

TRANSCRIPT

Interview with Frank E. Bridgeforth, by Michael J. Bielawa, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, December 18, 1997.

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Interview with Frank E. Bridgeforth, by Michael J. Bielawa, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, December 18, 1997.

PART 1 : Introduction

MB: It's Thursday, December 18, 1997. It's about quarter of ten in the morning, and my name is Michael Bielawa, and I'm interviewing Frank Bridgeforth. Good morning, Frank.

FB: Good morning.

MB: You just talked about scouting a little bit before. But before we get into that, you mentioned some dates in the 1930s. When and where were you born?

FB: I was born right here in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on Lindley Street, right across from Mount Grove Cemetery. [Park Cemetery]

MB: Sure.

FB: There's a little alleyway right across from the cemetery there. I pass by it every now and then. We lived in the house way in the back there. I was born on October 20, 1927.

MB: October 20, 1927.

FB: Yes.

MB: That makes you how old?

FB: Seventy years old.

MB: Seventy years young.

FB: Yes.

MB: [laughs]

FB: I have two brothers and three sisters living right now.

MB: Do they all live in Bridgeport?

FB: Yes, they're all in Bridgeport. All except for one. My youngest brother -- he lives in New Mexico -- in Alamogordo, New Mexico. We went down to visit him a few years ago. He came up here -- my mother died in March. It was ninety-nine. So he came up from New Mexico for the funeral, and then he went back. He comes up --he's been in Mexico [sic] now for about five years.

MB: Did work bring him out to New Mexico?

FB: No, he moved out there. He was in a truck accident. A truck ran over him and he was sent to Bridgeport Hospital. The weather up here goes through you, so the Mexico climate is much better. He had tried different places, and he found that Mexico was the best place for him. So he likes it out there. It's a nice place.

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MB: You mentioned your family lived on Lindley Street. Is your whole family originally from Bridgeport?

FB: Yes.

MB: Parents?

FB: My mother is from Providence, Rhode Island. She was born December 14, 1897, and my father is from Richmond, Virginia -- was from Richmond, Virginia. He was born December 23, 1900. He died in 1961, I think it was.

MB: What was your father's first name?

FB: Edward.

MB: And your mother's first name?

FB: Viola Lee Smith.

MB: What did they do? Actually, what brought them to Bridgeport?

FB: Well, my father came to Bridgeport -- I guess probably for work. They were living in the south, and I don't think there was much work down there.

MB: From Virginia?

FB: Yes. His family migrated into Bridgeport, and he was driving a truck for Chris Rickert, down on Howard Avenue. My mother was living in Providence, and my father used to play baseball at the Park City Giants.

MB: That's something I have to talk about, too. I'm really interested in that.

FB: So he was playing up in Providence, and that's where my mother met him, up in Providence. His family lived up on Providence for a little while, too, and then he came back to Bridgeport. And that's where him and my mother met. They got married right here, in Bridgeport.

MB: Do you know what church they were married in?

FB: No, I don't off-hand. It could have been Bethel, because we've been members of Bethel when it used to be over on Broad Street, and I used to go to Sunday school when I was -- in the 1930s, we used to walk from Pine Street, and go down to Broad Street, to the church down there, and then walk back. We spent some time at Seaside Park, and then we'd go back home, which was nice. The nice, quiet days when you could go to the park there. You'd set all your gear on one side, go across, go swimming, come back, everything was just the way you put it. Nothing touched. Now you can't even blink your eye. Makes it kind of rough.

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PART 2 : Baseball in Bridgeport

MB: Yes. So Edward -- your father, Edward Bridgeforth -- came from Virginia?

FB: Yes.

MB: Was it a trucker or was he in Bridgeport -- and played ball.

FB: Yes. He played ball. He was a pitcher for the Park City Diamond, and I think he played first baseman. I gave Mary [librarian] --we have a scrapbook, and all the baseball teams that he played -- he had a list of all of them. That he won or lost and the different positions of the guys.

MB: Wonderful.

FB: Mary made a copy of it in here, last year I think it was. I brought the book. They had published a picture in the "Bridgeport News" that said, "Did anybody know what this team was?" I cut the clipping out and I said, "Yes, the man on the end there -- on the top -- that's my father. He was twenty-five years old at the time."

MB: The top right?

FB: Yes. When you're looking at the picture, the top left.

MB: The top left.

FB: He's the youngest one sitting up on the end, there.

MB: That was by the monument?

FB: Yes, that was by the monument at Seaside. And we have the original picture. It's at home. We were looking at it the last time -- some of the relatives from Providence came down, and we put it away, and now we actually don't remember where we put it. It's still in the house some place, you know? That was an individual league. I don't know. I think the Park City Giants was the first Negro baseball game in the City of Bridgeport. Then my father tried out for the Negro National League, but he didn't weigh enough. He said he was under weight. You had to weight a certain amount of pounds, and I think he said he was about ten pounds underweight, so he couldn't go to -- it was like a Florida league that he was supposed to go to, but he didn't weigh enough. He was a good pitcher and everything, but he did not weigh enough to go into that league. He missed out on the league. Now, when we were kids, after he got off of work, we used to go down

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to Seaside Park. They used to practice, I think, practically every Saturday and Sunday. And then they'd have the game, and then there would be somebody at intermission that would come around with a hat, and they'd pass the hat around to everybody around the bleachers, and people would throw coins in. And then they'd organize the Park City Giant Juniors. That's where my older brother was. He was one of the members of the Park City Giant Juniors -- the original members. They still have the charter -- I was trying to get my brother to get the fellow's wife to give him the charter, so that I could bring it up here and have a copy made. But she said that she sort of misplaced it someplace. But there should be a way that I can find out, you know?

MB: Yes.

FB: The House of Records, where they get permits or something?

MB: We have to talk about that, too.

FB: Yes.

MB: Yes. Because, you see, they had to renew the permit, I think, every year. Something like that. Because they had the original permit, ok, because they were the original Park City Giant Juniors -- that's their name.

FB: Yes. The original Park City Giants -- they must have a charter, and it's got to be registered in the City of Bridgeport.

MB: Parks and Recreation. That's a possibility. What years did your father play?

FB: My father played from -- well, I guess he started probably when he was a young kid. He played before he got married. He was playing before he got married, so that he might have been about eighteen when he started playing ball, and he played up until 1938. I think he played up until about 1938, or something like that.

MB: They were an outstanding team. They were one of the best African American teams in New England.

FB: Yes.

MB: Absolutely.

FB: And they played quite a few games. Quite a few. I was surprised -- when I was reading a book, a lot of the teams that they played -- all the different positions -- and there's quite a bit in that book, there. That's history right there -- of the ball team. This new ball team that they're going to open up down here in the South End --

MB: Near the --yes the Bluefish -- here?

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FB: Yes. I was reading an item in the paper that this Afro-American and this Irish or Jewish guy -- they were talking about combining both names for the stadium down here.

MB: That's a possibility. Did you read that maybe in last week's paper?

FB: Yes.

MB: On the editorial page?

FB: A couple days ago -- yes.

MB: I wrote that article. I think I wrote that article.

FB: I was saying it would be nice if they did -- after the tape cutting -- the building is finished, that they have a room with all stuff about the baseball teams. The Afro-American leagues, the Spanish leagues -- all the leagues that were in the City of Bridgeport. Have like one place, so the people of Bridgeport can come down and look and say, "Hey, I remember this guy. I remember this guy. That's my cousin," or something like that. "Gee, I didn't know there were this many teams..."

MB: That's a wonderful idea. In fact, folks who are building the stadium because of my interest and love of baseball -- they've asked me to oversee that project. So I'm working on that. It's something I've always been interested in, and for many years, is the Negro leagues. Speaking of Larry Lester, out in Kansas City --in October, just a couple of months ago, I brought Beau Wallace in to celebrate Jackie Robinson and Larry Dolby's fiftieth anniversary of breaking the color barrier. He played in the Negro leagues -- the Newark Eagles, the Houston Eagles.

FB: Yes.

MB: And then later, he played one year with the Bridgeport Bees. I met him out at Shea during Jackie Robinson Weekend, when I was there. I said, "I've got to get this guy to Bridgeport." We had a wonderful day. It was Beau Wallace day -- the mayor signed the proclamation I drafted. It was really a very special day.

FB: And when I was reading it, it would be nice if they had one room just for showing all the leagues, and the information to show off my father's book -- some of that. And a lot of Bridgeport will say, "Hey, I remember that. I remember when they used to play down at Seaside Park."

MB: There is so much history that that's actually a good problem. There's a lot to pick. The real trick of it is, I guess, locating the sources.

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FB: Yes.

MB: And then getting a correct description of the dates -- that kind of thing.

