Bill. So you'd go in the Service, you'd go to college --

I: What kind of service did you do?

RF: I went in the Air Force.

I: Oh!

RF: Mainly because it was viewed by most black people as being the most liberal of the Armed Services, because they had the highest ranking military black people were in the Air Force. So that's why we thought, "That's the place to go." Not the Army, Marines or Navy, or anything like that.

I: So, would this have been during the Korean War?

RF: It was just about over, I believe. It was over, because I got in there after Korea and before Vietnam, you know? I got in there -- nobody was fighting anybody at that particular time.

I: How many years would that be --service, that you had to sign up for? Was it four?

RF: Four years -- yes. I remember, I got out of high school June 1st, and June 10th, I was in the Air Force.

I: Wow.

RF: There was nothing to do. If you wanted to go and work in the fields, or if you wanted to go and clean buildings --

I: Or clean churches. [laughs]

RF: Or clean churches. And those churches really needed some cleaning. [laughs] I didn't understand them. I really didn't -- I mean, how they looked so beautiful and all that kind of stuff, and how such ugly people could come out of the [unclear]. [laughs]

I: The churches that you cleaned in high school?

RF: Yes. I just don't understand them.

I: Yes. Did you feel -- in high school, you were cleaning white churches and stuff like that, but did you ever feel any -- was there any antagonism that you ever saw or realized?

RF: I used to wonder what could they possibly be learning in there.

I: In the churches?

RF: In the churches -- I mean, the white people. What could they possibly be telling themselves on Sunday that on Monday they could come back and look at me as nothing.

I: Which you already felt, that they were doing that.

RF: Well, they tried to make you feel that, but then you had your teachers and you had your

ministers and everybody told you that you were something, no matter how people thought about you.

I: Did the high school only have black teachers?

RF: All black school. The teachers, the principal -- they were all black. The whole neighborhood -- the stores were all owned by black people, the pool hall, the funeral parlors, the dance halls, the dentist, the doctor -- everybody -- it was almost like a separate country.

I: Can you recall any specific incident from the South at that point, where you really felt like you were judged racially, or anything that happened to your family?

RF: Nothing traumatic.

I: Nothing?

RF: No. We were pretty well insulated from all that stuff.

I: No rocks sent through your windows?

RF: We were pretty well insulated from that stuff. I was born on a black street -- 155-1/2 West Black Street. Black people lived on Black Street. One block over was White Street.

I: No!

RF: Yes.

I: It was actually called White Street?

RF: White Street and Black Street.

I: So it was a clear delineation.

RF: We never came together in any kind of way, you know?

I: So, why did you feel like when you were cleaning the white people's churches that they were bad people?

RF: Because they obviously thought they were too good to mix with us.

I: Because it was sort of a clear --?

RF: Yes. There was always this line. Even when you saw them on the street, you didn't speak to them. You didn't even look at them. You just walked around them.

I: That's interesting. And what did they do? They didn't look at you, either.

RF: No, no. It was crazy. I went into the Service, which was integrated. The Air Force was integrated at that time.

I: Which you must have found that interesting and different.

RF: I ran into a girl who was from Rock Hill -- a white girl. Now, the strange thing about it is we became good friends, and that always fascinated me that once some people got out of the South -- some white people -- I didn't meet them all -- they seemed to be as happy to be away from that crazy stuff as I was.

I: Where were you?

RF: I was in Colorado at the time I met this girl.

I: Oh, nice. Okay.

RF: We used to go out to the clubs together and all that stuff. [laughs] It was strange once -- we were talking in the Airmen's Club and they asked her and she said, "Oh, he's my friend. He's from work." And then she turned to me and she said, "What school did you go to?" [laughs]

I: [laughs]

RF: I said, "Nancy, Nancy. You know, as well as I know, that there were only two schools there. And you went to one and I went to the other one, right?" She said, "Oh, okay. I'm sorry." [laughs]

I: So, it was a breath of fresh air to get out of that?

RF: And I found out that I got along well with white people from the South -- better than I got along with black people from the North. Because I was a Southerner, and they considered me -- if you're a Southerner, I'm a Southerner. So we've got to stick together. [laughs] Is that weird, or what?

I: What about white people from the North?

RF: I knew some of them, but I couldn't really trust them. I didn't know how to read them. I knew white people from the South. We knew how to connect with each other.

I: That's interesting.

RF: I could read them, they could almost read me. You would never let them know exactly what you're thinking.



I: So, there was still a regional feeling.

RF: Yes. [laughs] So, all of these things. And you find out that eventually you come to the realization that people are just people, you know? And it's what you believe -- it doesn't have to be true. And sometimes they find out themselves that -- well, if he's all right, maybe what I'm thinking about all of those people is not true," you know?

I: So, was it like a real dawning when you were in the Air Force?

RF: Yes. But you still carry some of that baggage from the segregated South. I remember the signs before you walked in the door, or drink from a water fountain, or something like that.

I: Yes.

RF: All this was coming out of the same pipe, you know? [laughs] One of the biggest things --

I: No!

RF: This was the big thing that we used to do in the South. This was the most daring thing that you could do. It was to run up there and drink some of the water out of the one that said 'white' and get out of the store before they catch you! [laughs]

I: And did you do that?

RF: Oh, yes!

I: That was like a big thing they taught?

