

Victory Bell

Interviewed by Laura Furman
at Midway Village Museum

June 2, 2009

Laura Furman (LF): Laura Furman. I am interviewing Victory Bell on June 2, 2009 at Midway Village Museum.

LF: If you can state your full name?

Victory Bell (VB): okay. Victory Bell.

LF: and your birth date?

VB: March 7, 1934.

LF: okay and where were you born?

VB: Durant, Mississippi.

LF: okay. And were going to ask something so their follow-up questions from the interview you did for the Black Rockfordians book (INSERT FOOTNOTE)

VB: okay.

LF: . . . so there may be a little bit of overlap but then we've got some other things to ask as well.

VB: fine.

LF: tell me a little bit about when you in your family came to Rockford.

VB: okay. We came to Rockford and I believe 1945. And we came to Rockford as a result of employment for my father. My father had been a Rockford in probably 1942 and was working for JI case and he then sent back for my mother in probably 44. And then my brother and I came up and 45. And my sister came up probably in early 45 and we came up in June of 45. My reflections on preparing to come to Rockford was really excited because we always admired her relatives who basically, a lot of them were from Chicago and would come back to Durant. And you know they did nice things for us. They took us out and bought us hamburgers and things like that. And it was something for us to look forward to as we kind of grew up. And I was probably about 10 years old, nine or 10 years old when we left and wasn't really able to sleep too much that night before as we was excited about leaving. And we did come up on the train. That was the mode of transportation at that time.

LF: what made your father decide to come to Rockford initially?

VB: in Mississippi basically, there was a lack of employment. It was either farmland that you did farming, and for my father we were basically sharecroppers so you're really were not able to generate any economics for your family so, there was not even a breakeven point in the sharecropping business you know you was always behind and was always on

the books so. You know, there was people who were leaving, after the war and things of that nature. One of his brothers had come to Rockford and then came back and told him about the job opportunities in Rockford and so my father was one of the, the second one who left, he then decided he would come up to Rockford and try and make a better life for his family.

LF: so even with the war coming to a close employment was still plentiful?

VB: there was nothing to do in Mississippi basically other than, especially for African-Americans other than either work on a farm or maybe be fortunate enough to work maybe at a service station or things of that nature. You're not working in any of the stores so wasn't nothing really that you could gain any meaningful employment. A lot of the African-Americans did not own their own land so they were not able to actually go out and farm and make a profit from it so it was just a day by day survival for a lot of people who happened to be African-American.

LF: how did your mother feel about staying behind while your father blazed the trail ahead?

VB: you know it seemed like she was receptive to that because I think the vision was to ensure that my brothers and sisters and myself included had a better quality of life to look forward to and I think she accepted it for that reason. Naturally it wasn't something that people look forward to to have to separate come to seven or eight, well 800 miles, you know from each other for a period of a couple years, that was not something exciting in all but the overall goal was to find ways to have some of the better things of life that was one of the requirements, you left Mississippi.

LF: and once your mother followed suit and left some of you kids behind before the next wave -- -- who was the oldest? Who was in charge? How does that work?

VB: my brother and I was left behind with my sick grandmother at that time. Because my mother and father separated when I was quite young. So my grandmother who at that time I thought was an old lady, I really thought she was old, I imagine she was 50 or 52 you know. But we did things, we raised our corn, raised our vegetables, and she did a lot of canning and things of that nature. So we were very productive as you know a grandmother and my brother and I, and we have some other cousins, we all stay together there with our cousins too in the same house. But we did find in that situation, realizing that we too were going to be coming for. Because they always told us. I think I might've been in the fifth grade then, so you know, I was getting ready to go to the sixth grade then. They said we were getting ready to come up for school and that, we're excited about that.

LF: and which... this is your brother Lamar who was with you?

VB: Lamar yeah.

LF: okay. And then the sister came up the year after you...