FB: Yes.

MB: You just mentioned Seaside Park played -- there's a couple things I want to ask about Seaside. Is that where your father -- you mentioned as a family, you used to go there on Sundays. Baseball games were played on what day?

FB: Baseball games were played on Saturdays and Sundays. I think it was diamond one. One time when my father was playing there, he hit the ball and it went out toward the sea wall. I think that was one of the longest hits that they had in that baseball team out there, and that's out near the hot dog stand. That's been there. That was there when I was a kid -- that same stand. But they have different owners and different things have been changed around in there. We used to go swimming. Like -- we'd go out there for family picnics. We'd lay out a blanket, and put all our food and stuff on it, a little -- we had ice in a little chest. And then we'd go over and go swimming. Come back an hour later -- there it is, right there. People would be right next to us -- they'd have their little set-up. Nobody -- everybody was friends and got along down at the park. We used to go night swimming down there, too. Sometimes late at night -- about eleven o'clock at night -- us kids, we would go down there and swim.

MB: How old were you around that time?

FB: Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

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PART 3 : Seaside Park, Boy Scouts, WWII Scrap Drives

FB: Eight, nine, ten, eleven.

MB: So about 1937 or 1938?

FB: Yes. Let's see. Up until the middle of 1938, I went to Providence to stay with my grandmother for about a year, and I joined the Boy Scouts up there -- Troop 1. That was the first Boy Scout troop in the City of Providence. That was organized from 1910. And they had an eighty-fifth anniversary that I went to a couple years ago, and now they have a Yawgoog Illuminae camp -- and I think that I've been twice now. The oldest scout there is ninety-four. His name is Gus. Every time I see him, I always give him something from my count here. I have a pen or a paperweight -- I always give it to him because he's cool. He's about ninety-four. The next big reunion we have for that Boy Scout troop up there will be the year 2005, I think. Gus said that he'll be there, providing meals. [laughs] He said, "If I'm living, I'll be there. If not, well, say a prayer for me." [laughs] But he's cool. I just saw him when I was there, this past August. Because I go every August.

MB: When you use that word Illuminae, is that a council meeting or jamboree?

FB: No. That's a group of old-timers that get together. Well, it's not actually old-timers, because there are a lot of young kids. That's all the ones that have camped or visited a park -- the Boy Scout camp -- since 1960.

MB: The Rhode Island Boy Scout camps?

FB: Yes.

MB: Since 1916?

FB: Yes. Because that's when the camp was given to the State of Rhode Island for the Boy Scouts Camp Yawgoog. A lot of troops from Bridgeport and around there -- they go up there in the summer for camp.

MB: So you first joined the Boy Scouts when you lived with your grandmother in Rhode Island?

FB: Yes, Providence, Rhode Island.

MB: How old were you?

FB: I was about eleven years old.

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MB: So it was in what year?

FB: 1939. I was eleven-and-a-half, going on twelve. And then I came back to Bridgeport, and I joined Troop 27, that was at Messiah Baptist Church, that's right up there. I stayed in that troop for about five years, until the war broke out. And while the war was on, while we were in the Boy Scouts, we participated in the scrap drive, the aluminum drive, the grease drive, the paper drive, the rubber drive. I was air raid ward and helper. I loved that job. Because we heard the air raid siren go off -- I was living on South Avenue. I would don my uniform, put my little band on, and go around. All the storekeepers -- they had to turn them lights off. They had to close the doors and turn the lights off -- a black-out, you know?

MB: Yes.

FB: But I was like king then.

MB: [laughs]

FB: A little kid telling people, "Hey, turn them lights off. I'll write you up!" And, you know, they would get like a little fine.

MB: Yes.

FB: And I'd turn the lights off because they wanted complete blackness. Also, we had this big aluminum drive on the Boston Green. Do you know where the G.E. is, up on Bond Street?

MB: On Boston?

FB: Yes. The big Green [Old Mill Green on Bridgeport's East Side]?

MB: Yes. The old Mill Green?

FB: Yes. We had a big aluminum drive, where people donated all aluminum pots and pans. And all us Boy Scouts were running around, collecting all sorts of stuff. I mean, we had a mountain -- I'd say about one story high. All pots and pans -- all aluminum -- for the war.

MB: My!

FB: And then while we weren't doing that, we were making victory gardens, and then we were taking first aid classes, and also we were taking courses on model airplanes. We were making little model airplanes for the soldiers. And this place right on the -- where the bank used to be, on the corner of Main and State Street -- there was another doorway on State Street. We used to go up on the second floor, and that's where we used to make the little model airplanes.

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- MB: What building was that, on State Street? Was it just around the corner? Is that building still standing?
- FB: It's got a restaurant in it now. It used to be People's Bank, I think it was -- right on the corner. State and Main Street.
- MB: Oh, that's where the restaurant Roberto's is now.
- FB: Yes. But on the second floor -- there was another door on the side, on the State Street side, and we used to go up on the second floor. That's where we would learn how to make these model airplanes, for identification purposes.
- MB: Yes.
- FB: Soldiers, you know? And that was nice. I did all this while I was a Boy Scout, and I went in the Service. I joined the Navy.
- MB: What was the highest rank within the Boy Scouts that you achieved? Do you remember?
- FB: Yes. Second Class. Because I was helping everybody else. My cousin --he's still living, he was my Scout Master, Mr. Berkeley Cox. He worked at Sears & Roebuck. Sometimes he didn't get off on time, so I would actually run the meeting. I was helping everybody. I took my second class test on State Street. You know the big church on the corner of Park and State Streets?
- MB: Yes.
- FB: What is it? United? [United Congregational] I forgot the name of it. But I took it down in the basement. At that time, when you went for a different rank, you went to this church here, down in the basement, and there was a bench, and yourself and a lot of other Scouts would be sitting on the bench, and then there was a long table, and I think there was either three or four Scout officials that were sitting at the desk therer, and they would call you up, and they would ask you different things that pertained to that rank. And then they'd say, "Okay." Then you'd go sit down and they'd call the next guy and do the same thing to them.
- MB: So the test was in the church?
- FB: Yes.
- MB: And where were your meetings held -- the Scout meetings?
- FB: Our meetings were held at the church on Artic Street --Arch Street. They used-- the Messiah Baptist Church used to have -- right in back of the Majestic Theater -- the old church. It used to be right in back of it. Right now they've got the new

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church. In fact, it's in the same location. They had a little side building, and we used to go down in the basement for our meetings.

MB: And which street was it, again?

FB: That was Arch.

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PART 4 : Naval Service in WWII

FB: That was Arch.

MB: Arch Street -- yes.

FB: Right on the side, there.

MB: And after Boy Scouts, you were drafted or enlisted?

FB: No, I volunteered.

MB: You volunteered?

FB: I volunteered. At the age of seventeen, I went into the Service.

MB: And what year would that be?

FB: 1945. The end of 1945.

MB: In what branch?

FB: The United States Navy. I was --the first ship I was on was the Liberty Ship. U.S.S. Jean Lafitte.

MB: That's a good name.

FB: That was one of them ships that they were --building one every thirty days-- it was coming right off the keel. And that was the first ship I was on, and that was the worst ship I ever sailed on.

MB: [laughs]

FB: You could smell the diesel.

MB: Yes.

FB: It was a cargo ship. Because the Japanese and the Germans were sinking so many that the other transports -- they had to get some ships in, that they could bring up a lot of supplies. And then I went out the Pacific in that one, and then I boarded this transport, amphibious personnel attack, and U.S.S. Filmore APA 83(?).

MB: The name of it again was what?

FB: Filmore, APA. The APA stands for Amphibious Personnel Attack. We were in the Philippine Islands, and we were getting ready to go into the invasion of Japan, when they dropped the bomb. It saved many lives.

MB: Yes, absolutely.

FB: Because the Japanese were die-hards at that time, and they would fight to the last

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man, woman and child.

MB: Yes.

FB: Before they let you invade their home land. Our ship was loaded with -- we had a compliment of Marines and we had airplane parts and a whole lot of other parts that we were bringing over.

MB: My grandfather was a landing craft medium, and this, of course, was before the war ended. He was involved with the Battle of Okinawa. He was there.

FB: Well, we dropped some stuff off at Okinawa, in the Philippine Islands. Leyte, Samar, Pekalongan. I've been on Guam. I've been in --let's see, Guan, Tien, Okinawa. I've been in the Marianas. The Marianas was truck. Japan, I've been all over Japan. I've been from the northern tip to the southern tip. I was stationed on most of the islands.

MB: While in the military?

