

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library

Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"

Reverend Ronald Wells (**RW**) interviewed by John Soltis (**I**), June 20, 1998.

I Reverend Wells could you tell us when and where you were born?

RW I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, August 16, 1913

I Would you tell us a little bit of what Cleveland was like where you lived growing up?

RW We lived in a house that we'd rented the first four years and then we bought a home a nice new residential growing area and we were there until in the Depression, we lost our home. My father was a lawyer, he had gone originally to teach at East High School and to coach there and he'd always wanted to be a lawyer so while he was teaching both at East High and West High then later he went to night law school and finally became a lawyer and as it turned out he had his own business, he wasn't a great business man and in the Depression we really hit the bottom.

I Just to briefly interject you said he was a coach at the High School.

RW Yes

I What did he coach?

RW He coached football

I Of course he did in Cleveland.

RW Yes he did, one of the great stories one year they were in the Senate League and incidentally, later I went to East High School myself. Anyway, in the Senate League they were up in the last game with Central High for the championship and Central High an Afro-American young man who was a marvelous place kicker, I mean he kicked, drop kicker...

I Yeah the field goals

RW A dropkicker.

I Oh dropkicker.

RW Yeah a dropkicker and the score was nothing to nothing and the last part of the fourth quarter and this man drop kicked a goal from the 50 yard line and the umpire refused to, he said that's impossible it can't be done, doesn't count and both the other coach and my father went and said it's got to count

it went over we all saw it. "No, he said, this can't be done, that's ridiculous. So finally my father said "Well, if he kicks it again, will you count it." He says "Yeah," you know, "let him try." He kicked it perfectly and Central High, my father, gave the championship away but rightly so and ..

I Good for him.

RW And had, so that's one of the stories I always remember about my father.

I Good story.

RW The Depression years were tough and I developed a wall paper cleaning company of my own I cleaned wall paper and it got known around the town and I had two associates work with me and we called ourselves the Excel Wallpaper Cleaning Company and we really made, we charged a dollar for each bedroom, charged a dollar and a half for the living room and on a Saturday we'd do a whole house and that meant we had about \$15 to \$20 dollars to divide between two of us and some days that was the only money we had because the law business had gone completely to pieces.

I Sure.

RW So, but they were great years I'm a loyal Cleveland Indian fan and for 75 years, they let me down sometimes every year but anyway...

I They beat my Yankees last night (chuckle).

RW Yes, but in my day, I watched Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, Jess Speake and all the great ones and George Ensal a great pitcher of the athletics you know all that bunch, so we were great fans and we played a lot of just out in the park ourselves played baseball but we did softball mostly just the kids in the neighborhood.

I And how many were there in your family

RW I'm an only child, my mother and my father and myself.

I So we're in the 30's now and you're in the wall paper business now I know in the 40's you agreed to come to the First Baptist Church in Bridgeport, could you tell us, make that transition for us.

RW Well, I started out in Iowa State College in animal husbandry because I thought I wanted to be a farmer. But in the process of the two years I decided that farming was fine but not for me and I became interested in the ministry. So my mother in 1933 was invited to go to Dennison University by the President (who had been our former minister in Cleveland when I

was born) in search of the Master. So my mother decided that she would. She was a dietitian, and she had been in charge of the Kirk Junior High School cafeteria in East Cleveland. So we decided that if she went down there, I could move back 'cause I wanted to get into liberal arts rather than more animal husbandry and that would give us two more years together, since she was alone and so we moved to Dennison.

I Which is in?

RW In Grandville, Ohio. Twenty-seven miles from Columbus. I graduated from Dennison University in 1935 and went to Kroeser Theological Seminary located in Chester, Pennsylvania. Then the graduate program for ministry was a three-year program in which you got a BD now it's a MDiv, because a BD symbolized collegiate work but it was a graduate degree. At Dennison I got interested in philosophy and majored in philosophy and for a while I wondered if I wanted to teach philosophy or be a minister. And so I decided first to come first to the Seminary and then see what happened, so graduating from the seminary in 1938 my first church was the First Baptist Church in Sioux, in Somerville, New Jersey, and while I was there I talked with the church very frankly about it and said I'll come providing I can have time to work on a Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia which they granted me. So I used to go into Columbia Tuesday morning and work all day, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and I concentrated on my Ph.D. work. When I came home then I worked the rest of the time with the church and in four years I had a marvelous experience there in the church and at the same time completed my work, wrote my dissertation and received my Ph.D. in, from Columbia in 1942. The books had to be published and my book was published it was called *'Three Christian Transcendentalists'* which was my research, so with that then came the call to Bridgeport. You say "how did I come here?" Well the way it works in the ministry you are in a church, in the Baptist church anyway, we don't have Bishops or anybody to move you around, you're in that church until some pulpit committee shows up to hear you and so that happened one day. I saw these four people and they scattered so they weren't seen as a group coming, but I noticed these four people and I thought, "Well, that must be a pulpit committee." They walked out never said boo to me. The next Sunday four more people showed up and then they said, "We want to talk to you." They said "We're from the First Baptist Church of Bridgeport, Connecticut and we'd like you to come to be our minister, will you consider it?" So out of the discussion that's how I came to Bridgeport.