VB: my sister Veola and my other sister had already, she was living in Mississippi, she was older than it was married at that time so she was already out on her own when we came to Rockford.

LF: and that was Geneva?

VB: Geneva. Mm hmm. Geneva.

LF: okay.

VB: and so Lamar, Geneva stayed with my other, because my father had a child off so. Genny was the one who stayed with her mother and so feel a Lamar nine we all stayed with, we always stayed with my father and my stepmother and so, Viola was the one who came up because she got married and then she came up and once she came up that left just my brother and my stepmother had also come up.

LF: how much time went by that you worked on the preparation of the trip? Do you think?

VB: oh I imagine my father came in 40... 43? It was a good couple of years we were looking for, knew it was coming. Kind of worked with anticipation, waiting for the day to happen. And then before we actually came to Rockford, we then because my mother separated from my father by then. She was in Memphis and then come back to Cleveland so we did stop in Memphis for a while before we left Mississippi. But when we all came from Durrant, we came on the train and that was when my stepmother came back down to get us. And that was really an experience too. Coming up on the train then was, it was segregation you know. It was just blatant segregation so you knew that you were going to sit in the worst car that they have on the train, that was just understood. But the other thing was we traveled on a pass. In a pass at that time was some families who had come to Illinois, Rockford, happened to work for the railroad, the companies are allowing them to go back and bring up different family members and they had passes that they could use from the road to bring up different families so you were basically coming up like, it wasn't so much as a set of soon name but you know you were an extended family of the person who worked for the railroad. And that is how most, many of the African-Americans to get out of Mississippi. And so we left for probably about 2 a.m. in the morning on a Friday, whatever do you came because that was the time you could ride with a pass and then it would take two days may be and you do arrive to Chicago maybe six or seven o'clock in the morning and then with the pass again you sits in 12 Street station until a lot of 30 or 12 o'clock before you could get to Rockford. And that was the process that was used for individuals. It was a extremely hardship on individuals traveling with kids because kids would be crying and they'd be you know some kids was young and so you noticed how difficult that was something you would never forget. Especially in Chicago because when you got to Chicago there are so many people averaged 12 Street station just, that was the biggest thing I've ever seen. Was to see the

number of people at 12 Street station and they'd be going all kinds of different gates wears right now the station, train station in Chicago now, Amtrak, is nothing compared to what 12 Street was. And so we stayed there, we had food that we packed so most of the food, you'd carried the chicken and different stuff like that that wouldn't spoil. So it was a very difficult kind of a situation that you are confronted with as she travels. It was just blatant racism all over so African-Americans really didn't communicate with other people too much and when, in today's society when they say you have to be aggressive, it takes a long time to get the mode from reservation to being aggressive because you were taught growing up that you know you just don't speak out, you don't look at white people, you just didn't have eye contact with white people. So you grew up with ads and it took all of us a long time to get accustomed to the lifestyle changes that were from the south to the north.

LF: and we'll come back to then a few minutes but I want to ask you a few things about the travel and the preparation. I think I'm understanding correctly that the passes that were issued were only for African-American travelers. Am I right?

VB: you know that was probably the case because you were traveling a low cost, low expense and it was a mean, number two the factories here in Illinois they were getting employees that they knew would work and number two they were not having to pay a company to go out and recruit those individuals and it made a little easier for those initials to get to Rockford. And once those African-Americans came to Rockford they were very committed to working, because they had always worked hard, my parents were very hard workers. Both of them because they were accustomed to it. They worked in the field. I've been out in the field too myself. I've picked cotton, shucked corn, planted crops, you know I've done that

LF: so most of the people you knew came north, really to some degree, sponsorship of a local company who was looking for employment?

VB: a lot of times the companies use that means to Rockford, that was how my family and the friends of my family, that's how we all came. With the understanding that if they got here they could start at work the next day. If they got here on Sunday they could be going to work on Monday.

LF: so a lot of these companies are telling their employees go ahead and recruit your family members?