FB: Yes, while in the military. I've been to Korea twice. I was in Korea during 1945, when we dropped some troops off there, and we went back aboard ship, and then we went back to the Philippines. We dropped troops off in Okinawa in 1945. I left most of my ship papers at home, and I keep in touch with one of the fellows -- well, there were two of them. One Afro-American -- he lives in Philadelphia. He came to visit me after we got out. As a matter of fact, he visited me twice, I think it was. And now there's another fellow. He's in Waco, Texas, and we keep in touch. He just sent me a picture of him when he was aboard ship. Him and I -- we both look like little kids. I just sent him a picture of me, and we looked like little kids. We look like we're playing 'sailor.'

MB: [laughs]

FB: And uh, he sent me a picture of himself --because I had sent him pictures of the ship papers. What was it? On Thanksgiving Day 1945, there was a mine coming toward the ship, and he was one of the gunners that shot the mine away from the ship and blew it up. I happened to have that ship papers I was reading and I looked and I said, "There it is. That's Chuck." So I started looking around to see if I had his address on the back of one of my ship papers. So I wrote him a letter and I sent him a copy of it. He was tickled pink. He asked me did I have anymore. Well, at that time, I only had three. I had my personal collection. I said, "Well, I don't know. If I find some more -- I'll have some copies made, and I'll send them to

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you.” So, when my mother died and we were going through all this stuff, I came across some more ship papers and letters that I had wrote to my mother during the war, and there’s one that’s a V-Mail -- a couple of them are V-Mails, and there’s one that says, “Dear Mom, we’re at cut-out, cut-out, cut-out,” and it goes all the way down, like that.

MB: What is “V-Mail?”

FB: In other words, it was a little small letter that we could mail off of the ship. But they censored the mail before it went off. They read it to make sure that you didn’t say where you were or what you were carrying on your ship -- things like that. Because they said that “loose lips sink ships,” that the mail might get intercepted someway or other, and it might get in the wrong hands.

MB: That’s right.

FB: And they could tell by the date on the letter -- you know, just about where it is. They’d say, “Okay, that’s about a month,” and they would look at the postmark that was in the telegram-- that it was an APO Pacific or in the Atlantic. And they somebody would be able to trace it.

MB: Sure. Of course. Certainly.

FB: A letter takes, maybe, thirty days. So they’d figure, “Okay.”

MB: Just even to know where um -- the contingency on each craft -- the amount of people -- who was where?

FB: Yes.

MB: I mean, keeping track of different folks as they rise in the ranks. I mean, every bit of information is important military intelligence.

FB: Yes. Now, they figure that so many people on transport -- if they happen to know the name of the transport -- like it’s APA or AKA. AKA was cargo -- amphibious cargo attack. Now, that meant that they were carrying a lot of cargo. APA -- amphibious personnel -- that’s carrying personal. So they figure, “Okay, carrying personal” -- plus, you’ve got armored men, too. So this way here, they could turn around and say, “Okay, if that’s one ship there -- that means that’s a convoy.”

MB: Yes.

FB: And there are a whole bunch of ships in the convoy. Because I have a picture at home of my ship -- I think ten other ships -- were all in convoy -- and I’m trying to remember where we were, because there was one part of an island, but I’m not sure

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if we were in Leyte Gulf, or if we were off the coast of Okinawa. I'm not sure. Because the background -- you could see the island, but it's so far in distance, it's kind of hard to figure out which island. In the Pacific, when you're coming near an island, they all look alike.

MB: Sure.

FB: And we've seen some islands that our commanding officer -- he would go and get a map and get the map and it's not on there. These were volcano eruptions that come up, and uncharted piece of land in the middle of that, and they'd look on a map -- "No, that's not here." [laughs] And we've seen somewhere -- they come up and you'd see the tip of them, and then the next morning, they weren't there. They would go down. I guess on account of the earthquakes they used to have over in Japan there.

MB: Sure. Did you recall what stations were -- the battle station -- what positions were?

FB: Okay. I had two jobs. I had a military job and a specialty. I was cooks -- I was with cooks and bakers aboard ship, and my military was manning in a twenty millimeter. And if I wasn't doing that, I was feeding the ammunition. It gets heavy after a while.

MB: Yes.

FB: Hot and heavy.

MB: Yes.

FB: It was nice. I really enjoyed it. I wouldn't give nothing for the experience and just the knowledge that I learned when I went overseas. Visiting all the countries, seeing how the people lived, trying to learn a little teeny bit of their language, just to get along.

MB: Do you remember anything now -- Japanese, maybe?

FB: Sometimes I can hear somebody say something, and at that particular moment, sometimes I can say something back. But most of the times, no. It's all on the tip of my tongue sometimes.

MB: Sure. People with a language after a while -- they [unclear] like anything...

FB: But in Japan, they had different dialects. One part of Japan -- maybe the northern tip of Japan -- their dialect was a little different than the ones that were in Tokyo, and like that. I have pictures that I took in Tokyo. In fact, there's one picture I

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took of the Imperial Palace. That's the one that McArthur took over after the Second World War. We weren't in there, and we were up on the third or fourth floor, and we could look down. And looking down in the street, there was like a water way, and -- it was like a little landing craft on it. Now, that was in 1945. Now, I went back to Japan again in 1947 because I turned around and joined the Air Force after I came home. I joined the Air Force and went back in. When I went back into Tokyo, I looked for the same thing. It wasn't there. Yet I have a picture and it shows like a lake, and like an armored carrier or something, right out there. When I went back years later, it's not there anymore.

MB: When did you leave the Navy?

FB: I left the Navy in July of 1946.

MB: And what rank were you then?

FB: Steward Mate 1st Class. That was three stripes on there. I was going for Petty Officer or 3rd Class, with cooks and bakers.

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PART 5 : Coming Home from WWII, Working, Baseball

FB: I left the Navy in July of 1946.

MB: And what rank were you then?

FB: Steward Mate 1st Class. That was three stripes on there. I was going for Petty Officer or 3rd Class, with cooks and bakers. But I got discharged before I got promoted.

MB: But didn't you say that when you got back to Bridgeport, you turned around and joined the Air Force?

FB: Yes, around a year later. Because when I came home, it had seemed like I hadn't been no place. Nothing had seemed to change. The same guys that were here when I left -- they were still there. They were like standing on the corner. The only thing different was they might have had different clothes on.

MB: [laughs]

FB: That was about it. They were just standing around. They weren't working when I left, and when I came back, they still weren't working. And yet, there were quite a few jobs. I was going to school -- I was going to Bassick [high school] -- and I was working part-time in G.E.

MB: What were you doing in G.E.?

FB: I was in the corning department. Electric wire. I was there for a while, and I worked at Lorraine Novelties. I worked in a bowling alley.

MB: What bowling alley? Do you remember?

FB: Hawley Bowling Alley. I used to set-up pins, and that was on Fairfield Avenue. I worked at Jenkin Valves. I worked at Bassick.

MB: Those were all before you went in the military?

FB: Yes.

MB: You had a lot of jobs as a young man.

FB: Yes.

MB: Good for you.

FB: I stayed active -- like now, I'm still active. I used to make field telephones. Parts for the field telephones, down on South Avenue. You know where Sikorsky is?

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MB: Yes.

FB: Way down, out that way. In the big building there. My oldest brother -- he worked in a place where they made sub-Thompson machine guns. My mother [Viola Lee Smith] worked in another plant -- she was testing bullets.

MB: Remington, maybe?

FB: I don't know. When she made that whole thing about black history in Bridgeport [Bridgeport Public Library oral history project], she was like an inspector for bullets. She was inspecting the bullets and everything. I made field telephones. My brother helped make the sub-Thompson machine guns. My mother did the bullets. My father was still driving the truck. My sisters -- they were in the Girl Scouts. As a matter of fact, everybody in my family was in the Scouts.

MB: Wonderful.

FB: I traced our scouting history back to 1916, when my uncle was a Boy Scout.

MB: Rich history?

FB: I have a copy of his registration, when he joined the Boy Scouts, in Providence, Rhode Island.

MB: Well, that's a treasure.

FB: That's my father's brother. It's his next-to-his-youngest-brother. Providence -- that's where my mother met my father, when he was playing ball. They were living up in Providence for a while. That's when he joined the Boy Scouts up there.

MB: Your uncle?

FB: Yes.

MB: Because your father, who was driving a truck, also playing ball -- that wasn't his means of --?

FB: No. His livelihood was driving a truck.

MB: And he played semi-pro ball?

FB: Yes.

MB: In Providence?

FB: Yes.

MB: That must have been something to have --

FB: He's one of the original Park City Giants.

MB: I know the story in the early 1920s, and Bill Green? I can't remember the name of

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the manager. His last name was Green. It may have been Will. I know it's Green.