I Oh, I see. So rather than having a Bishop or somebody assign you to a church, the members of the congregation that are looking for a minister go around...

RW Yeah, they hear about, we do have state conventions, organizations, Baptist state conventions and many times the church will go to the state convention and say look "We're looking for a new minister, whom would you recommend?" And then they contact other people they and maybe, anyway, they get a group and then they sort it out and finally decide we'll see Rev. Ronald Wells in Somerville or Joe Blow out in Pittsfield or whatever.

I So they decided they wanted you and you decided to come here.

RW Came here.

I Tell us about Bridgeport in that period --well first about the church the congregation and just Bridgeport at that period.

RW Well, the First Baptist Church was one of the strong Protestant churches, we had 750 members when I came and we had 800 when I left, it was a big church a thriving church, my church in Somerville had had a terrible experience and they were practically out of business I had there the job of building a new church out of bringing the people back and the interesting was there everything I did was wonderful, here I come this is an old established church they all new, and they had their committees all organized this is 800 people so it was a whole new ball game, but it was a great experience because I learned how to work with organized groups that had their own ideas and if I had an idea of what I wanted to do it was my job to sell, I learned how to work with volunteer committees.

I And you say it was an established church, how long had the church been here?

RW The church was founded in 1835, the first, they bought St. John's Church which was one of the six churches in a row on Broad Street and it was on the corner of what's now State and Broad, right by the library, it was right across from the Public Library and that church, they served it, they out grew it and they tore down in 1860 and built a new one right on the same corner and then in 1891 they sold it to P.T. Barnum for a museum and bought the land at Washington and West and built a new sanctuary and building in 1891-92 and the dedication was in 1892. So it's been, the church itself is a hundred, what it is now 1998 to 1836, you figure it out..(chuckle).

I Okay, a hundred sixty odd years?

RW A hundred sixty odd years, but the building here is a hundred two now or so, hundred and four. So the church grew, of course in the early days, in those early days this is when the first influx of people from North Europe

came in the Slavs and Hungarians and the Serbs and the Russians and the Germans and that was the first influx. Then of course during the Second World War we had a hundred and ten thousand people came in the war industry and that was a period of time when I was here. So we had people all over the place and of course they built --well I guess by then all of the units like Yellow Mill and Seaside Park and Beardsley and so on had all been built. But these were all houses that were built for people who were coming into town.

I To work in the factories there?

RW To work in the factories and so these hundred and ten thousand people came to Bridgeport during the Second World War and they were all over the place. The hospitals were full. We organized the council of churches of Bridgeport in those days I was a charter member and one of the interesting things in those days, in each hospital every day they kept a list of religious preference if you came in you could state you were Jewish or Protestant or whatever, Methodist, Baptist. But there was always a list everyday of at least ten people listed as unaffiliated Protestants --everyday a new list. So we decided in the Pastor's Association that we would, each one of us, take a hospital for a week and everyday we would go and call on these ten to twelve, five or eight unaffiliated people in both St. Vincent's and...

I Bridgeport? [Hospital]

RW ---Bridgeport. So that we had that kind of a ministry for people and that it didn't produce a vast number of people coming to our church, but on the other hand, many people did come to Bridgeport and they were Baptist or Methodist or Presbyterians and they would... So our churches did increase, not vastly, but it was a good increase. The best thing that happened to us was, we had a lot of college age young people who had not gone off to college because the fellows were expecting to be drafted and the girls had gotten good jobs in industry.

I No kidding?

RW Well, there were many young college graduates who came to Bridgeport and young adults seeking the work in war industry and our young people had a fairly active group. And they'd meet these new kids across the assembly lines. So what do you? Well there was nothing to do in Bridgeport except the gin mills so we developed a Saturday night program of square dancing and games and stuff. And so our own young people would say c'mon to our Saturday night program and so next thing we knew we had 50 to 60 of these college graduates young adults in this, --we called it the Senior Youth Fellowship. And it was this unwritten rule that if you

came Saturday night for the recreation, you showed up in church Sunday morning. And then we had a big Sunday night program, now of course we didn't all that, but nevertheless that was one of the great exciting things in my time as far as the ministry and the church was concerned. That together with all this calling and all the rest of it then.