VB: Mm hmm.

LF: What companies your father go to work for?

VB: my father started working for JI Case when he came to Rockford. My uncle worked to JI case. Then my father worked at [Ebaloy]. It's a little company down by the railroad tracks, going back towards west of the viaduct and he worked for Barnes Brothers. He was doing some machine work at Barnes Brothers and that he worked at Roper. But case

was where he started off at. Never worked at Gunitite didn't. Most of my people worked at Case or Roper.

LF: was there any trouble continuing that deployment as GIs came home looking for work?

VB: at that time at work was pretty plentiful because most of them left for Chicago. There were very few of the GIs that came back to Durrant. Durrant was probably maybe about 7-8,000 people, if that many. So there was nothing for them to do so they'll come back to Chicago. That's where most of them once.

LF: one additional series of questions about your travel. What did you pack?

VB: oh you know, in those days you know, you had, African-Americans were extremely concerned about appearance you know. If you had blue jeans on, you're blue jeans had to be clean. They could have patches on them and things of that nature but they had to be clean. And there were clothes you played in and clothes you wore to church. And as you travel, you know you traveled with your little, clean, you know your nice clothes. They always were starched. That was one of the things that I grew up with, you know shirts starched, pants starched. Kept your shoes shined. So things we packed was, naturally we was, vegetables, and we came probably in the summertime so you had peaches and things that we grew say we had your actual fruits. Apples and oranges and things like that. You'd have some bananas but you know that you didn't keep those around that long. Then when they came to the clothes you packed them neatly but then other things, the other, our family members on the female side were all cook cakes you know so we knew we were going to have a lot of cakes, homemade cakes. Everybody would have been a little boxes you know the kids were very responsible as far as keeping up with their belongings and keeping up with the others. Think that is one of the things I remember more than anything else is how closely knit we were as not only family members but as a race of people. You looked out for that little city or that little village you were in, you look at problems people and you always try to stick together you know.

LF: what about household belongings? Did those get shipped? Did they get left behind?

VB: We, at that time you know, you could put, you know you had trunks. You know I don't think the guy that, at the railroad station would help you, you had trunks and they had all their things and the big trunk. And we had a little small suitcase that we carried our things in that the major part of the carry-on was the trunk and then you shipped things too. You would ship your big things to the city and then they would pick it up but she wouldn't have to worry about that so it's just carry on travel things. That you would carry.

LF: so your family didn't have to make hard decisions about what they would keep and what they would take? You got almost everything up here?

VB: you know, it is kind of strange to think about that because we reflect back on it you know, when you look at furniture and things of that nature you just didn't see anything that you were excited to you not bring with you. You are going to have a clean start and Rockford, you know, my father was in the habit checks coming in each week so things you're going to get what you want. Your bicycles and things like that he certainly was not going to bring with you. I had just gotten a little pony and that was the biggest problem I had a was to leave the little pony behind because I never got a chance to ride it. It was just like a little pet. And that was sad to me, to leave that, we had our dog and things like. That that was another thing that you hated to leave was your animals.

LF: so you left the dog behind?

VB: Mm hmm. Yeah. I had no choice.

LF: what did you bring with you for fun while you were on the trip?

VB: you know in those days you know if you had some books, magazines, Ebony magazine was very popular, Jet Magazine and things like that look that it was those kind of things. So you had the opportunity to sit and look at you know the, magazines that Joe Lewis was in, you look at that, that was important. Sugar Ray Robinson. The boxers. Boxing was very important to us. Think about Jackie Robinson. Those are the things that we used as entertainment factor as you traveled you know. There is no walkie-talkie no walkmans...

LF: no iPod no game boy...