FB: I know when we were kids, we were living on Pine Street, no, Lee Avenue. My father used to take off on Saturday afternoon with his baseball glove and say he was going to practice. And he had that baseball glove for quite a few years. I thought it was still in the house, but I looked around -- I couldn't find it.

MB: Maybe it will turn up.

FB: Yes. If it does turn up, it ain't going no place.

MB: No way. You hold onto that. When I talk to folks, I say, "That's a treasure and an heirloom, and that should be kept with the family and never parted with."

FB: Right.

MB: I mean, it's one thing to show somebody or share it, or put it on display.

FB: Right.

MB: Loan it to a museum or library. But don't ever [unclear].

FB: It's like a book. Now, I keep that covered in plastic now. I still have the book. I've made copies of it. I don't know how the copies -- if they came out good or not. Those copies -- that book is old, okay? That book was my father's. He started that when he started baseball, cutting the clippings out every time he played, and putting them in the book. So you're talking fifty or sixty years. Some of the papers were getting yellowish around the edges, you know?

MB: Sure.

FB: So we kept that up.

MB: So your whole family was working, and that was just before the war, by making field telephones, and inspecting the ammunition.

FB: Yes.

MB: That was probably during the war -- during the early 1940s.

FB: The early 1940s.

MB: And when you came out, you joined the Air Force?

FB: Yes.

MB: And so you still had that desire to see the world?

FB: Yes, I saw a little bit more of it.

MB: Wanderlust.

FB: Oh, yes. Wanderlust. And no doubt, I was with the engineers. At first I was in

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an ammunition company, and then they transferred me from the ammunition company -- that ammunition company -- all we did was -- we moved around ammunition that had been set after the war. We either destroyed it or we shipped it to some other places.

MB: Sure. Was that local?

FB: No, this was overseas.

MB: Oh, I see.

FB: A lot of the equipment -- right after the Second War -- we dumped. Right in the middle. Brand new. We dumped it overboard.

MB: My grandfather remembers the earthmovers on the docks of Hawaii, just pushing everything right off the docs, into the ocean.

FB: That's right.

MB: And the regular G.I.s and sailors -- they were all stunned and shocked.

FB: Yes. They were all brand new jeeps. Still with...throwing everything overboard. They said something about if we brought all the stuff back to the States, the automobile manufacturers would lose money because the G.I.s would buy it -- buy the jeeps and everything. Because he could have gotten a jeep for three hundred bucks. We got a state bonus, which was three hundred. That would have been nice. That would have bought --

MB: A jeep! [laughs]

FB: Yes.

MB: And now people are driving the Hum V's now.

FB: Yes. One of the ships I was on -- we dumped quite a bit of stuff overboard. And I also saw one of the barges that had a lot of equipment that we were getting ready to load, and we hit a typhoon, and the barge actually twisted the rope a little like a pretzel. Everything went over. We had these big ropes and we had a steel line inside of them.

MB: Yes.

FB: They snapped like they were pretzels -- just like that.

MB: That was while you were in the Navy?

FB: Yes. During the war -- a lot of people don't think that water is strong, but I tell them, "Water will destroy."

MB: Oh, yes.

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- FB: Water can turn a battleship upside down.
- MB: Yes. And there's nothing to stop it.
- FB: No. Like my father used to say, "Water and fire are good servants, but bad masters. When they start controlling you, that's when it's bad."
- MB: I like that saying. Your father said that?
- FB: My father used to tell me that. He used to say the same thing about whiskey. He used to say, "Whiskey is a good servant but a bad master. As long as you controlled it, it's okay. But when it starts controlling you, let it go."
- MB: I like that.
- FB: He used to do a lot of quotations. I used to do a lot more when I was going to school for extra-credit.
- MB: Where did you go to school?
- FB: Prospect, Longfellow, Roosevelt, Bassick, Congress --
- MB: The elementary, where the Bassick is the high school.
- FB: Bassick was high school.
- MB: Yes.
- FB: Congress, where the police station is, that was junior high. Whittier. I think I went to Whittier one day, and then they said since I lived on the other side of Iranistan Avenue, I had to go to Congress. And then after I finished Congress for a year, I was supposed to go into -- I thought I was going to go to Central, but then they said, "Nope, you have to go to Bassick because you live on the other side of Park Avenue. Park Avenue to Main Street -- you went to Central. Park Avenue to Iranistan Avenue -- you went to Bassick. I didn't want to go to Bassick because all my friends were all going to Central.
- MB: Well, Central was where City Hall is now.
- FB: Right.
- MB: What year did you graduate high school?
- FB: I left high school. I was in the tenth grade, and I went back overseas.

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Interview with Frank E. Bridgeforth, by Michael J. Bielawa, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, December 18, 1997.

PART 6 : 1940s and 1950s, Air Force Service

FB: I joined the Navy. I left school and I joined the Navy.

MB: That's right.

FB: And then when I came out of the Navy, I went back to school under the G.I. Bill for a few months, and got the wanderlust, and went back in again, and then I took my G.E.D. test on Okinawa in 1948 or even 1949. I still have my certificate it's in my book. And that was it.

MB: How long were you in the Air Force?

FB: Eight years.

MB: Eight years?

FB: Yes.

MB: So, longer than the Navy.

FB: Yes.

MB: What was the rank when you were discharged?

FB: I was a staff sergeant.

MB: My father was a staff sergeant in the Air Force. He was in during Korea.

FB: My oldest brother -- he was in the infantry during the Korean War. I was an engineer, and my youngest brother -- he was a paratrooper.

MB: Military family.

FB: All military.

MB: When you went in the Air Force, it must have been 1947?

FB: Yes. I went in as a corporal because --

MB: That's what I was going to ask. You were still so close, so they probably credited --

FB: What it was -- they had like a promotion. "Okay, all you Navy guys. Come on, join the Air Force. We'll start you off at corporal. You won't be a private. You'll start right off as corporal because you've already had some kind of rank in the Navy, you know?" You've already went to your training. So all we have to do is put a uniform on and -- boom, they'll throw you right out. Out to the fish, they would say. And that's what they did. I went to Okinawa again. I said,

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“I’ve been here before.” The guy said, “Yes?” I said, “I’ve been here before.” I said, “That was when I was in the Navy -- we came there.” I have a picture -- suicide cliff -- where the Japanese committed hari-kari [hara-kiri]. While I was with the engineers on Okinawa -- first, they put me in the ammo company. Then from the ammo company to engineers. I was operating -- they taught me how to operate a crane, a bulldozer, a grader. I have pictures of all this stuff -- stuff I operated. The best piece I had was a dragline, and it had a two-and-a-half cubic yard bucket on it. I could get inside that bucket. I have a picture of it at home.

MB: Yes.

FB: It was called a Northwestern. And the first time I got in that thing --

MB: The bucket -- the whole piece of equipment was called the Northwestern?

FB: Yes. I had been used to operating the little cherry picker cranes and stuff like that. They said, “Well, we’re going to put you on this big thing there.” I said, “No problem. That will operate the same thing.” So I got in it, sat in the seat, and gradually I looked down. There was a body lock that held the cab so it wouldn’t sway. I released the body lock and I swung it around a little bit and I said, “Okay, now pick up the bucket.” So to pick up the bucket, I had to push down on one pedal. That pedal pushed me right off the seat.

MB: [laughs]

FB: I had to get used to it.

MB: Yes.

FB: I had to actually sit in it sort of side-saddle to get more strength in my left leg to push the pedal down.

MB: [laughs]

FB: But the other ones weren’t that strong.

MB: Yes.

FB: Then, once I got used to it, it was like -- hey, it was just like a toy. I’d be out there in a quarry, because we were digging up the coral rock, because we had an asphalt plant, and we were making our own asphalt, and the trucks from different outfits would come and get the asphalt, and they would take it to the runway -- up to Naha and Kadena runways, and fix the aprons. The aprons are where the airplanes tax off onto the side. And so, that’s what we used to do. And sometimes, if I wasn’t operating the dragline, I’d be driving one of the trucks with the asphalt. A couple

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of times, the M.P.s used to stop us because we'd be going too fast, and they'd hold us up -- "That asphalt is no good. You have to dump it." Right now in Okinawa, you'd probably see piles of asphalt on the road from Naha to Kadena. There was a General Whitehead -- he told the M.P.s, "The next time you stop one of those trucks with that asphalt, you bought it." When we come down, they used to give us the high sign to go ahead --

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Interview with Frank E. Bridgeforth, by Michael J. Bielawa, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, December 18, 1997.

PART 7 : Bridgeport Newspapers, Working after WWII

MB: I just want to say a few introductory remarks. Hi. It's Michael Bielawa again. It's December 18, 1997. It's about ten-thirty right now, and I'm having a lovely conversation with Frank Bridgeforth. We were just discussing his Air Force days, serving in Okinawa. After Okinawa, did you come back? Well, after your Air Force days -- you were in eight years. That means you came out in 1955?