RF: Oh, yes. I mean, we didn't steal hubcaps or cars or smoke pot or nothing like that. Drink out of the white water fountain. [laughs]

I: How interesting.

RF: That was a daring thing to do.

I: And did the water taste different?

RF: It's the same. The same water.

I: I'm just kidding. [laughs]

RF: It's the same pipe. [laughs]

I: I know. [laughs]

RF: So, just to show you how silly all of that racist stuff was, you know? And people died just the same. They buried them in separate graveyards, even. Even separate graveyards.

I: Oh, yes.

RF: Yes. How silly all that stuff was.

I: Is there anything more about the Air Force that you remember?

RF: I learned a lot. I went to a lot of places. I had never been away from home -- before I went in the Air Force. I was in Texas in no time -- I flew there. They asked me if I wanted to go.

I: That was the first place you went?

RF: Yes. The first time I was in an airplane. Another funny thing. There were no signs at the airport. No white entrance or black entrance -- nothing like that. It was weird because I don't think they assumed that the black people would ever fly anyway, or have enough money to come to an airport anyway. So they just didn't bother to put up signs.

I: But Texas wasn't considered the South South?

RF: Well, that was the South, too. They were part of the whole thing. But I mean in South Carolina, when I went to the airport in Columbia.

I: Oh, the same thing there?

RF: I didn't know how to go into the building because there was no damn sign there to tell me which one I was supposed to go into. So, I'm standing out there until somebody told me, "You can just go right in there."

I: Wow.

RF: So, that's the kind of stuff psychologically --

I: Ingrained.

RF: It gets ingrained in you.

I: Yes.

RF: And I sort of separated myself, even in the Service. If people wanted to draw me into the group or something, I would always sit over in a corner, and stuff like that. Until they pointed it out to me. "Why do you segregate yourself from us? We're all in the same thing together."

I: But in the Service, you didn't notice that they were giving you different jobs or --?

RF: No. I had one of the highest jobs you could get there.

I: What did you do?

RF: I was a cryptographer. Top-secret crypto-clearance.

I: Wow!

RF: And at that time, I guess that was new. Because everywhere I went they'd say, "You're the first colored guy we've ever seen in this field." I'd say, "Oh?" [laughs] I didn't know that.

I: How interesting. So you used to do all the coding and decoding?

RF: All that stuff. All the little secrets, and all that crap.

I: Can you tell us any secrets now?

RF: No. [laughs] The only secret you'll find out is there really are no secrets.

I: Yes?

RF: When I was in China, the people on the other side knew everything we knew.

I: Oh, so you did travel out of the United States?

RF: I was in Taiwan for three years.

I: Oh.

RF: It was really, really, really interesting. I was into another culture then, when I was in the Service over there. Taiwanese and Chinese and Filipino and all that other stuff. So I got to see how different people behaved with each other, and all that kind of stuff. I liked to study people, and I found out that we all have similar instincts. You know, what makes you cry here in America, would make you cry in China. How you relate to somebody -- if you treat them bad, they feel bad, you know? If you treat them good, they feel good. [laughs] People on this planet, and why we persist upon separating ourselves up into little categories that don't make very much sense -- of course, nobody is getting off the plane, anyway.

I: You can try -- it's all yours.

RF: Somebody might as well learn how to get along with folks, you know? But I really enjoyed the Service.

I: That's good.

RF: That was one of the most interesting parts of my whole life, was being in the Service. In

fact, a lot of the stuff that I write relates to some of those kinds of relationships that I was involved in -- people I'd met in different places around [unclear].

I: But you decided four years was enough?

RF: No. Actually, I had re-enlisted.

I: Oh!

RF: I re-enlisted in China. I wanted to stay there, but I had some kind of an illness I picked up over there.

I: Yes, you told me that.

RF: Some unidentified thing.

I: A virus or something.

RF: It put me in the hospital for eighteen months.

I: Oh, my goodness.

RF: I thought I was going to die. I was all ready.

I: How was it affecting you? Just weak or something?

RF: No. It was just something that kept growing, and they couldn't find a way to even identify what it was. They never told me, "Well, we don't know what it is." I'd say, "Is it going to kill me?" They'd say, "We don't know. How can we tell? We don't know what it is." They kept trying to culture it and all this kind of business.

I: What were the symptoms, if you don't mind my asking.

RF: They had seen it before. It usually happens in joints, like elbows and knees -- it would just keep swelling, like big. The only way to do it was just cut it open and drain it out -- all that stuff.

I: Oh, my! You were a young man. You were only how old at that time? Twenty-three or something?

RF: Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. At that time you don't have any fear of death or anything.

I: Right.

RF: So, they told me that they don't know what it is. I thought, "Well, if it just kills me, it just kills me. So what?"

I: So you left the Service then?

RF: Well, they shipped me to the Philippines, where they had the big operation on my leg, and I don't remember too well -- they told me they were going to send me back to the States. I didn't want to come back to the States. I said, "Send me back to Taiwan -- just discharge me over there." They said, "We can't do that. We've got to take you back to the United States." [laughs] So they shipped me back to St. Albans, down in Jamaica, New York.

I: Oh, okay.