VB: no computers you know! No. It was, we were very disciplined. Because to be honest with you in the South African-Americans really understood the liabilities of being out. It was just something you grew up with. If he never grew up in the south it was difficult for you to understand, if you were not on African-American from the south it was impossible to understand that. And then when I look at the educational system today and think how you're going to expand your mind you know. I look at my little granddaughter, you know, she's able to do anything she wants to do. She's very bright and we were always kind of contained. You really were kind of contained. But the one thing you had was those grandparents were very strong and supportive, and always touch you but you know someday you're going to be able to do this, someday you're going to have these things. You know, things are not always going to be this way and that was what brought us through.

LF: now did your grandparents come north as well or did they stay in Durrant?

VB: they, my grandmother came to stay with us probably when she was maybe 75 or 80 and then my grandfather never came to Rockford. My great-grandmother came to Rockford which we grew up with she came to Rockford when she was about 110 and she died at 118. And she was just a little lady, mixed with a lot of Indians. Just was, you know, very alert. My grandmother all I remember her doing is raising kids and cooking.

You know she never worked on the field, very frail little lady. Straight hair loved to comb her hair, and I used to love to comb her hair too because she had real pretty hair. And so you know those were things you'd entertain yourself with.

LF: did you go back to Durrant to visit other family members?

VB: every, every August. Every August of the year we always go back and would always get in our cars and travel there and it usually would be six or seven of us as a family in seven or eight cars going down. Always went together because the factories closed in August, July and August, all of the plants closed. And that was our, you know, that was our summer. We spent summer in the south. All throughout, when we were single especially, and when we got older I did the same thing with my kids. I always, when my mother was in Memphis, I would take them to Memphis every year. They would go and stay with her so they learned a lot about the South then. They were a part of the movement in the 50s, 55, 56. We were traveling to Birmingham with my first wife when they had the first of the sit ins and my kid saw some of that. And we were also in Memphis when James Meredith was, went to the Old Miss, admitted. I saw all of that you know. I was in Memphis when they cross the Selma bridge March 7, 1955 saw all that stuff.

LF: what, this is a digression from our migration story, but since you're here and on tape, what sorts of things like that did you see and experience and Rockford?

VB: Rockford was always kind of a conservative city. There was a place that blacks was to be in the blacks had accepted their place without any complication. It was different from Chicago, different from Gary, difference in St. Louis. It was just a conservative city, and the attitude of African-Americans here were conservative. You have a lot of African-Americans who were conservative. They were not willing to rattle the cage which resulted in Rockford being stagnant rather than growing and opening up all of the opportunities for its citizens and you can't blame all of that on one set of people it was as a result of people getting complacent, people just feeling a little comfortable and looking out for maybe what they could get his individuals. And you know on one hand you see that as being bad, on the other hand in you see it as people knowing how to survive a system. So you don't really want to be so hard on them but, because Rockford was a machine tool industry. And that was one of the failures of our city that we did not diversify so we could be competitive you know and not because of the topic. You know, when we did not deal with the Chrysler situation, when we did not deal with the Northern Illinois University, you know that set us down to be not a top class city as we should have been.

LF: you mentioned your mother coming down to meet you and your brother to bring in north. Did your father come down to pick her up? Or did she travel...

VB: he did not actually come back for that, but he would always come home you know, every three or four months he would come home, where every three months he'd always come. Because again, you know, they could, pass. They could, we had relatives you

know, it was a similar underground railroad deal where there is eight, and the Reverend companies is probably aware of it and everybody was tied into the loop and it was just that a deal with segregation they didn't want to travel at a certain time. So they set a time slot that you could travel and there was an area that you could travel in and that benefited the companies and the cities they were going to because it was not just Rockford, it was all over the United States that was happening. And my father would come down also because they were also very close with his cousin things and like that that worked for the railroad. Now the black people who had it made when I was growing up that I can reflect back on were always those African-Americans that worked for the railroad. They had a stable job, and they worked out on the tracks and things like that. They always did well, they had their own homes, their kids mostly all basically went to college and things like that. So the railroad was a very stable employer for you no African-Americans.