I So okay, that brought the young people in. What would be, I guess what I'd like to know is the cross section of the congregation, what, you know, ethnic group or age?

RW Well, I would say that the great majority of the people were the family people in the 50s to 60s. Basically it was Anglo-Saxon, Protestant church. We did have one or two Afro-Americans.

I Oh really?

RW Yes, from the very word "go" almost. And we were open. It wasn't that we were excluding people, but as you know that Messiah and their many strong Afro-American churches and Brian Largeflin the Afro-American people were coming to the city they immediately looked there. On the other hand, we did have a number and have always had and now currently a new minister who's been there two and a half years Hopeton Scott is an Afro-American Baptist minister. Basically it was a church of families so that the mother and father were probably up in their 50s and many of these young people I talk about were all 21, 22, 23, but they all came from the, that is the core group. We had a basically, --I think you'd say we were a blue-collar church. We had some executives, we had a couple of GE vice-presidents, George Lindquist of the Lindquist Hardware and Lindquist Steel was a very beautiful member of our church. He was one of my dearest friends, and greatest supporters. There were others who worked in the city so that it was-- But basically, we were not an elitist church in terms of all top executives and many of our people worked in the factories at Bullards, at GE and all of the big industries of the time.

I I guess during this period, I guess during this time, --during the Second World War, other than, you know, the huge increase in jobs and industry and people coming in, are there some personal stories you've heard of --people going off to war or members of your congregation, that sort of thing?

RW Yes, there were many interesting things that happened along the way. For example, one day a man rang my doorbell. We lived on Park Avenue down Chester and Atwater just a block north of North Avenue and we had to buy the house. They didn't have a parsonage then. Anyway, the doorbell rang and the man came in and he put the gun down on the table as he sat down and I said, "Now then, I take it you want, you have something you

wanna talk about.” He says, “yeah, I’m at the end of the rope, but before I kill myself I wanted to talk to you to see if there was any hope.” When he put the gun down, I wondered if he’d come to shoot me. So we talked along and it turned out that his problem was that his wife had gotten to running around at work, running around with somebody else and she, --there’d been in a big to do and he was ready to blow it. So we got to talking and I raised some interesting questions with him about --didn’t tell him my theory of counseling. I don’t tell people what to do. On the other hand, I’m not like the Rochester Program that never says a word and says “umm-hmm.” And my philosophy in counseling has been that as you think it over, maybe you say now here are two or three different ways you could approach this and it’s up to you. So that’s what I did with him. I said, “Well now, look here, you tell her to get the hell out and divorce her. You can live with it and ask yourself what are you doing that you can do differently with her to regain her respect and her love or at least show her you’re a better guy and so on.” So that was one kind of an experience. Of course, during the war the Japanese relocation became a very interesting thing. You remember the Japanese were all removed from their homes, --just torn out from their homes and put in what I call “concentration camps.” And then it was opened up so they could be relocated and one of my dear friends in the National Home Missions Society got involved in this and he got me to go to Cleveland to organize a committee there that ultimately relocated over 500 Japanese Americans in Cleveland. Well, coming back here [Bridgeport] people heard about that. So I became involved in the relocation of Japanese Americans here.

I Tell us a little more about that.

RW Well, it was fascinating because I ended up making 44 talks; people would call me, the Jewish Woman’s Clubs saying “we hear you were in Japan,” and I said, “No, never been to Japan.” “Well something about Japan.” “Yeah,” I said, “I’ve been involved in the relocation of Japanese Americans if you’d like me to talk about that.” “Oh, well anything will do, so come.” (laughing) Well, as far as I was concerned I didn’t care whether, they didn’t know any more about that and I was glad to have the opportunity to speak. I spoke at Rotary and there was a man named John Ives who owned and operated the Arcade [shopping center and hotel] and the Ives’ Staples Company was right there...

I Sure, right there on Main Street.

RW Yeah, on Main Street. And I ended my talk with the Rotary saying this has consequences I need jobs. And John Ives came up and said, “I’ll give ya three right now. Give me three men I want to work in my Arcade Hotel as a night clerk and I need two carpenters to work in my construction work.”

I That's great.