FB: 1955.

MB: And you returned to Bridgeport?

FB: Yes.

MB: In all the different jobs -- you've had an incredible amount of jobs, from standing up pins in the bowling alley to creating field telephones. You were a cook in the Navy.

FB: I also ran a pool room for a friend of mine.

MB: Was that before the war?

FB: Yes, that's before the war.

MB: Before the Second World War?

FB: Yes. This was actually during the war, until I was old enough to go in the Service.

MB: Oh, I see. I see.

FB: I delivered newspapers. I did everything.

MB: What paper did you deliver?

FB: "The Bridgeport Post," "The Times Star."

MB: Door-to-door?

FB: Door-to-door. And sometimes the papers would have forty-eight pages or something like that, and they were heavy. And we had the bags -- canvas sacks.

MB: Yes.

FB: We used to pick up the papers at "The Bridgeport Post," right on the side entrance.

MB: State Street?

FB: Right.

MB: Yes.

FB: There was a little side entrance, on a little short street, right now. Right across

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from it is the UI, right?

MB: That's correct.

FB: There's a little door. We used to go in that door, go up about three steps, and there was a platform. Then we'd go on the platform, and there was two windows. We'd go to one of the windows and get our papers. Now, at that time, when I was delivering papers, you had the five star final, four star, three star, two. Actually, it was the county edition. That was the first paper that came off. That had a lot of news, but it didn't have everything. Something would happen during the day and they would actually change part of the front page.

MB: And that would become the two star?

FB: Yes. And then it would become the two star. The five star final was the last paper that came out. That would be at night. And a lot of times I'd get out of school. I would pick up maybe the four star and maybe a couple of county editions. At that time, the papers were a penny. Yes, I think they were a penny. We delivered them, and we used to get two cents a paper. And then they went up to a penny-and-a-half, and then we charged three cents a paper, and all like that. I had some customers who actually were bad payers. You see, at the end of the week, they only had to pay me a quarter. And some people lived on the third floor, and I'd go up to the floor, knock on the door, and I knew they were home, but they wouldn't come to the door to give me my quarter.

MB: [laughs]

FB: Okay. So I would stop delivering papers sometimes. I'd say, "Hey, [unclear] with my money." So "The Bridgeport Post" -- what they did -- they issued them people cards, so they would have to pay "The Post," and when I came up on Saturday, all I had to do was punch the card, and "The Bridgeport Post" would pay me. They would pay me. You see, they had to pay "The Post."

MB: Yes.

FB: And then they'd pay me. So that was nice that way.

MB: Was it a lot of walking?

FB: A lot of walking. And I had a bike. I had put a bicycle together. The fellow I got the paper out from was a good friend of ours. They used to live on a houseboat, out on the Henry Street dock.

MB: Oh.

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FB: Their name was Reese. The father's name was Captain John Reese. Very good friends of ours. Out of the original family, there's two sisters, one brother and a step-sister. She lives in Philadelphia. That's my Godchild. All the rest of them -- they passed. I have pictures of all the boys that were in the Service at the time. They lived on the houseboat, right off the Henry Street dock. They used to go to school with me.

MB: What school?

FB: Prospect. The city had some kind of ordinance where you had to live in Bridgeport in order to go to the public school. Now, I guess they declared the water like neutral ground or something, so they moved off of the houseboat and they moved onto land, and they moved onto Whiting Street. Because we were living right next door. We had moved from Main Street to Whiting Street. We were living right next door to them. One of the boys had the paper route, and his name was Douglas. He was the youngest boy. He's the one that gave me the bicycle, and I took over his paper route. And I kept the paper route for a while.

MB: Did they all --?

FB: All the boys went into the Service except for one. There were five boys. Four of them went in. One stayed home. I think there was something about the Sullivan brothers -- and they all went down.

MB: Yes.

FB: Then they started this thing where they don't want to take and kill the blood line.

MB: That's right.

FB: They would leave one to keep the name going, you know? And I have pictures of the four of them that were in the Service.

MB: Yes.

FB: I got that at "The Bridgeport Post" right after -- when they first went in. As a matter of fact, I got those and a lot of the other guys from the South End. And I got pictures of all them. I don't know if I gave Mary [librarian] a copy of them or not.

MB: The pictures, I'm sure, will be nice to highlight your words -- your conversations.

FB: Of all the fellows that went into the Service during the Second World War that I got pictures of -- and how many are still living? None. So it's very interesting.

MB: So, when you came back after the Air Force in 1955, did you start-- take your background as a cook, or a earth mover?

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FB: No, I started working in the gas station.

MB: Where was the gas station?

FB: In Stratford. Because I stayed with my mother. They moved out of Bridgeport, and they moved into Stratford. So I stayed with them, and I worked with the gas station -- Kramer's Gas Station. It was on the corner of Stratford Avenue and South Avenue. Nick Kramer.

MB: [unclear]

FB: They turned around and opened up a body shop.

MB: Yes.

FB: On Old South Avenue.

MB: That's why I know them -- yes.

FB: Because I was working for the father, when he had the gas station. Little Nicky was into hotrods and customizing cars, and I used to help him customize cars. He had a little Ford, and his father and I used to go up to Boston, when they had the hotrod shows. Because little Nicky had cars entered in up there. He got a lot of trophies. We took an old Model T, all rusted and everything, and we cleaned it up and everything, in the garage there. We made a hotrod.

MB: Neat.

FB: In the 1950s, they would take the cars, hit the coil springs, so that the car would drop down -- so they would be no higher -- you could practically put a pack of cigarettes down underneath. That's how much clearance was between the bottom of the car and the ground.

MB: [laughs]

FB: And the front seat -- they'd take all the support out from under the front seat, and drop the seat completely down, so that if you saw the car going down the street, it didn't look like anybody was in the car. Because that's how low they were, you know?

MB: Yes.

FB: But it was cool. I used to like that. And the auto shows were beautiful because I used to like to -- me and my father used to go down to the auto show, and see all the other cars that were on display, and one time we went down there. They had this car -- it was stainless steel. I mean, when the lights hit it, you'd have to put sunglasses on. That's how bright it was. I said, "Nick, I know they don't let this

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thing on the road.” They couldn’t possibly. If you put that thing on the highway, that would be nothing but one big light, you know? It would probably blind everybody on the turnpike there. They said when they brought it up there, they had it inside a truck.

MB: They transported it.

FB: Yes. And those vehicles were beautiful.

MB: And that was in Boston?

FB: Yes.

MB: Were there any shows in this area?

FB: No, not at the time.

MB: So you built them over at Kramer’s Garage?

FB: Yes.

MB: The gas station?

FB: The gas station. Because Little Nicky -- that was his hobby. He used to like to tinker with cars, and then they built the body shop.

MB: So did you ever go to the midget auto racing up there on Candle light Stadium?

FB: No. When they had Newfield Park.

MB: Newfield Park?

FB: Yes.

MB: But that was in the late 1930s -- mid-1930s --

FB: The mid-1930s. Because my cousin lived on Beardsley Street, and we used to go up in the South End to Beardsley Street, and we’d go in the back there, because the park was right in the back there, and it was nice.

MB: They still played ball there -- not during the races-- but --

FB: Right. They used to play ball in some of the corners.

MB: Yes.

FB: We used to have what they called sandlot ball, when they played in the lots there -- block it off. Sometimes we’d block off a street and play right out in the street.

MB: Not in the park, but on the street?

FB: On the street. And sometimes in the park -- if you have one open corner. But when we used to play big games -- we had a little team going, and we used to go practice down at Seaside Park. Then, a lot of times -- I’d go practice. Every time they had practice, I’d be there practicing. And when we’d have a big game, they’d

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want me to sit it out, and let one of the other guys do it. "Well, he's a better hitter than you." I'd say, "Yes, but he didn't practice."

MB: Yes.

FB: One time I happened to own the bat -- one bat, catcher's mitt, and I think it was a first baseman's glove. So when they told me I had to sit out, I took my gear with me, and they said, "Let us use it." I said, "No. If I don't play, you don't use it."

MB: Well, that's only fair. Especially if you make all the practices.

FB: Yes, I used to make all the practices. Some of the big guys -- they wouldn't.

MB: Yes.

FB: But then when game time came, the girls up in the bleachers -- they want a big show, you know?

MB: Yes. What position did you play?

FB: I played second base -- sometimes played shortstop.

MB: Hardball?

FB: Yes.

MB: And Seaside Park seemed to be a big part of your -- not just your life, but your family's life.

FB: Yes.

MB: Recreation. That's how your parents met, at a ball game.

FB: Yes, in Providence.