LF: so when you and your brother came north with your mother how many other family members were traveling with you?

VB: oh it would be, the train would be full. Full of us, oh there would be a lot of us and you know not having taken a trip that far was kind of you know exciting on the standpoint you're seeing different territory you are seeing different cities, different towns and you know you go during the day time you see a lot of people standing on the side of the road meeting their people. You see the porters and the other people you know yelling rather than having a microphone to what's going on. So I think we, my brother and I and my mother, along with all the other people, found it to be a you know exciting time. When you are leaving you know, you were leaving some very negative parts of your life. And it was something you really worshiped, escaping that. So that, you know, was quite nice.

LF: where did you arrive in Rockford, which station?

VB: oh man! South Main Central, Central Station. Never forget it. We got there about again you know, left Chicago about 11 or 12 so we got there about one or two o'clock or something, whatever time it was.

LF: in the morning?

VB: Uh huh. It was in the a.m. And my father, they had rented a place right across, it was, will you see Tinker cottage and then you got Tinker Park and you got Winnebago St. and you got the viaduct. So I lived most of my life right down by the viaduct. All the, where the Army Corps of Engineers purchased all of that for the broadened out Tinker, broadened out Kent Creek. I lived right there so, he had transportation cause we had a lot of luggage so he had a car, so we goes home and you know we had a spacious place, you know. But we had a common living room where, you know if you had five or six different families living there, then we had a common living room we had a common kitchen. And you know as far as sitting down and listening to the radio you know you had, you didn't have nothing like that you know. One radio for everybody. But that was life you know and that was something that you understood. But coming into that train

station you know, and seeing, it was a beautiful station you know. And then Tinker cottage at that time was, Tinker looks just like it looks out there. The peonies that were out by the rail track there, they were unbelievable. It looked just like Sinnissippi Gardens. And then the creek was clear, you could see the fish in the Creek, you could see that little slight waterfall there as you come under the bridge. Unbelievable! Just Tinker had a beautiful garden there.

LF: so your father was there to meet you at one o'clock?

VB: oh yeah. He was there to meet us.

LF: other family members too or just...

VB: quite a few of them because there were a lot of us coming to Rockford. We all was meeting and going different places. You know but, everybody was anxious to get to their places. Because we'd been, then on the road probably two days, three days. Long trip!

LF: and as far as other family who were living in Rockford are ready, you said there was an uncle?

VB: my uncle was Irving yes. He was already here. Irving Bell.

LF: okay. Any others?

VB: [Unzo?], they came afterwards. Then my other uncle came, his name was Unzo, and my brother, father got him here. He was my father's brother and in the other one's name was Precious and he came to Rockford and we all, and then no name J.C., JC he was a brick he was a cement guy. He was a military person so he learnt bricklaying, brick masonry and he was a Masonary carpenter. Very very good. And so he came from Durrant to Memphis when he was 51, he worked on 51 from Memphis to Durrant probably to Memphis and beyond. Then he came to Rockford in his latter years.

My other uncle was [Levolian]. He had been in the military too. And he was, he was kind of like a party guy, very, he loved to dance and so we'd go down the alleyways of Mississippi and watch them dance and watch the soldiers cause there was always soldiers, they'd come in and dance. And we watched that and so, he also came here and he ended up drinking a lot. But they were hard-working, all of my family was hard-working people.

LF: these were World War II veterans or...?

VB: yeah, World War II. That's why we liked, they were very neat. They'd have their khaki pants and the belts. The belts with shiny buckles and the shiny shoes and money in their pockets!

LF: yeah.

VB: and the girls was behind them! That was the real story! I wanted to get out of Mississippi so I could, whatever I could do to get on some sporty pants and shoes and girls that was where I wanted to go.

LF: tell me a little bit more by your father?