RW And with that John became deeply involved, not only there, but he actually got involved in, --he was a Congregationalist, as I learned later he got active in their National Social Action Committee, about all sorts of things. Well, the most fascinating story about that of the, --Steinkraus was President of executive of Remington Arms or was it Sikor- no, Remington Arms I think.[Bridgeport Brass] Anyway here was a big full page ad saying "you don't, we don't need to tell you what a great job we're doing for the war work and blah, blah, blah, but what we need are people to work for us." So in those days there was a Jewish fellow who was head, he was the owner of the Bridgeport paper that was sort of the weekend one, sort of the Rag, it wasn't the "Post," but...

I "Herald?"

RW Yeah, the "Bridgeport Herald". I forget his name, but he was a great guy and he got into this with us.

I Ah, Lobe?

RW No, it was before him, anyway we decided we'd go see Herman Steinkraus, because we had people to work. So he went (clears his throat), he went with me and a couple of other guys and we went in to see Steinkraus he said "what can I do for ya?" And they had said that I should be the spokesman so I said, "Mr. Steinkraus it's not what you can do for us, but we hope we have something we can do for you. We read your article and we have people that need employment." "Oh great!" he says, "tell me about it." So I told him this story about this and he looked as if I'd kicked him in his stomach at first, but then he settled down and he listened and he said, "Well, I'm going to call my personnel man in and he buzzed for Joe Blow, the personnel man..." and the guy came in the door stood there a minute looking at this and Steinkraus said, Barney Stasky says, "Joe, how would ya like to hire some damn Japs?" (laughter) So he says, "you tell the story over again." Oh and before that, when Steinkraus was sort of wondering whether to call him in or not, I guess my Jewish friends said to him, "Herman, do you remember what it was like being a German Jew in the first World War here?" "Oh!" he said, "that's what it's all about?" And the editor said "Yes Herman, that's what it's all about." Well the result was that they did hire, I don't remember how many, but they began hiring and we began to put people in there.

I Okay, now just let me back up for a second so we understand this. These were Japanese Americans I guess primarily from the West Coast...

RW Yeah, they were all American citizens...

I Who were put into these "concentration camps" essentially and now if you could find them jobs they could relocate

RW They could relocate anywhere...

I They could relocate out of the camps?

RW Yes, yes, out of the camps anywhere, early on there was a two hundred mile line on each coast, that they couldn't relocate near the ocean. Then they opened that up and that's when we could begin to, when I was doing the work from Cleveland this was still closed, but then it was opened and the line was taken away and so we could begin to do it.

I And the fear had been because they were of Japanese decent?

RW And that they were saboteurs and so on. As a matter of fact one of the things that just burned me up there was a man in San Diego by the name of Gerta who sent a letter to the editor about every three weeks of the most vicious stuff about these terrible Japs they were all yellow they were all dirty saboteurs and so on and they kept publishing this stuff here in Bridgeport. Now why in the world this would come and they would publish it, but they did for weeks and months on end. And I was relocating people --and with these letters. But, then part of the problem too was that we had to find housing for these people and so that became part of my job and what I found was the thing, and I've said this more than once, I discovered that in this city there was a greater amount of human concern and compassion. Because would go to people advertising rent and I'd say, "Look I'm here to..." --and sometimes I'd have a Japanese American with me, and I'd say "We need a room for this man, he's working at Bullards or Sikorsky or whatever." And he would say "Well, we have a room if you'd like to look at it." Once in a while they'd see this person they'd say "Well, ya know, my aunt owns this house and I'd have to check with her..." and you knew it. But I never got the "What the, what are you bringing these people for?" And I really found a great sense in the city of Bridgeport among all of our people a sense of concern, compassion, and so on.

I It's such a, always been a city of immigrants and...

RW Yes it has, it so that one more set of immigrants and now, what is it 86% are minority and in the city of Bridgeport, so...

I It's still a city of immigrants, just different groups

RW Exactly, precisely, it's a whole different group. So that this was one of the fascinating sides of, in addition to preaching and teaching and counseling

and doing the pastoral calling and so on this was very interesting, and the great thing about it I've said more than once that the thing that I appreciate most about my church here was that it was a free pulpit.

I And by that you mean?

RW Well, here they had boys and in the Japan area in some of my families had them in the South Pacific, but I was free to talk about relocating Japanese Americans here.

I I see.

RW I also happened to be a pacifist through all my life and believe in nonviolence and again they supported me and I didn't preach it all the time but they knew that their minister was in the, whatever the sign-up was oh, 4, 4F.

I Oh okay, yeah.