RF: There was a hospital there called St. Albans Naval Hospital. At that time it was a Navy hospital. It's a VA hospital now, and I spent all that time, --most of the time there, in that hospital. The funny thing is, when I got back to this country, the thing started disappearing on its own. They did nothing. I mean, no treatment or nothing. It just started going away. It just went away back in 1960 and it never came back again. Whatever it was, it never came back again.

I: Who knows?

RF: I don't know what it was. Who knows?

I: The air. The water. The stress. Whatever.

RF: Who knows? But I came back, and at that time, when I got out of the Service, I came to Bridgeport. I used to come up here to visit my sister.

I: Oh, your sister lived in Bridgeport?

RF: Yes. My older sister -- yes. They had lived in New York before, and then they moved up here. Where was he working? [unclear] or someplace like that.

I: So you went to visit her?

RF: I came up to visit. I said I'm going to stay a weekend, and I'm still here.

I: [laughs]

RF: That was in 1961.

I: Wow! You were going to stay a weekend, and you just kept staying.

RF: Yes.

I: Now, what street did your sister live on?

RF: When I first came up here, she lived at P.T. Barnum [housing project], up there on

Building 12. I'll never forget that.

I: What did you end up doing? Did you just get a job yourself?

RF: Well, before I got out of the Service -- they put you through all kinds of tests and stuff, to see what you're better qualified for. If you wanted to do the same job you had in the Service, you [unclear] all kinds of [unclear] of the State Department and different governmental jobs, down in Washington. I could have gotten jobs doing the same thing, but I found out that you had to work shifts and all that stuff, like I did in the Service. I hated working those shifts. I was rated and everything. I could have gone and gotten a job down at the Pentagon and all that, but I turned it down.

I: You could have been a cryptologist. [laughs]

RF: I think I had had enough of that.

I: Yes.

RF: I had really had enough of that. It made me nervous to know all that secret stuff. I was always afraid I was going to be kidnapped or something, and they were going to make me talk. [laughs]

I: You could have gotten a job in the CIA.

RF: I really didn't like that.

I: No.

RF: It was interesting -- very interesting stuff to do. And we thought that you could look at material -- messages and stuff -- find out what's going through, even to the President. Even the President couldn't look at stuff that I could look at because he didn't have the crypto clearance.

I: Wow.

RF: I have handled many messages that went to Eisenhower, when he was coming over to Japan at that time.

I: Wow.

RF: I was stationed over there. They had riots in Japan, so they changed them and sent them to Taiwan. So he came to see us.

I: Did you get to meet him?

RF: That was the only time I had ever seen a President. I was maybe as close to him as from here to the other side of the room. That's as close as I ever got to a President. I have never seen another real President in my whole life. The only one I ever saw was Eisenhower. And that was because he was supposed to go to Japan, and he couldn't go to Japan because of the riots -- concerns about his safety over there. So he came to Taiwan instead.

I: So, what did you end up getting a job at, then? Since you decided that you weren't going to pursue government --?

RF: When I was in Bridgeport, I decided -- well, when I went to the VA, they got me all the medical care that I could get in this area. The first thing I saw in this area was the VA hospital in West Haven. I got shifted out of St. Albans to West Haven. And they were very helpful. They tried to find what I was best suited for. Did I want to go to school? Did I want to do this? Did I want to do that? Somebody mentioned the post office.

I: [laughs]

RF: "You can take ten points. You're a disabled veteran. Why don't you try that?" So I tried that.

I: Oh, they actually considered you a disabled veteran at that point?

RF: Yes, because it was a medical discharge. Because I didn't re-enlist and spent the money and everything. [laughs] I took the test, and then I decided to move down south for a while, so I went down to South Carolina. And when I was down there, somebody forwarded me the test result that I had passed the test of the post office in Bridgeport, and did I want to come back up here and work for it? They actually assigned me a day to come back -- to interview and all that stuff. I missed the first one, so I came on the second one. I decided to take the job, so I just came up. More and more -- things happened to cause me to stay in Bridgeport. They were the first ones to offer me a job, so I took that and I worked there for a long, long time. For thirty-one years.

I: You must have liked Bridgeport.

RF: What I liked about it when I first got here -- when I first got here, I asked my sister -- I said, "Where's the beach?" I always liked walking on the beach, because I'd been those

three years on Taiwan, which was just beach all around.

I: Yes.

RF: A little island on the Taiwan Straights there. I loved going to -- I could always think there. It was just beautiful, watching the waves come in and all that kind of stuff. So when I went out to Seaside Park -- when I found out I could walk there -- not like in New York, where I'd have to take fifteen busses and eighteen subways, trying to get to Coney Island or something. And that was good for me. I could walk to the beach from where she lived, at P.T.

I: Yes.

RF: I liked that beach. The only thing -- when I went there, I found out that beach was sort of segregated when I first went there. There was only certain places where you could go on the beach and be comfortable.

I: Oh, really?

RF: Yes.

I: This was what year?

RF: 1961. There was a certain tree out there, and they told me that that's where you're supposed to go.

I: I was going to say -- you didn't use the bath house? That was it -- the tree?

RF: No, the tree was the place where all the colored people went, so that's where we always congregated on the --

I: Is that tree still there today?

RF: I think it is still there -- yes. It was weird. Strange.