MB: Then, let's see. You were at the gas station in the mid-1950s, and what from there?

FB: From the gas station to Sears & Roebuck. [laughs]

MB: Sears & Roebuck -- that's right. That's what Mary [librarian] said.

FB: Yes.

MB: Was that Sears & Roebuck right here in downtown Bridgeport?

FB: Yes. I was there for twenty-six years.

MB: What was your -- in what capacity?

FB: Brake mechanic -- brake specialist.

MB: Oh, so you worked the automotive center?

FB: Yes, I worked the automotive.

MB: I know you knew my grandfather, then.

FB: I did brakes for twenty-six years.

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- MB: My grandfather swore by your place. He said, "That's the best garage."
- FB: Yes, it was good. I really enjoyed it.
- MB: It's the Connecticut State Police Barracks.
- FB: Yes, the State Police Barracks now.
- MB: Sometimes I seem to say these things that we know as obvious, but for posterity, for recording --
- FB: For somebody who hasn't been in the area, they wouldn't know what it was.
- MB: Yes, that's right.
- FB: Yes. Because when I first went in there, dirt was still on the ground. They hadn't finished the floor yet.
- MB: In 1968 it was built?
- FB: 1967. And they were still building it when I went in -- my youngest brother had already started there. He started working there part-time, because he was working for the state at the same time, too. I was working in the gas station. I had left Kramers and went to work -- you see, when Kramer gave up the gas station to open up the body shop --
- MB: It's still there.
- FB: Yes, but Kramer doesn't own it anymore.
- MB: It's still the name.
- FB: Yes, because Little Nicky sold it. He sold it to a firm that was coming out of Norwalk, but they still used the name because that was the only way that the guy could get the body shop. You got to buy the name -- all the permits.
- MB: Yes.
- FB: That's what Kramer's was. Because I think there was something about that -- Kramer's was the last body shop to be built in the 1960s, and according to, I think, the town charter, there were no more body shops to be built after that.
- MB: So you worked at the body shop, too, then.
- FB: Yes, I worked in the body shop for a little while. But I couldn't stand the noise.
- MB: Yes.
- FB: But I would be there practically every week. I would be there and I would help out. Because a lot of time I would drive the wreckers -- go and pick-up wrecks for them. I was off on Wednesday, and I'd be down there, and I would drive the wrecker going in the accident that we'd get a call for going to help bring the cars

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and things back in. That was an interesting job. One time when we were working the gas station -- I think it was 1956, when we had a little fog out in Stratford on the Turnpike -- that was when it was still called the Turnpike.

MB: When was that going through? Do you remember? Was it 1956?

FB: Yes. There was a forty-car pile-up.

MB: Wow!

FB: I was working in the gas station and we had a wrecker, so myself and Little Nicky went up on the turnpike to help get some of the cars off, and we were also setting flares up, and the accident happened on the south-bound side of the turnpike, but the people on the north-bound -- some were stopping to see what was going on, and they were getting hit from the back. And the next thing you know, chain reaction. Practically every wrecker that was in the City of Bridgeport and Stratford was up on the turnpike. And a lot of them didn't even get a chance to tow a car -- they were hit.

MB: Oh, boy!

FB: We were lucky. We went right up on the ramp. I think we brought down about eight or nine cars. Out of all the cars that were in that accident, nobody got killed, and I think the most serious injury was a broken arm -- out of all of that. That was something. And when I was setting up the flares -- you know, you hit the flare and it lights up?

MB: Yes.

FB: A little piece of it hit the tip of my shoe and it went right through my shoe.

MB: Oh!

FB: It missed my toe.

MB: Oh, it missed your toe! I was going to ask you if it was a little hot foot there.

FB: And then I was saying to Little Nick, "Damn." He said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you -- that's molten metal. That goes right through you." I said, "Oh." I said, "No wonder these guys wear steel shoes."

MB: Yes. Steel-tips.

FB: Yes. But I was always afraid of steel-toe because I remember a case where the guy had a steel toe, and he drops something on his toe, and the steel cap cut his toes off. You see, at that time, when they first started with the steel toes, they were just a cap. Then, I think, after that accident --

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MB: The cap was on the outside of the shoe?

FB: No.

MB: It was on the inside of the shoe?

FB: It was on the inside, with the leather over it. You couldn't [unclear]. And then what they started making them was putting the bottom piece of it, like a cap of a bottle. Because the way it was -- it was just a cap.

MB: I see.

FB: And anything that hit it -- it was going to come right down, just like a blade.

MB: And then it would become like a shell.

FB: Right.

MB: Yes.

FB: And over here, they'd put the bottom piece on it.

MB: Was that in the garage that that happened?

FB: That accident, where the guys got his toes cut off?

MB: Yes.

FB: No, that happened in the garage. I don't know if it was in Bridgeport, but I remember that it happened because they were telling us about it.

MB: And you were in Stratford at that time?

FB: Yes. And then when I went to work for Sears, we were using acetylene torches, and then they'd come out with a director that said, "Anyone who has contact lenses, do not operate a torch." Something about the heat from the torch -- it melted. Because one guy -- that's why they came out with that. It didn't happen here, but it happened someplace. When the guy went to take his contact lens out, his eye came out with it, and he went blind.

MB: The iris?

FB: Yes.

MB: He took the top of the eye out -- the cornea -- not the iris.

FB: Yes.

MB: And that was over here in Bridgeport?

FB: No, that didn't happen in Bridgeport. But it happened someplace else. But they came out with a directory, and they posted it on all the bulletin boards.

MB: I see.

FB: "If you wear contacts, stay away from torches." That's what happened -- the guy

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pulled it out.

MB: Yes, yes. It disappeared.

FB: It sort of melted or something. Oh, there was a big piece -- and they made us all read it and sign it. So this way here, they've got your signature on that -- if anything happens -- that you read it. If you signed it, you read it. But, like you say, once you signed it, it said that you read it and you understood it. If you didn't understand it, you were supposed to ask.

MB: Sears & Roebuck was a landmark in Bridgeport, and like I said before, my grandfather included, knew the garage. Were you ever part of any kind of national meetings, or did you ever go to conventions for Sears & Roebuck or Mechanics?

FB: Well, yes. I went to a couple schools. They sent me to one school in Pennsauken, New Jersey, for brakes. Now, I had been doing brakes in a gas station, but then when I was in the gas station, we didn't have brake lathes to cut our own shoes and stuff, and do our drums. We used to send them out. So Sears already had had that equipment. So the first brake lathe they had was called a Barrett. That was the ugliest looking piece I ever saw in my life. It looked like a big pot standing up there, and you set the drums on it. We learned how to operate that. Then they came out with the Amco, and then they sent us to school, up in Pennsauken, New Jersey, for a week.

MB: Pennsauken, in New Jersey or Pennsylvania?

FB: Pennsauken, New Jersey is the name of it. So they sent us up there for a week, to go to the training course on brakes. That was actually to learn the technical aspects of it. The physical aspects was no problem. Hands-on -- that was me. I knew exactly what it was. But then when it came down to the technical stuff -- you know, reading the book and coming out and explaining about this and about that -- that's when we had to go. But as for doing the work, no problem with doing it. I think the disc brakes first came out in 1951. I think Chrysler had it. We started working on disc brakes in 1967, and then 1968 -- all the way up to now. Up until I retired. It was an item that said, "Don't be afraid of disc brakes. They're not as hard as they seem." And that's when we [unclear]. As soon as you did one you'd say, "Gee, this is easy." Because we used to have enough of wheel cylinders.

MB: So you were working on both at that point.

FB: Yes. My buddy, Kramer, had this old Model T Ford, and it had what they called a

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step-up cylinder. One part of the cylinder was one-and-a-quarter inch, and the back part was, I think, about an inch. That's what they called like a step-up cylinder. In other words, you needed more pressure to stop going forward than you needed stopping backwards. So that's what they called a step-up cylinder. We had some old cylinder kits that Sears had, that they were going to throw out. When I was checking them I said, "Hey, I can use these." They said, "On what? They're all dated, Frank." I said, "Yes, but a friend of mine has a Model T, and according to the little box and the writing on it, it says for Ford and up." I think it said from 1921 or something like that. I said, "Let me take them anyhow. You're going to throw them away." So we took them down there and we pulled up one of the wheels to go see what Nick used to do. If it leaked, he'd take it apart, wash it off with mineral oil or whatever it was, and then he'd put it back together again. And then it would work again. So I looked and said, "Yes." Because right in the center, it had the signs there and they have brand new ones now.

MB: Perfect.

FB: So we put them in there.

MB: Can't beat that.