VB: my father was very strong individual. In my opinion was very handsome person. I admired him for how neat he was. Didn't have a lot of education from the standpoint of books that he used to, when you're growing up and I was young, when they go to the Delta picked cotton he was the person who did the weighing of the cotton. He was very good at math, he could figure things out real well. Strong family values. Wanted to look out for his family. Even though in Mississippi, you know I know how precious Mississippi was, and I knew of the dangers that lurk for African-Americans I always had a sense of security when I was with my father. I always had that and always try to live that example with my kids. Even though I was in a very dangerous world per se, it just appeared that he was going to protect me.

So my father, a lot of respect for him. Didn't, never have talked back, didn't talk back to your parents period then you know. Not your father anyway. But I never headache had a confrontation with him I just admired him. He was active in church, when we was growing up. Always wore really neat clothes. Very very dark skinned but were neat clothes. And I guess that's one of the things I noticed, how neat he would be. I mean the shoes were shined, and the belt you know is cleaned up, shirts were nice, but he was, he was about 6 feet my father was. But he was a very strong person. And he was not the kind you were just going to push around to know. And that's one of the things I always thought about in, that's one of the things I said about the movement, I could not have been like a Dr. Martin Luther King, and I think it took that after my father you know. He just was not one and the white people in the South knew that. There were those African-Americans that they knew they were not going to just play around with and he was one of those. So I admired him a lot. We were able to tell him before he died how proud I was of him and things of that nature.

LF: did he find any other educational opportunities in Rockford?

VB: when he came to Rockford it seemed like he had into the machine shop and did exceptionally well. Because he was a lead person of, because matter of fact I just couldn't find the picture, had a picture taken of him when I was in school and all the kids told with her father did and so I was able to have that picture and I thought was really nice whereas you know, "my father's a doctor," "my father's this" but it was something that I always felt very proud of. And I think he did find ways of educating himself to a large degree. But he was really concerned about all the kids getting an education. Really you know pushed that . And very committed that we go to church and then we be good citizens.

LF: what about your mother?

VB: my mother? So I've got two mothers there. My stepmother I grew up with. Very committed lady. She didn't have any kids of her own so we always were just, you know, just we didn't say stepmother she was just like our real mother. A kind, warm gentle person. Really looked out for us as well as anybody could whether they were blood or not. That was my stepmother. And my mother was a, she was an educated person. She had taught school, very family oriented. My sister, my, [Dale, Maggie] always stayed with my mother. And Lamar and I stayed with my, Lamar, Veola and I, Veola we were half sister and brother. and so my real mother was a person that taught you character, taught you to be proud of yourself, and touchy family values. Her whole life was "look after your brothers and her sisters. And look after your family." And she was the matriarch of the family because she was the last one of her family to die, of all her sisters and brothers and she had about 11 or 12 brothers and sisters. She was the last one to die and always said that "you're going to make something of yourself. You're going to, you're gonna, these little hands" she would say, "they're going to be able to take care of me and take care of your brothers and sisters."

But she just believed in the family, and taking care of the family, and my sister Maggie then, with her first child, and she got a child out of wedlock, with her first child my mother just took right over and cared for it and then my sister made then did marry a nice guy who was in the service and then they traveled all over. I mean they was in Washington, Texas, they was in Chanook and then over in Beirut and then they were in, well it had to be India, cause they were over there when they had the embargo and to bring them out they had to get him out. But I was fortunate. You know I had, and my mother did get married again too, I had a good stepmother and I had a good stepfather that they could not tell if they was your blood. And my stepfather who lived with my, in Memphis, he was just an excellent person. And so we were fortunate even though there were negative things around us. We were fortunate.

LF: how was Rockford different for you from Durrant?

VB: first thing they got me, well we came in the summertime before school started so we might have gotten here in July cause school started in August I believe. So it was before school started, so we had established good relationships with the neighborhood kids, because we lived right next to Tinker Park. So that's where everybody was at. That's where all the activity was taking place. So there was basketball, there was track, it was other games we was playing, plus we was right down the street from Booker [Washington Community Center]. So we adapted to the social side of Rockford exceptionally well. All of us did.