I: Probably well fertilized. [laughs]

RF: Yes. I do remember when I first got here, when I came downtown -- I didn't see any black people downtown at all, in Bridgeport. I didn't see any. There were no black bus drivers or anything. I had seen some in New York, but I didn't see any here. I was wondering what kind of place this was. [laughs] People were really not too friendly to me. I was out of the hospital and I was walking on crutches when I first came here. I don't know -- I didn't get a good impression when I first got here. But it's changed over



the years, you know?

I: For the better, you think?

RF: Yes.

I: In a lot of ways?

RF: Yes.

I: So, where did you end up moving to in Bridgeport?

RF: Beardsley Street, on the East Side, over there. I moved over there, in a one-room. Davis was her name, [unclear] Davis. 215 Beardsley Street. That was the first address I had of my own in Bridgeport. I liked that area. It was nice. A nice little party area over there.

I: Oh, really? Were there a lot of single people around?

RF: A lot of single people around. The landlady's son was there, and he had a brother and stuff. They showed me all around. They said, "We'll show you around Bridgeport. We'll show you where to go -- where to have a good time," and all this kind of stuff. Things kind of picked up then, when I went out on my own, with my own little room. I had my own little room, and I could use the kitchen and all that stuff.

I: What did you do for entertainment in Bridgeport?

RF: Oh, we went out to -- I was always a movie freak. I still am. I started to go to a lot of movies, but the movies had gotten progressively worse over the years. They are all hype now -- spectacle and all that stuff. But I used to like to go when they had the real actors out there, and actresses, who could play a role so intense, that you would wonder how they ever got out of that role when the movie was over. Did they live the rest of their life as that character? [laughs]

I: Did you go to the Palace or the --?

RF: I remember once going to the Palace. It was still open at that time.

I: Oh, yes.

RF: I remember going there. That was a beautiful theater. The Poli?

I: Where did you go to the movies, then? I guess I'm wondering what theaters.

RF: There was one on Fairfield Avenue.

I: That's still there -- that little theater.

RF: Yes. I spent a lot of time in New York. I kept going back because I had friends there from the Service, who had been over in China with me. My best friend was Harry, who lived down in Jamaica. [Queens] He had been to Yale University. We sent all the people to teach them how to speak Mandarin up to Yale. They all went into us. Most of the guys who were over in Taiwan had either been through the Presidio in California, or Yale University. They all spoke either Chinese or Russian or Japanese. So, when we would hang out over there -- and I knew the local language, which was Taiwanese, because my girlfriend was Taiwanese.

I: So, that's why you didn't want to leave Taiwan. [laughs]

RF: Yes, yes. [laughs] When we used to go out, we'd have one guy speak Japanese, Harry, who could speak Mandarin, and me Taiwanese. And we'd even have one guy who could speak Russian. We were all black people.

I: Wow.

RF: And that was one of the times when I began to wonder -- before, I really thought that we were genetically inferior until I went into the Service. Then they said, "Hey, man. They've been fooling you." You know? [laughs] They've been fooling you! I mean, God! I saw guys who were pilots and guys who could do anything, you know? I mean, take a guy out of Mississippi and make him an expert Chinese linguist who could even read and write, and back home you would have been a shine boy -- a shoeshine boy -- or something.

I: Unbelievable.

RF: So, we used to go out to the clubs over there. If we came in and they knew we were from this base that this secret base we were on that everybody knew about -- Linkou. Linkou guys were in here, right? So, the girls would stop speaking Mandarin and start speaking Taiwanese.

I: Oh.

RF: And then when they found out that -- hey, that guy understands what you're saying. He knows Taiwanese because of his girlfriend. Then they would switch to speaking Japanese. We had that covered, too, because we had a guy who could speak Japanese.

I: [laughs]

RF: When we went, I mean, they couldn't say anything. They started whispering to us, because we are all together all the time. [laughs] It was strange.

I: So, the same guys you kind of hung out with in New York -- a couple of them?

RF: Yes. And they were from everywhere. One from Mississippi, one from Jamaica, me from South Carolina, another guy from Chicago.

I: You'd just take the train into New York from Bridgeport?

RF: Yes. I would go down there a lot from here. Those were in the 1960s. You know, the flower children and all?

I: Yes, right.

RF: The hippies and the hangout in Thompson Square Park -- all night with a bottle of wine and some bongos and stuff.

I: So, you were into all that, huh?

RF: Yes, I was into all that -- into all that.

I: [laughs] Going to clubs and hearing music.

RF: Loving jazz and all that.

I: Jazz?

RF: Yes.

I: Who did you see in New York?

RF: You name them.

I: Miles?

RF: Miles, Jimmy Smith, Joe Jones. I used to hang out sometimes in the Bird Land. That was on Berkeley and 52nd. We used to go down there for that on Monday nights, when they would have the jam sessions until four o'clock in the morning.

I: Wow. Charlie Parker? No. He wasn't around then.

RF: No. [unclear], Pres, Lester Young. A whole group of guys. Dizzy Gillespie. We were street talking to these guys and stuff.

I: Wow.

RF: Count Basie. We even ran into Sugar Ray Robinson down there once. I really loved New

York.

I: It's a wonder you didn't live there. But you moved to Bridgeport, you had a job in Bridgeport.

RF: Yes.

I: How was the job at the post office? What did you start doing there?