RW He was a 4F, yeah, conscientious objectors.

I Conscientious objective, that's....

RW But this was a free... and they said to me several of them would say very nicely "Ya know pastor, we don't agree with you but you have a right as a minister of the gospel to proclaim the gospel as you see it." And I felt that that was the greatest gift they could give me. I didn't care if they weren't giving me a lot of money or anything, but uh, so it really was an amazing experience and then, with my Doctorate's Degree in Philosophy, Dr. Courtwright needed somebody to teach philosophy at night school. So he called and asked if I would come and teach philosophy in the night school. The Junior College was in a little, big ol' house that faced, stood on Fairfield Avenue about where the Oldsmobile now defunked Oldsmobile [is].

I Okay, was that just west of Park Avenue, somewhere?

RW ...was further, it was up, it was west of Norman. In that block between Norman and Yale.

I Okay, sure.

RW Only two or three houses there.

I Yeah, not far from Bassick High School?

RW No, right around the corner really from Bassick. So that that's where I taught for two years, that's where Henry Littlefield got his start. He came about the same time to be Dean and then of course later on he became President of ah...

I University of Bridgeport?

RW University...he lived right across the hall from us until about three months ago when he went down to Washington finally with his daughter.

I Oh here at 3030?

RW Yeah, right here.

I Ah, what was the student body like there when you were teaching night school philosophy in Bridgeport?

RW Well, this was a combination of older young adults who wanted, had started back to school. There were some who were seniors, I mean, first and second year students. But again, they were young adults. They weren't all the kids that just start in. Most of them were older and again, I didn't deliberately try to convert anybody. But out of it one or two couples got interested and came to the church. But that was not my purpose. I was teaching philosophy and then it just became too much. And so by then they moved. They were growing so fast they were able to incorporate that part and the rest of the program.

I And eventually that grew into the University?

RW Oh yes, this was the University of Bridgeport, the start of it.

I So by a junior college it sounds very much like the community colleges of today.

RW Yup, well it was really, and it was the only one in town, the only college the only collegiate work. And it was while I was here that the Gala first started to well, they got interested in forming Fairfield University and then of course, Sacred Heart came along and then I don't know when Housatonic first developed.

I late 60s, yeah.

RW But ya know, I'm not sure when we get to this other thing if we begin to look around we may have the largest collegiate student body of any city anywhere. Not that it's us, but you take, when we add up all the student body...

I That's true.

RW It could well be that we are the largest academic, collegiate academic city in the...

I Never quite thought of Bridgeport as a college town...

RW No, ya see ya don't. But that's why I think this whole thing of this is a unique, really a unique city in many, many ways.

I So you stayed in Bridgeport until when, now?

RW 1947. And at that point again, the church in Ames, Iowa --First Baptist Church, was not by the college and the student work was out by the college. They needed a new minister and I had been active in our National American Baptist Student work doing conference work with Green Lake, Wisconsin which was our summer conference ground. So I was known by the..., and had been involved at this level so, Lou C. Feder, who was the executive of our University pastor work, he got hold of me and he said "You've got to go to Ames to be the minister and the student worker at Ames." So my--, matter of fact, my grandfather had retired in Ames and he'd been a deacon in that church for 24 years. And my grandparents were members of that church and I had first gone to Iowa State College, so that I knew the church. Although in those days I taught Sunday School in a Presbyterian Church, the Baptist church was downtown and but anyway -- so --and I'd been up. I started going to Ames when I was three. My mother took me out because her folks were living, her parents were living there and we used to make trips. And my aunt and her husband had the house right next to my grandparents, so we used to go out periodically to Ames so Ames was like a second home to me

I Oh, okay.

RW Before I ever went to college -- and that's part of why -- and then with this interest in agriculture, I'd worked for my Uncle John down in his 360 acre farm down in southeastern Iowa one year. And I'd worked for a cousin of my mother's and her husband on a dairy farm in Hickory, Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh for two summers and then I graduated from High School in January of 1931. I got a job on a dairy farm family in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania and I was there from February of 1931 until I drove my new little model T Roadster from Stroudsburg to Ames, Iowa, stopping off in Cleveland (chuckle).

I Okay, so you leave the industrial city here and you, out there on the Great Plains.

RW On the Great Plains and we had the church was much smaller than this the actual membership was only 200. But we had professors, and we had, but again business people and but then there were these 400 American Baptist Students, not all of them came to our church but many of them, a lot of them, did we again had a group of 40 or 50 students in our Student, we called it the Roger Williams Club and we had a house where we lived on the top floor and we had the student program and the church office on the ground floor until we built a new church in ...