FB: The Model T -- his son still has it. I think Little Nicky still has the Model T. Because I remember one time in the 1950s, we were riding in it around Stratford, and we stopped at Keating Ford, and the manager of Keating Ford called us in and he told Mr. Kramer at that time -- "Nick, I'll give you any car on the lot for it." He said, "What do I want another car for? I already got a 1953 Buick, I got this, and I got another type of car. I don't need another car." He said, "I'll buy it off you." He said, "Well, I don't want to sell it."

MB: [laughs]

FB: He said, "Any car in the shop." He said, "Any car. Any car on the lot that I have -- I'll trade you even for it." I said, "No, I don't need another car."

MB: It sounds like you liked working with cars. How did you get along with all the workers?

FB: Very good. Very good. Always had fun.

MB: And you enjoyed the cars?

FB: I enjoyed working on the car. I tell guys, "If you want to get some kind of occupation get something you're going to enjoy and go."

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MB: You were just saying about looking for an occupation --

FB: Yes. I tell kids, "If you're going to look for a job and you want an occupation -- get something that you're going to enjoy doing. Because if you're just going to take the job just for the money -- after a while, that's going to be boring, and you're not going to want it and you're going to say, 'Oh, man, I'm tired of this.' Then you're going to slack off. You'll probably get fired when you start slacking off."

MB: Yes.

FB: "So get something that you enjoy doing." I used to enjoy working on cars. That was one thing that I really enjoyed. So I got along good. That's why I kept it so long. If I didn't enjoy it, I wouldn't have kept it that long, you know? I couldn't become a bank president because that would have been a lot of work, and that I didn't want.

MB: [laughs] So cars are all the jobs you've had, it seems like.

FB: Yes.

MB: You enjoyed the cars the most.

FB: Well, cars and heavy equipment. That's what I enjoyed. And when I was in the military, they always gave the smallest guy the biggest piece of equipment. I guess for self-esteem -- to make him feel better or something.

MB: [laughs]

FB: Like that big Northwestern that I used to operate -- I mean, that was huge, and the tracks were up like this.

MB: Four-feet-tall.

FB: I'd have a seven-and-a-half-ton reel, and the running board was about two feet off the ground. [laughs] When I was stationed down in Florida -- when I came back to the States -- I had to bring my own heavy equipment. I was in engineering outfit, so if we had to use a bulldozer or something on the other side of the base, they would call up our engineer outfit, "Okay, we need a bulldozer on the north end of the base, or something like that. Can you send us one over with an operator?" So I would go down to what they called the POL and --

MB: POL means what?

FB: We had trucks down there, plus there was fuel, and I used to go down there. I'd get my truck, which is a seven-and-a-half ton reel -- it's like a tractor -- and I'd go and pick up a low boy, which was -- it's a trailer, but it's a low trailer. We called it

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a low boy. It's only about a foot-and-a-half off the ground. We got quite a few wheels on it. I'd run my bulldozer up on it, tie it down, and then I'd go to my job with it. I'd load my bulldozer back on it, bring it back to my outfit, take it off and put it on motor pool. And if I had to bring a crane, I'd do the same thing. I'd put my crane on, lower the beam down, tie it down, transport any place I went.

MB: So I know you liked that in the military -- well, the military was your first full-time career.

FB: Yes.

MB: But then, when you came back at Kramer's Gas Station -- that was your first full-time job?

FB: Yes. But I worked with Kramer part-time.

MB: Oh, part-time?

FB: Part-time right there, and when they opened up the body shop in 1962, I helped them around it, but I was working for somebody else in another gas station. I worked for Musey's Gas Station, right down the street. But on my days off, I would be over Kramer's. We'd be driving a wrecker, we'd be pulling cars [unclear].

MB: So you had a couple of part-time jobs and took a few?

FB: Yes. And when I went to work for Sears, I was doing the same thing. When I was off, I'd be down at Kramer's.

MB: So was it a full-time position at Sears?

FB: Yes. It was full-time.

MB: I guess outside the military, then, your first steady full-time -- eight hours a day --

FB: In the military was a full-time job --

MB: And then Sears Automotive --

FB: Well, the gas station -- when I worked for Musey, that was a full-time job in the gas station. Let's see. I stayed at Musey from 1962 to 1967, and then I went to work at Sears. I stayed at Sears from 1967 to 1992.

MB: 1992?

FB: Twenty-six years.

MB: You don't have to answer this question if you'd rather not. Do you remember your pay scales back then? How much pay you were getting?

FB: Yes.

MB: You do?

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FB: I remember all my pays. My first job at Lorraine Novelties, I was making thirty-three cents an hour. My first job at G.E. -- I was making sixty cents an hour.

MB: That was just before you entered the war?

FB: Yes.

MB: So the early 1940s.

FB: And Jenkin Valves -- I think I was making fifty-five cents. That's why I left Jenkin Valves and went to work at G.E. because they were paying a few pennies more.

MB: Sure. So you went from Jenkin Valves to G.E.?

FB: Yes.

MB: And then you were in the military?

FB: Yes. Let's see. In the military, my first pay was twenty-one dollars a day, once a month, and then it went up to twenty-eight.

MB: So it was twenty-one dollars a month?

FB: Yes. Well, that's what they used to say -- twenty-one dollars a day, once a month.
[laughs]

MB: [laughs]

FB: That was a whole month's pay. And then they went up to twenty-eight, and then, I think, they went up to forty-some-odd dollars. And then when I was staff sergeant, I was making just over a hundred dollars a month. But then I was always on TDY, so sometimes my pay would be three hundred.

MB: TDY was what?

FB: TDY was temporary duty assignment.

MB: Oh.

FB: In other words, I was on courier for a while when I was in Japan there. Because, you see, one time I was what you call malassigned. I was engineers -- the last time I went overseas, I was engineer, and the outfit they put me in was a radar outfit. And I'm saying, "What am I going to do in a radar outfit? I don't know nothing about that." They said, "Well, you can be a sculptor." I said, "What's that?" They said, "They got a board where they plot positions of air craft."

MB: Sure.

FB: I said, "That's boring, because I'm an outdoor person." So they said, "Well, okay." They said, "Well, we'll put you on one of the relay sites, anyhow." So

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they had me cutting a road going up to one of the plateaus, and I had to level the space off because they were putting up a relay there. So I was cutting the road up the mountain, up there, and one winter, when I was cutting the load up there, I hit a rock up underneath some ice and snow, and it flipped me.

MB: Oh, yeah.

FB: And me and the bulldozer went over the side of the cliff.

MB: Okinawa?

FB: No, this was in Japan.

MB: Oh, in Japan.

FB: I was in Kadena. I think I was in Osawa at the time -- yes. Because that was the Osawa outfit. In fact, they've got a reunion coming up this year. They send me papers all the time. I send them clippings when I don't make the meetings. I mean, the reunions. I had just missed hitting our POL dump. We had aviation gasoline in drums, sitting down there. I just missed it. And I had an Army parka on at the time, because it was cold. And when I went in the Mess Hall, the officers were eating and the guys were eating there and they said, "What happened?" I said, "Oh, nothing. I just fell off the cliff with the bulldozer." And the officer said, "How's the bulldozer?" I just looked at him and walked away from him. He didn't ask me how I was.

MB: Oh, incredible.

FB: I guess he figured I'm standing here --

MB: Yes. [laughs] And then after that, the gas station -- do you know what the salaries were at the gas station, perhaps?

FB: The gas stations -- seventy-five cents an hour. And then when I went to work for Sears, they started everybody off at one hundred and fifteen dollars a week, plus over-time. So that was nice there. And then they graduated up, then when I left, I was making fifteen dollars an hour fifteen-fifty, or something like that.

MB: That's a far cry from thirty-three cents an hour.

FB: When I tell guys that I used to work for thirty-three cents an hour, and I would bring home sixteen dollars at the end of a week, and I could go to -- at that time there was a place called Case Closed, where you could buy a pair of pants, a reversible vest for about ten dollars. Or sometimes less than ten dollars. Actually, you could buy a whole suit for close to ten at Case Closed, with a reversible vest, where it

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would be corduroy on one side, and then you turn it over -- inside out -- and then it would be like plaid or something. And I still have a picture of it at home. Case Closed was nice. Everybody used to go there. It was on the corner of Norman and Railroad Avenues. Right now it's right across from Went Field, the ball park.

MB: Yes. I played ball there many years.

FB: Yes, I used to play ball there, too.

MB: Only softball, though, I played there. I never played hard ball there.

FB: I used to go ice skating there, too. Because a lot of times in the wintertime, water would freeze on it. And we had the skates that had the clips on it -- hooked to your shoes.

MB: Yes.

FB: And you had a key that you used to tighten them up. That's what we used to use for ice skating. And then they came out with the shoe skates.