RF: Well, I was what they called a distribution clerk. That was the first thing that I learned how to do, which was to read letters and sort them according to zip code and street and all that stuff. I had to memorize a lot of stuff. I never carried on the outside. I always worked on the inside, in the offices and all of that. I did that job -- I did some training for some of the employees. I did some requirements of classification is the job that I did the most of. That job was working -- was also an office job. I actually had the opportunity to go out into the neighborhood and the community, to verify circulation records of people like the "Bridgeport Post" at that time. Now they're called the "Connecticut Post."

I: Right.

RF: Stratford, or go to Hartford, or go to New Haven. Wherever they would send me. Once a year you'd have a manual verification. I was one of the people who was qualified in this area to do that. So I'd jump in a car and go out. [unclear] here on one day, to just follow it all the way through what happened to all that copies on that particular date. If that came out all right, then I wouldn't have to do anymore. If something was wrong, then I'd have to do some more -- investigating to find out what happened. To make sure that they're paying the right amount of money.

I: So, did you like working there, in terms of just the people that were working there and the structure? Did you have good benefits?

RF: Yes. It was good benefits. Well, you know, you meet all kinds of people in a job like that. If there was any kind of negative, it would have been that the kind of personalities of the people you'd run into there. The job was fine. Just that some of the people that I worked with -- there were a lot of people who didn't like each other and things like that.

I: Well, you get that all over.

RF: [unclear] and all that kind of stuff. And even some racism at that time, you know?

Although it was supposed to be completely neutral in the government -- civil service -- a lot of times it was not. Because you can design a job to fit a certain personality or a certain people. You start a lot of these tests. Any kind of test can be designed to yield the kind of result that you want.

I: Just like any kind of interview can be designed the same way. [laughs]

RF: Yes. It's the same thing. But basically, it was a good career. They took care of me and my family.

I: So you got married in the meantime?

RF: I got married in 1963, 1961 and then...

I: Oh, okay! Not long. A Bridgeport lady?

RF: A Bridgeport lady, who was born in New York, but she was raised here. I met her through the landlord's son, with the house I lived in on Beardsley Street. He said, "Do you want to go to a party? I know some sisters. They're all home for the holidays." It was around the holidays. I didn't have anything else to do that night, but sit around there and be lonely. So I went. And, actually, the girl I went to see was not there. But this one was. So I thought, "I came all the way up here, I might as well talk to somebody." So I ended up talking to her. [laughs] And we were married for thirty-four years.

I: Wow! That's wonderful! How many children?

RF: Two. One boy and one girl. They still live in this area.

I: What area of the city were you living in when you got married?

RF: At that time, Beardsley Street.

I: Still?

RF: Yes. Me and my wife lived in that one room for a while -- a few months -- and then we got an apartment on Hanover Street, on the West End, and we stayed there for a year. And then we finally ended up in Stone Ridge [condominiums, North End].

I: Did she work, too?

RF: At St. Vincent's, as a nurse's aide. She worked in the OB ward.

I: Well, getting back to the post office -- this project's about work -- were there any strikes or anything in particular?

RF: Well, we couldn't have any strikes in the government.

I: I thought there was one once.

RF: There was one when we sent out on the sidewalks and signs and all that stuff.

I: About what?

RF: For a while. That didn't last too long. I can't remember what year that was, though. In the 1970s or 1980s.

I: What was the strike about?

RF: Some had to do with working conditions. Mostly working conditions, and some had to do with wages, also. Contracts -- stuff like that. But usually, all that stuff was settled without strikes. We had a union there to negotiate for us.

I: So, you did belong to a union when you were at the post office?

RF: Yes.

I: What was the name of the union?

RF: The American Postal Worker's Union.

I: Okay. So you had regular meetings, and did all that?

RF: Yes. There was a union called the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees, which was the only black union in the country.

I: Oh!

RF: And it was created back in the 1920s or something, down in Georgia. They created this because at that time, when they had black postal workers could not join the white union, so they started their own union, the National Alliance of Postal and Federal Employees, which is still in existence today, as the only black owned and operated union in the country.

I: So, did you find them helping you out at all, along the way -- either of the unions?

RF: Oh, yes. I mean, they did very well. The APW was very pro-active in getting things done that most of the people wanted. The management had really listened to these people, although they knew you couldn't strike. There was a law against that. There's ways of striking without going on strike, and they knew that, too. The police call it the Blue Flu, you know? [laughs] Whatever.

I: Right.

RF: There's ways of doing -- in fact, there's so many instructions about how you do something. If you really did it right by the book, you wouldn't do very much. So they would go back right by the book -- we want to do it exactly how it's supposed to be done in the book, and that would slow everything down, you know? [laughs]

I: Yes. From the beginning to end.

RF: It was legal, you know? We were doing a job the way it was supposed to be done, rather than the best way to do it. They could do strikes like that.

I: But you had pretty good benefits and everything?

RF: Yes. They kept getting better. When I first started work, I was making two dollars and sixteen cents an hour.

I: Wow.

RF: I'll never forget that. And I thought that was good money -- and it was!

I: It was then!

RF: Yes. In 1961. When I ended up there I was making something like eighteen, nineteen or twenty dollars an hour -- something like that. But then the money is not as valuable now. Then it was.

I: So, when did they pay for your school? When did you decide to start going to school again?

RF: Well, I got the G.I. Bill. I used that.

I: Oh, you did?

RF: Yes.

I: Right away?