And then school started and I started off at Montague, and my first few days of school was kind of awkward, you know, because I had never gone to an integrated school. I had only gone to African-American schools. And, you know, all my teachers were black. And so I gets to Rockford and all the teachers were white and that was an adjustment from something that I couldn't really imagine would be that different so, because we had to say "yes sir, no sir" to white people period, you know anybody we saw. And so when

you get to school you know, I was saying yes sir, yes ma'am to the teacher and she was saying "you really don't have to say yes ma'am to me." You know, "yes Mrs., Mrs. Burns," my homeroom teacher. And so that was the biggest adjustment for me was to transform myself in that short period of time from not participating in with other white kids to and integration with white kids.

So consciously you know it's a change, they change and I was basically an A and B student when I was in Durrant. I was an exceptionally good student. And why that's Rockford, the first probably two months, you know I was carrying Cs. You know, might've had a D. and so something, they knew something was wrong and so Mrs. Burns kind of picked up on, you know she always saw me as a nice person, and so she then said well you know you've got to do this. And so she started having a little white girl, her name was Carol Stacione. Never forget that girl! She was just a little and was teacher all the way through. Just a little prissy English teacher you know. And we got to be good friends you know. And then she started, just let me finish that first, but she was, but the biggest adjustment was to integrate with the kids and understand that you are not in Mississippi now, you're in Rockford. And so Mrs. Burns just did an exceptional job in terms of making me comfortable and making me aware of the fact of you know I could do think that anybody else to do. So after a few months of that I got very comfortable, had good friends black and white, and integrated, it went well. Integration went well.

But going back to Carol Stacione, teachers then, you know, even though you were in, Rockford was still segregated. You know when I came here in high, in elementary school, Rockford was still segregated. But the thing that I noticed was, all my teachers at Montague School, Washington Junior High, or West High School, all of my teachers were very fair to me. I've never had a teacher that I thought treated me differently than they treated the white students. So the experience with Mrs. Burns and Carol was that Mrs. Burns was a sensitive teacher. And they would give kids layers of responsibility and that's what made kids different than you have kids today. When I got to Washington Junior High School we were still ninth grade, you know we go til the ninth grade, and when we got to ninth grade, you know, we were in charge of the school and the teacher always gave us certain authority and I was one of those students that ended up with that in high school.

But a lot of the kids that I went to school with, a lot of them did exceptionally well, exceptionally well. It was a class, if you look back on all of my class, most of us did well. Those kids came through South Rockford and went on through high school. Kids, I mean black and Italian because that was the majority, there were very few Hispanics at that time. But very, if you look at the age bracket when we graduated from high school and went on through, all of us were very productive citizens. Even in a divided kind of a setting.

LF: Mrs. Burns was a sixth grade teacher?

VB: She was a sixth grade teacher.

LF: So Montague went through sixth and Washington was seventh, eighth, ninth?

VB: Correct. Best, that was the best concept they had in school. Because when we got to be sixth grade, you were in charge of the school and you kept those little first and second grade kids in line. And then when you got to Washington, and you got to be in ninth grade, you kept those little sixth and seventh years in line. And then when you got to high school, you know, you finally then had a number of leadership roles, you know.

LF: What did the Italian s think of their African American classmates? Was there tension between those groups?

VB: We were one group of people and after we got there and if we had fights they were just a fight with two individuals. We didn't have racial tension. I think it was the adults that made the division. But people, you know I went to a lot of Italian homes when I was growing up, Joe. . . oh, Joe. . . he got killed, he did. I forget his last name. But I had a lot of white friends growing up. After we got past that. From Montague on through. We didn't have a problem but we were not dating white girls. You know, in high school we were not dating white girls. We possibly might have danced with some white girls but that was just, you know, you didn't do that.