I And did you spend the rest of your time in the ministry there at Ames, pretty much?

RW Yes, I was there for five years. We built a church and we did this student work. And then I taught for two years at the college. But then at the end of that period of time, this National Board of Education, -- Dr. Feder who wanted me to go there -- his chief boss came to me along with himself and said "We want you to come and head the whole Board of Education National Program dealing with our Baptist colleges, our seminaries and our student work." And I said "Well," --this was '51, and I said "well, they haven't completed the church and I just can't leave until it's done." "Alright," they said, "we'll wait." So they waited a year they held the job open and so we got the church finished and the day it was finished, --the parsonage, the rest of it, we'd been in the church itself as you might see, see this? look at this film. We'd been in that for two years, but we lived in the Sunday School rooms because the parsonage wasn't finished on the end and we did the work ourselves, --the men in the church. I helped one carpenter lay all of the hardwood floor in eight rooms and hardwood floor, something yet again, anyway, so people said, I heard they said "Well that hasn't anything to do with the ministry," "I said it's where the ministry's going to live." (laughter)

I Okay...

RW So then after there I came back to our Board of Education and I served in this national position for, for ten years, 1952 to '62 and at that point we bought a sixty acre farm in New Jersey, near Flemington, a little town called three bridges, so we had a farm and we did, we had hay and the boys got a cow and horses and so we had a great time for ten years there and I commuted to New York on the Lehigh Valley which came into Penn Station and my office was at the corner of 32nd and Madison, just three blocks over from Penn Station.

I Sure.

RW And so we were over there the ten years. This involved traveling all over the country. We had the eight Afro-American colleges in the south, so I

got whole new, --we used to stay in the south. I was working in the black community and then our colleges were scattered all the way from Maine to, --at Minville, Oregon in the north here and our student program was all over the country as well. So that necessitated a great deal of traveling, and we had to fold up a couple of colleges and I helped rewrite the charter for Bishop College. One of our black colleges we moved from Marshall to Dallas, under the pressure of the United Negro College Fund, so I got involved in writing new corporation programs for these outfits. So that was a very interesting experience.

I Okay, so all of this and then when you finally retire you decided to come back to Bridgeport, why Bridgeport again?

RW Well, we looked all around, we looked at many places and I was still doing consulting for Marx and Lundy, the big fund raising firm. I've been a client of theirs four times and then I actually, after Sioux Falls, they wanted me to direct the campaign for the United Presbyterian Church, a national campaign. So for three years I was the director of that campaign and then ended up being a consultant with them and then I retired and (unclear) per annum. A week and a half after I'd retired, I got a call from the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian Seminary, and he said, "One of your major mission fund friends told me I had to call and talk to you all day if I had to get you to come and be our interim president." So for eighteen months I was in, went back and was interim president at the...

I ...Pittsburgh.

RW ...Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. And then after that I was doing, I continued to do this consulting work, Marx and Lundy. I did feasibility studies at McGill and also University of Toronto and the national, I mean the New York Historical Society, and places like that and that was a very fascinating thing. So I ended up really being consultant on the staff of Marx and Lundy, one of the really great firms, and so ended up my ministry really raising money (chuckle), but finally with Pittsburgh Seminary.

I And when did you come back here to Bridgeport?

RW We came back here in 1985, we'd looked around at places and I was still doing this consulting work, that's what threw us off.

I Yes.

RW And I needed a place where I could have good transportation, --be on my way to New York. I still had several companies, people I was working

with, and was on boards of executive committees, -- so I had to go to board meetings -- and then this consultation work. I did one for the major Catholic church in Cambridge, Massachusetts...

I Massachusetts?

RW For them and then these other, this New York Historical Society, and I was supposed to do the one for the New York Library. I was already for that and I went down one day for a meeting and I had pulmonary emboli on the streets of New York which meant I couldn't breathe. So what do you do on 43rd Street? So I sat down next to the wall and people, --I saw the dramatic of the good Samaritan story.

I Oh.

RW I saw people come down. They'd see me. I had my Homburg hat and my black --they'd see me sitting against the wall, they would walk across the street, go down and come back. They avoided me.

I Yeah

RW And then there were people who would look sort of and then they'd freeze walk right by. There was not a single soul stopped to ask me. I found that my breathing stopped so I could walk another, across, sit in the middle of the next block and I'd work my way back to Penn Station, I mean to Grand Central, in through the Lexington Avenue door there and I sat on the steps of the Graybar Building and their security guy came by a couple of times and the second time he said "Sir, are you in trouble?" and I said "Yes, I don't know what it is, but I can't..."