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Interview with Frank E. Bridgeforth, by Michael J. Bielawa, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, December 18, 1997.

PART 8 : Prospect School in South End, WWII Service

MB: At that point --and you mentioned all kinds of social activities, were there racial divisions? Or, I know when I grew up in Bridgeport, just kids played with kids. It didn't matter what religion or anything.

FB: No, I uh, ok –

MB: At that point in time, was it African-American --

FB: When we were kids, I got along good with everybody. As a matter of fact, everybody I saw all day -- we all got along together.

MB: It was a multi-ethnic --

FB: Syrians, Hungarians, Italians, Jewish people. And I went to school with all these kids, right in Prospect. One fellow -- he was Syrian. His father used to sell bananas. And that was on the corner of South Avenue and Main Street. That was in the 1930s.

MB: That was an outdoor stall or store?

FB: No. The father had like a garage in the back, and they used to go right down to Water Street, because the ships used to come in and bring fruit.

MB: Oh.

FB: His father used to sell the bananas, and one day the kids reached into a banana stalk to get a banana, and the banana spider bit him and he died.

MB: Oh! That's a terrible story. Oh, my.

FB: That hurt us because we were all going to school together. Him and I -- we used to swap lunches. I used to have my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He didn't have that. He had something like a biscuit with some kind of -- I call it "goo" in it. But it tasted good. It was better than eating my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So we'd go to school and we'd swap. And every day in school, I'd be eating different foods, because I would swap with all the other kids. "Hey, Frank, you swapped with him yesterday. You're supposed to swap with me today." The parents didn't know what we were doing, you know?

MB: [laughs] It sounds like a taste of the world, actually. Different homes had different foods.

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FB: Right. All nationalities had different foods and everything, so we were eating everything. And then we used to go to what they called summer Bible school. The first summer Bible school -- we were living on Lee Avenue, and they had a big tent that was on the corner of State and Lee Avenues. It was like a big circus tent. We used to have revivla meetings then. When we were kids, we used to go there and they used to give us new Bibles and everything. And then from there, we went to summer Bible school, over on Spruce Street. There was a big Russian church. Actually, that was what they called a temperance legion. And we used to go down there. The reason why we joined that was because they used to give us lollipops or little candy sticks. And teaching us things about the books of the Bible.

MB: Yes.

FB: And then, from there, we went on Warren Avenue, the First Presbyterian Church. Right now that church is out in Easton, off the turnpike.

MB: Yes.

FB: I go there every Tuesday -- the second Tuesday of every month with the Boy Scouts. We have what they call Round Tables out there.

MB: Yes.

FB: We used to go there when it was on Warren Avenue, for summer Bible school. And at the end of the month, in July, we'd have a picnic that would be out at Putnam Park, where everybody would bring something. It would be a round-robin. I still have my report cards from summer Bible school.

MB: What years was this?

FB: 1932, 1933, 1934. I got all my report cards.

MB: You're good.

FB: We had a reunion in 1972, and I brought -- they said bring all your memorabilia, so I brought all report cards. Myself and my mother went. My cousins -- they were there. My brothers and sisters -- they didn't go, but I had their report cards, when they used to go to summer Bible school. So it was very impressive.

MB: Wonderful.

FB: Everybody brought their memorabilia. The priest was telling us that he remembers that there was one boy who, when we were going to summer Bible school, who recited the books of the Bible, backwards. I couldn't even pronounce some of them frontwards.

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MB: [laughs]

FB: And he'd start with Revelations, Third John, Second John, First John, and then go back up. We learned the books of the Bible, like in a sing-song fashion, you know?

MB: Yes.

FB: It had a little rhythm to it.

MB: Sure.

FB: Every time we learned a new verse in the Bible, on our report card, they'd put a little star or a little heart or a little cross on it. My card is full of them. My brother -- he was a crackerjack. His card was loaded with them.

MB: Your brother's name is --?

FB: Edward.

MB: Edward, Jr.?

FB: Yes. He lives in the South End right now. He was one of the original Park City Giant Juniors, the baseball team. Like I said, I got all those report cards. Plus, I have some of my report cards when I was going to grammar school, and my brother's. My mother saved a lot of that stuff. So when she died, going through all the papers, I came across some of the old report cards, and a lot of the letters that I had wrote to her during the Second World War. And she had letters that my brother wrote.

MB: Treasures.

FB: And from the Korean War. I gave them to my brother. And my youngest brother -- when he was going through boot training and airborne, I had some of his letters and his hat, and I sent them to him in Mexico.

MB: And that brother's name is what?

FB: Joseph. And his tassel when he graduated from Bassick High School. You know, the tassel you have in your cap?

MB: Yes.

FB: I sent that to him. Oh, there's a few other papers. And my mother had one newspaper that I had sent home from California, 1954, when I was in Japan. The caption on it was "Two Thousand Some-Odd Servicemen Returning from Japan and Korea." My picture is way down on the bottom. It's soldiers and sailors, so there's a lot of them. But it's the whole page. It showed a lot of us on the ship,

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you know?

MB: Yes.

FB: And I'm way down on the bottom. My mother has a little arrow pointing to me and it says, "Gene" on the bottom.

MB: That's nice.

FB: This reunion in Tennessee, for the air traffic control -- AC&W -- aircraft control and warning outfit -- 511 -- that I was in -- they're having another reunion. Now, I may not go because my wife wants to go to Florida. So what I'm going to do -- I'm going to write to him because they already sent me a letter. I'm going to write to them and tell them that I have a copy of his California paper -- California trip -- in 1954, that has pictures of some of the guys in the outfit when we came back to the States. I'm going to send it to him on loan. But I'm going to send it in a tube, you know? It's been folded for close to forty years, so I've got it hanging. If I could put it in, laminate it, and then be able to roll it and put it in a --

MB: I'll talk to you after the tape, with some suggestions. I'll have some suggestions on that.

FB: Then they could send it back to me. When I first got in touch with him, I was looking through either the VFW magazine or the American Legion magazine for reunions, and I came down the list and I said, "Oh, there's my old outfit." So I wrote to them. They were the guys -- yes. He remembered me. He told me that they were having this reunion. I said, "Oh, gee, that's nice." I said, "Well, I won't be able to make it, but I can send you some pictures and things of some of the guys in the outfit."

MB: Sure.

FB: So I went through my photo album, because I had four photo albums all together. There were fifteen hundred pictures and clippings from 1939 up to 1954. And right now, one of the books is spaced out because I took a lot of the pictures out, and I gave them to the children -- the grandchildren -- of some of the guys that I grew up with. I said, "This is how your father looked when he was your age."

MB: Sure.

FB: That's why I have a lot of pages -- they're all missing -- a lot of the pictures or articles. But all my war pictures -- they're all still there.

MB: Let me interrupt for a moment. We're going to come back to that in a moment. A

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couple of things. I see a question here about -- you just mentioned your wife. How long have you been married?

FB: Let me see.

MB: You knew all the other dates, right off the top of your head! [laughs]

FB: I think thirty-four years. I keep forgetting.

MB: And your wife's first name?

FB: Lorraine.

MB: You met here, in Bridgeport?

FB: Right.

MB: At a dance hall or a church social?

FB: No. She knew my cousin, and I met her through my cousin a long time ago. We got married in the 1960s.

MB: Very quick question. Although the lines of labor and work -- we discussed the salary and the perks. You seemed to really enjoy working with the cars, and that was a very big part of your career.

FB: Yes.

MB: On other thing here -- anything you have to comment about experiences with harassment or discrimination?

FB: Oh, yes. In the Navy there was discrimination.

MB: Racial discrimination?

FB: Racial discrimination. In other words, aboard ship, we had five Japanese prisoners, and I had to bring some food down to them one day, and one of them said to me in English, "Why do you fight us?" And I just looked at him. He said, "In Japan, we have one Army -- the Japanese Army. We have one Navy -- the Japanese Navy. But the United States has two armies -- black army, and a white army, a black navy and a white navy. And I just looked at him. One of the marines who was standing guard -- I said, "Hey, this guy speaks English." He said, "Get out of here!" I said, "Yes." I told him -- when I looked back and they said, "They don't believe you." He just looked like that. And as the years went by, I kept thinking to myself -- I'd think, that's what happened. That's why a lot of things happened. Somebody will be standing there, and because they're from another country of something, and they'll be standing there, looking up in the air like this. They understand what to say, but they will not speak a word. They will

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listen. And that's what happened during the war. A lot of people would say things, and somebody else would hear it, and people would act like they didn't understand English. They knew exactly everything you were saying. And this is how information got back.

MB: Yes.

FB: Now, they were hoping that if they ever got freed or something or something like that, that they would be able to communicate what the Marine guards were talking about aboard ship.

End of Interview