RF: I wouldn't have been able to pay for it myself, but they re-inaugurated the G.I. Bill. First they cut it off, and they brought it back for people who were -- at a certain time in the service were eligible for it. So I took advantage of every bit of it. Thirty-six months of education.

I: What year did you start going to school?

RF: Roughly 1968 or something. The Vietnam War was in full swing.

I: Where did you go?

RF: The University of Bridgeport. I started there with one course -- I'll never forget it -- Psychology 101. I don't know why I chose that particular course, but I did. And I made an A in it. I thought, "Oh, this is not too bad."

I: This is easy.

RF: This sounds easy. I didn't really register as a student until I had about -- I don't know -- twenty or thirty credits. Something like that. Because I had this great fear of taking entrance examinations -- tests like that. I didn't do well on where you choose A, B, C or D. That intimidated me. That gave me no way of expressing anything of my feelings toward that particular question. Like in college, I would always choose to do essays. Everybody thought I was nuts. "Are you crazy? You want to do essays?" "Yes, I want to tell them what I want to tell them about. I want to answer it in my way. I don't want to say A, B, C or D." So those kinds of tests -- a lot of other people aren't intimidated by those tests.

I: Yes.

RF: They're really dehumanizing to me -- to mark A, B, C or D. Sometimes I would just put a line through all of them. I don't want any of them. So, if I had to take the regular route into college, I probably wouldn't have made it. I like to say, "I didn't go through the front door. I went through the window." So, when I had proven to them that I could do this college work, then I walked in there and said, "Okay, now sign me up. I have proven to you I can do your work, so sign me up." So I matriculated and all that. And I graduated with Magna cum laude.

I: Wow!

RF: In 1976.

I: So, you went part-time.

RF: Part-time.

I: At night?

RF: At night, in the summers, on weekends, sometimes. Whatever.

I: A lot of people have different ways of doing that, but it's hard.



RF: It took me like twelve years to get me up to my Master's degree. [laughs] When I had my Master's, I ended up with a 3.8.

I: Wow, that was excellent.

RF: Yes. So, I could do that kind of stuff as long as I could write.

I: What was your undergraduate degree in?

RF: In literature.

I: And your Master's?

RF: It was literature.

I: From UB?

RF: Yes.

I: Oh, I didn't know they had a Master's program.

RF: Let me correct that. My Bachelor's was in creative writing.

I: Oh!

RF: My Master's degree was in literature.

I: From the University of Bridgeport?

RF: Yes.

I: So, what was your intention of what to do with this degree?

RF: I had no intention. Everybody was asking me. These were non-utilitarian degrees. What do you want with them, you know? [laughs] Do you want to be an engineer...

I: [laughs] And what was your interests?

RF: I was just interested in developing my mind as much as I could.

I: What were you writing, though?

RF: Well, that was the first time I ever got published, was in college. When I found out that I could really write convincing types of essays. I knew that if I could be allowed to answer the question the way I wanted to, that I could convince them that I knew what I was talking about even when I didn't. [laughs] Should have gone into law, right? [laughs]

I: If they read it.

RF: If they read it. But I knew how to hook them into reading it. And so I --

**[End of Side One]**

I: So, you found out there was a power in words.

RF: There's a real power in words, and that everything that we have ever known and everything that we do and everything that we know about what's happened since the planet began, is in groups of words somewhere. Everything that's ever been said, everything that's ever been one or learned -- it's in a book somewhere in a library. So you can go to a library and become the most intelligent individual on the planet, I suppose, if you read everything in the library. But you just wouldn't have the paper -- the validation from some university or something like that. But all the information is available to everybody, and it's all there. If you want to know anything about anything, it's there. And that's why I went to libraries. It's one of the first places that the totalitarian dictators want to burn. When they'd take over, they'd burn the books.

I: Sure.

RF: Because here, you'd stop people from thinking as individuals, or learning anything. And I remember how it was in the South, when we couldn't go to the library. Black people couldn't go to the library and take out a book. You had to get a white person that liked you to get that book for you.

I: So, did you do that?

RF: Yes.

I: You found a white person to go get books for you?

RF: Yes, they would do it. They were white people that paid for college educations for black people in the South. A lot of people don't realize it. You think that the Ku Klux Klan and all that -- but there were a lot of people who did things that would have gotten them hung if people had known about it. So there were good people there all the time. You see, we're always mad at the wrong white people, you know? [laughs]

I: [laughs] So you [unclear]. They were just sort of -- I don't know.

RF: The ones who didn't have any power -- they had more than you. I grew up in a neighborhood with white people. But they were hillbillies. They worked in the mill, like I did. They were inside these machines, with hoses, to wash the cotton off the --

I: They didn't get the books at the library for you?

RF: No, no. They were in the same place where I was, almost, but they were just white. And I never considered them white people.

I: So, did you feel -- you know, the 1960s was the time -- I was in Detroit. So, there was a different story going on there, in terms of riots and all that. What was going on in Bridgeport. We should talk about that.

RF: Nothing.

I: That's what I had heard. That's what we talked about.

RF: The University of Bridgeport --

I: In terms of racial uproars, was there anything going on?

RF: Not much. Not much. It was usually quiet on our campus. There was not much going on. But we had people coming in, like Dick Gregory or -- who else came in?

I: Mohammed Ali? No.