I can't breathe...

RW "...breathe well." "Well," he said, "let me, --where are you going?" I said, "I'm trying to make the 2:07 back to Bridgeport." "Well," he said, "let me call the guards, couple of them and they'll escort you to the train." Well they came and looked at me and I guess they felt I didn't look like I should get on any train. So they said, "You better go down to our

I ...medical facility?

RW "...medical facility," yeah. "We have people." So they took me down there and most of what they had there was stuff for heart. And they said, "We can't find out what it is and so we think you better go to one of the hospitals." So they took me. They called the ambulance to New York Hospital and these fellas escorted me there and --I mean to the taxi and

then over -- and I was there two and a half weeks hooked up for [cumidin] and the other stuff they give you for, --it was blood clots.

I Oh, okay.

RW In the lungs, thak goodness not in the heart, so I had to wait. Heparin, was the first thing they used.

I That's right, yeah.

RW ---intravenously, to thin the blood. And I was there two and half weeks. I had an interesting, fascinating time. The first night, --it wasn't until about 8:30 - 9:00 at night that this New York Hospital -- that the guy finally -- the resident says, "I got one more test I have to make," and I guess it was some kind of a scan. Anyway he took me into this thing, pushed me in this thing. I thought I was gonna be swallowed up in this big ball, you know, and he said "well," --afterwards he said, "I can't send you home, you've got pulmonary emboli and you're going right up to bed." Well got up there in a semi-private room with four beds and they're three women in the room and I didn't sleep much that night. The woman across was an old woman and they had to strap her down; she was trying to get out of bed. The more they strapped her down the more she yelled. The dear old soul over here -- 90 something -- and she cried all night for her husband, "Jim, Jim, Jim." And the girl over there was a drug addict and she vomited all night. So the next day they took me to a semi-private four bed men's room and I said "If that other is coeducational dormitory living I'd prefer the men's dorm." (laughter) The next morning when the gal wheeled me there, the bed I was going to was over by the window and here were two beds and another one, three of them. "Who is this new man?" and this big buxom nurse she wheels me in, she says, --big loud voice, "Well Reverend" she said "I hope you'll be happy here" and these guys look, "Reverend, we're stuck with a minister! (laughter)" So I played it very cool; I said, "Good morning gentlemen and shut up..."

I Tried to rest?

RW ...to take the initiative, anyway. So, well then we came here [3030 Park Retirement Home], because I needed this and of course we knew David Decker who built the place....

I 3030 Park?

RW Yeah, so we decided this made sense and we've been very happy to be back here. We've been here now thirteen years and of course actually in this place, you wouldn't have to move out of here for anything. We've got a beauty parlor, a barber that comes for the men. They have a pharmacy.

The doctors come for various things, not the tough stuff, but the run of the mill stuff and we have programs and movies. We show movies periodically and we have chapel services for Protestants. We have an ecumenical service and a Jewish service and Catholic service and an Episcopal service separately, so we have religious activities and just plenty, --it's really almost a self-sufficient community.

I How large is it. About how many people live here?

RW Well, there are, I think a total of maybe two hundred and fifty. Now this is the resident section and the health center is the connection there, the Decker Wing, and then some years ago they bought the old Van Doren Place so that up there opposite Sacred Heart now belongs to us.

I Oh, really?

RW Yeah, and probably in the long run that's finally going to be basically where we go if we no longer can operate here.

I Okay, that has more intensive care or assisted living?

RW We have skill....living here, but yeah, but I think they're figuring on closing this out and ...

I Oh really.

RW Ultimately, yeah, it's a lot of talk and a lot of furor going on about that. But anyway, but this is the residents and we still have about thirty five single rooms, a few others now. Henry's just been vacated, but that'll be filled. But right now, people are waiting later and later and later 'til they come in --and the tragedy is that we had number of couples come in and two, three weeks, and months, two months, three months, after they come in one of them dies. They said, "well, we're not ready yet." But we figured that it was much more to the point to get settled and we can go, we're free to go wherever we want to. We're going out to Denver to see our family the end of the month and so it's just like living in your own home and we say to so many people, you know, "Don't wait, 'cause then you have the double trauma of folding up your house."

I Okay, we were saying that moving at any time is traumatic

RW Yes. You have to get rid of all your stuff or most of it you do to come into one room or two rooms in our case we had three rooms. But even so, we had an eight and a half room house where we were. Our kids came to help us move and, you know, the interesting thing is you have some things that are particularly, you think are particularly precious and that they obviously

would want and so you say “Well, now surely one of you would like this, wouldn't you” and you get this “Well, father and mother, no, we don't have the...(laughter) So...now there were a few things they wanted, but basically we had to....