RF: Malcolm X came in -- all those kinds of people. They would come in and talk and stuff like that. As far as actual activism going on, protesting things. I think somebody took over the student center once.

I: At UB?

RF: At UB -- yes.

I: Who was it?

RF: That was against the war in Vietnam, or something like that.

I: Oh, okay.

RF: People would read poems about making love, not war.

I: You weren't into that?

RF: And then when it was all over, everybody just disappeared, and that was the end of that. We made our protests, we had done our thing.

I: But you didn't have the segregation like you had in the South, up here, in the 1960s?

RF: Well, there were certain places that you didn't go.

I: Like where?

RF: There were no signs. Just like I explained to you on the beach at Seaside Park. There were certain places where you just did not go. You didn't go to this place -- you had to

go to this place. Like, in Atlantic City, when I used to work there, and when I was in high school, in the summers I used to work in the hotels and stuff. I worked in the [unclear], which is one of the largest hotels there. And the black people in Atlantic City went to a place they called Chicken Bone Beach. [laughs] Kentucky Avenue. That was where we went, you know? You could go up to another place, but you were in the wrong place. You belonged down there, and you'd go back down. And this was in Atlantic City. But it was kind of exciting going up there, you know? We used to go up there with a one-way ticket. That's fate. You have a job --

I: When you were a kid in high school?

RF: In high school.

I: So, you did have a world, other than --

RF: We went to Atlantic City. We got on the bus. You'd have a one-way ticket out there. And as soon as we got there, we could get jobs. Jobs were just so plentiful at that time. We always chose to work in kitchens because there was food there.

I: [laughs]

RF: So, what they didn't pay me in cash, I got in food. [laughs]

I: Yes. That's right!

RF: So, I didn't mind washing pots and all that kind of stuff, because I was going to take all that food that they were going to throw away -- take it back and sell it to people. [laughs] "Where did you get all that food from?"

I: Bridgeport didn't have -- well, they did have some segregation, --there were places you didn't go.

RF: Yes. Not that that there was any kind of signs or anything. You just understood, this tacit agreement. "You don't belong here," you know?

I: Yes.

RF: You could feel it if you walked into one of those places. I could recognize it even more than maybe people who were born here. You would see a person -- who didn't want to -- actually didn't want you to approach them, or you were in a place where you were not welcome -- you know how to get out of it gracefully and just go on, you know? It's

strange.

I: Yes. That's life here. So, you retired from the post office. When did you start teaching?

RF: Well, before I left the post office.

I: How did that come about?

RF: They had asked me at UB before, and I rejected them. I said, "No, I'm not a teacher." I never thought that I would ever do that. I never dreamed that I would ever be standing in front of a bunch of students. And they kept asking -- because even in class, I didn't say very much. I always did well in tests -- essays and stuff.

I: [laughs]

RF: But as far as verbally contributing to what was going on in class, I didn't do that because most of the classes that I went to at the time I went to UB, I was like the only black in the class. So I figured I don't say nothing. Don't say anything. If you say what you really want to say, they're going to throw you out of here. So you just "don't say nothing," you know? And I didn't say very much. Some of the creative writing classes -- you had to read what you wrote. A lot of times I wouldn't read it. I'd just give it to the professor "You read it if you want to." I remember once it was required that everybody read the things that they produced, like the poems and the short stories and all that kind of stuff. How I got around is, when I got home I recorded it, and I took the recording in and played it before the class. I didn't stand up.

I: Were you just shy?

RF: Well, it was a lot of that. Always, that's been a problem. That's why I never saw myself being a teacher -- never. I would never do that, you know?

I: Yes.

RF: How I got around that a little bit is that --

I: You made recordings of all your stuff. [laughs]

RF: [laughs] There was a program at ABCD [Action for Bridgeport Community Development] -- a drama program -- and a friend of mine, Abe Chambers, who [unclear] here -- he asked me to come over there. I went over there and I watched what they were doing on a stage, and they were doing skits and stuff. And so they invited me to come in

and do something. I said, "I don't know anything about this." They said, "That's okay. Just read your lines." I started getting up on the stage, acting, doing parts with people." I found out that if I was involved with what I was doing on the stage, then I didn't care about the audience -- I didn't even see them. And that we had [unclear] people. I had this great fear before. And especially when they applauded at the end. That was good. That was cool.

I: That was a bonus.

RF: Yes. [laughs] So I started doing that, and slowly, I began to lose some of that fear. I think it went all the way back to when I was in grammar school. I used to stutter a lot, and kids -- you know how they are. They laugh at you when you do that, you know? So I just shut up. I didn't say anything. I just went silent for a long time and "didn't say nothing." It took me a long time to start speaking again. [laughs]

I: [laughs] Well, thank goodness you started.

RF: In a way that was good because that developed my imagination more, and my way of communicating became writing rather than speaking. So every bad thing has some good in it. That happens to me. Every tragedy seems to --

I: Stimulating.

RF: Yes.

I: So, then you retired what year from the post office? Rather recently, right?

RF: 1992. I had thirty-one years. 1955. And that's all you need. I didn't care about hanging around for a bonus for the next six months. I didn't care about being promoted to stay or anything. I just wanted out. And I wanted the first opportunity to get out, and I took it. I didn't care whether I had any money or enough money to retire or not. I just got out.

I: Was that considered early retirement from the post office?

RF: No, it was the full time -- the age. At that time it was fifty-five. Now they've changed it.