I I guess your point is well taken that why wait until there are other health problems and things like that going on.

RW Yes, here you can have it, residents just as though you were moving into a Condominium. See now, we pay a monthly fee. We don't buy into this the way you do in some of the newer places, but we have all our meals served to us, except for Sunday night supper it's the only one and as I say everything's here, you wouldn't have to...

I And who runs this place. Is this, is it a corporation?

RW Yes, the original corp..., to get the tax exemption it had to be founded by a supporting group and it was the Council of Churches of Bridgeport, The Greater Council of Bridgeport. That were the board and they were the members and they elected the board and it was formally incorporated Inner Church Residences, Incorporated. Then several years ago, Miss Keavens, who is the CEO and the president of that in the whole operation, after she bought Fairfield North about three years ago, five years ago, --no four years ago she says that they insisted on a whole new remaking of this, so now she has a company called the 3030 Health Systems and this is the new parent corporation. With eight members she's the CEO of it and these eight members are entirely self sufficient. They are now the board that operates the whole place, then she incorporated seven new corporations under this top corporation. The Bridgeport Health Systems, which is a combination, is this not including the residents, it still isn't clear then the Fairfield North and 3030 Park is a separate corporation that handles all of our endowments, --now basically Harvard doesn't have a separate corporation to handle it's endowments, then there's a new corporation that does the Public Relations and Fund Raising, well that's a normal job that was done by ...

I Yeah.

RW So, she's now got seven corporations and she's the President and CEO it's one of them. But the only members of these seven corporations are this top board or eight, it's sole members.

I So it's all the same people.

]RW Yeah, so now it's this entire group, these eight people and herself who run the whole thing and they're entirely self, --the board, self perpetuating.

I Is it a for-profit or a non-profit?

RW It's not-for-profit?

I Not-for-profit.

RW Not- for-profit, yeah, but the city did put the screws to us and we are now paying taxes. We used to give a hundred and seventy thousand dollars a year for supposedly, you know, this is what not for profits do, they give something, supposedly for police protection and fire to help maintain that. But last year they finally settled on some additional tax for this property which is in Bridgeport.

I It's interesting. I don't understand too much of it, but it's interesting (laughter).

RW Well, we're having a hard time understanding this whole new distribution, because you know, why do you need separate legal corporations to run your public relations and fundraising department?

I Is that, I don't know, but it sounds like there's taxes or something. I mean there's, I mean, I don't know, there's just speculation.

RW Well, yeah, some of the people in, whether it was the agencies or homes like this or the, I don't know who, said that it had to be reallocated or redistributed somehow. Somebody made the...

I The bottom line, I guess, though is, are the services, has the facility maintained good standards?

RW Oh yes. Yeah, the standards are good. So....

I Yes, that's the important thing.

RW Yeah, and while we've had increases every year, we haven't had anything the last two years, last year and this year in our monthly fee. A monthly fee pays for the apartment, they pay the basic telephone, they don't pay the long distance, but the light and the heat and the telephone and then the food, is all part of this monthly fee. And then the other part we pay-- when people come in, they pay an entrance fee which is like a health guarantee. And that's in this 3030 Park. It's held, but they're allowed to amortize your original payment each year towards the operating of this on the basis of your actuarial. Ours for example is 19 and a half years so they've been taking one 19 and a half of our total payment each year until it's all gone. So that's the second source of income to operate the facility.

I Fascinating story. I guess before we close Rev. Wells, this tape is going to be in the library, hopefully, forever (laughter). Is there any parting word or words to posterity you would like to share (laughter), or not?

RW Well, again I think the experience of Bridgeport and all of these various things we've touched on, really makes this a fascinating city. And if you have any, --people have an interest and concern in this city. It's fun to know, to go back and know something about all these --of these facts. And at the same time, to know what's available. And you know, we have a car to take 40 or 50 people to the Bridgeport Symphony in their series. And then things at Fairfield, the Fairfield U has various programs and so does Sacred Heart. So we have available really, our orchestra. We used to go to the Philadelphia Orchestra and we had season tickets there and this orchestra isn't quite the size or the strength of the Philadelphia Orchestra, but it's a very excellent orchestra. And then the other stuff that comes, you know, and then having good speed and all the rests, this town is an amazing town to live in.

I Well, thank you Reverend.