I: Yes.

RF: I'm glad I didn't hang around.

I: Yes, right. And now you're teaching at --

RF: Well, I started at UB, and then I ended up -- after the strike at UB, I stopped down there

because I didn't like being involved in all that controversy.

I: And you were in the strike? How did you feel about that, with the UB and the --

RF: Well, I was only a part-timer, you know?

I: Yes.

RF: A lot of my friends were -- the professors I knew were the ones who were involved in the strike and all that stuff. But I didn't want to take sides, I guess. I didn't want to get involved, so I just didn't go back there. A few years later I started at Sacred Heart.

I: Oh, okay.

RF: I was up there for about three years or so.

I: Sort of doing this all part-time, while you were still at the post office?

RF: Yes. I just kept doing it. And I kept working for newspapers and stuff like that. The old "Fairfield County Advocate" that used to be here.

I: Right.

RF: It had now been weekly in Westport. I worked with them for years.

I: Oh!

RF: Jim Motavalli.

I: Jim's a friend of mine.

RF: Shows -- we did all this kind of stuff. I was always dealing with the words and stuff. It was good that I could end up teaching literature. Sometimes -- like, next semester, I'd be doing African-American literature.

I: Oh, that will be interesting.

RF: Yes, yes. I've done that before.

I: At Housatonic [community college]?

RF: Yes.

I: One question I do want to ask you is how have you seen Bridgeport change over the years? Is there anything particular, in terms of the city itself?

RF: Well, let's see. When I first got here there used to be like a saying and everything out of New York and Bridgeport. I thought that meant that's the next best thing.

I: Right. You can look at that two ways.

RF: When I got here, there was a lot of activity going on in Bridgeport Brass. All these companies were really booming here, you know? Everything was going on. It seemed like everybody had a job. It wasn't a problem. [unclear] much as far as I could understand. And then things started leaving. The conditions changed. The economy changed. Access to jobs changed and neighborhoods changed. A lot of people moved out of the city and into Trumbull and Stratford, as though they were escaping a sinking ship or something. [laughs] They moved out.

I: Where were you living now? On the North End?

RF: Yes, I was living at Stone Ridge, a stone's throw from Trumbull -- out that way. I spent a lot of years in Bridgeport and I like Bridgeport. And I remember writing letters to editors and stuff like that, about the people that were abandoning Bridgeport. I said at that time that I was going to stay here, even if it sucked into Long Island Sound. I was still going to stay here, and I'm not going to run out even if they make me a millionaire. I'm still going to stay here in Bridgeport. I remember that letter. [laughs] But I wrote a lot of letters. I took them to all kinds of [publications]. I got mad at them when they changed the name from the "Bridgeport Post" to "Connecticut Post." [laughs] So I just sort of adopted Bridgeport. You know what? A lot of good people are in Bridgeport. A lot of people I don't want to be bothered with here in Bridgeport. And that goes along all racial lines. I mean, some black folks I don't want to be bothered with either. And some white people I don't want to be bothered with. And there are some that I love. I mean, I've come to a place in my life where I really do have to love everybody, but I don't have to like the way they are and how they act, you know? That's their problem if they've got problems like that. But I don't have any time left to hate anybody. There's not enough time in your whole life to really hate anybody. It only hurts you anyway.

I: It tears [unclear] time.

RF: There's not even affecting the other person.

I: Yes.

RF: I see now that Bridgeport is really going to come back. I've been saying this for years and people say, "You're a fool. Bridgeport is crazy. It's going to be the armpit forever," or



whatever else they want to call it. But I always knew that Bridgeport had the potential to rise up again, because it's got the harbor out there. Nobody has ever really started developing that, and I think they are going to do it this time. And I think I'm going to be here when all that stuff happens.

I: And what about the beach at Seaside Park?

RF: The beach at Seaside Park.

I: Is it still segregated?

RF: No, I still go out there. Well, you don't see many white people out there. The ones that live in Bridgeport -- they are out there, you know?

I: Yes.

RF: The real people. [laughs] Who really liked it. They're still here. They're still trying to make things better. I think that they have gotten a lot better over the years. I've seen a lot of development that's going to happen in downtown Bridgeport. I expect it to end up being like --they said Pittsburgh was dead when all the steel mills were up. Go over there now and look at Pittsburgh. Go look at Cleveland now. That was a dead city. Detroit was supposed to be dead. Providence was supposed to be dead. Look at Providence now. Look at North Hampton, Mass., with all the issues it had. But look at it now. Because it is a wedding between the arts and industry that came back and rebuilt everything. You can't leave the arts out of it. We've got the best library in the whole state, right here. And it's one of the best assets we have here in Bridgeport. And this inter-modal transportation center is going to be here. All the theaters and all the stuff is going to be right around here. Housatonic College connected right through the library. And the library was here first.

I: Yes. The perfect setting, really.

RF: Yes. [laughs]

I: Well, is there anything else before I turn off the tape recorder and thank you for this --

RF: Well, I don't know what even we've all gone through here.

I: A lot!

RF: I've just been talking.

I: Well, I've learned a lot and I'm sure other people will, too. But I thank you for talking to me, for a good hour, almost.

RF: I want to take this opportunity to just say something about my love -- it's Bridgeport.  
[laughs]

I: There you go!

End of Interview