But I've gone to [restaurants and things] you know. And I wouldn't, I started working for [them] right out of high school. In high school. I was working for Harold Hicks, [Restaurant], on Wyman Street and the [Mandarin Garden] was also on Wyman Street. And Walgreens was at State, was on Main and Mulberry, and Bishop cafeteria was Main Street right next to the Telephone Company in 53, 1953. I couldn't eat at Bishops cafeteria in Rockford in 1953. And so it really hasn't been as long as a lot of people think. When you come, I couldn't eat at [Kresses]. When they started marching in, Dr. Martin Luther King was marching in Birmingham, in probably 50 well probably 60s. . . , [Kresges] were segregated in Rockford. So, but we didn't, we didn't in school, we didn't run into that. We just, even a West high school. But after we, maybe after the, the 64 has when the civil rights start a movement, 64, 65, 66. And that's when changes were beginning to be imminent in America.

LF: did your father faced discrimination in the workplace?

VB: he never talked about it if he did. I mean, they were not promoted like other individuals were. But he never talked about it. They all worked hard, molding and doing sand and working on the, my father worked in a machine shop for a while so he had moved up. Like I said he was always good with figures. He was, you know, his skills in that area were very good. I'm sure he possibly was but he never talked about it.

LF: do you think your parents made the right decision coming north?

VB: they definitely feel that they gave us the opportunity to have a better quality of life for ourselves and our families, our kids and to get a better education. There's a two prong to an education. The African-Americans that did remain in the South, the South

educational system probably was one of the better factors of African-American. Because you were taught by those individuals who knew, you had to have education to survive, you know. And if you did not get a good education, you are not going to survive. So in that side, most of your black colleges in the South... I recognized early on in life, once I went to Memphis, that blacks had, you know, subdivisions, black new subdivisions. And some of blacks would say "well you know" they knew exactly where the whites stood in the South. And some degree, that could be correct. But the blacks in the South just, you know, they were living on a standard, you know, an American accepted standard.

Which I figured something was wrong when I saw the land that was owned by whites and blacks didn't have any lands. While my question was to my father, and it was, well, why is that? You know, why is it that we don't have our own land? Why we have to work somebody else's land? You know, how did the, how did the white people get all of the land? And then as I read about it in history and looked at how land was assembled, and African-Americans were not considered as citizens, humans, so they couldn't get any land. You know, and a person could come personally worked for, his name was Claude Wilks, he was one that owns the plan, well we thought he owned the plantation, he was leasing the plantation from the federal government for probably a dollar an acre, if that much, \$.50 an acre. And so you build, okay this is not what we're really here for, but when you look at it. As a child I saw, I said this is just not right. You know, and my father, my father, especially, cause my grandfather was a minister. And my father was the one who always, my grandfather lost his life, the horses ran away and crushed his leg. So he lost his leg. And so they had to amputate his leg up here [gestures to thigh]. And my father was the one who always had to take him places. He is, he looked just like him, and so as we grew up, you know, there was a sense of, I couldn't figure out why they didn't have land. Now, I found out later that my grandfather was supposed to have some land down in near Yazoo City. But then there were those African-Americans who could read in those days, and there were those African-Americans who could not read. And that land that was given to them with that 40 acres and a mule situation, some of them lost it because when the taxes came they didn't understand that. It's some serious history as relates to African-Americans.

But I think my father was just one of those individuals who possibly, he just made it very clear even, as first discrimination, he knew he didn't have a lot of rights but he just made it very clear he was not going to play with people. And they weren't going to play with them. But I'm sure any African-American was confronted with discrimination.

And one of the other things I always try to live is I never did play out with guys. You know some guys, some black guys will get out and play with white people. I never did that, I never got comfortable with doing that. Because it is going to lead into an heiress meant situation and I knew my father didn't behave like that I was never embarrassed with him. And I never wanted to embarrass my kids. So, I've tried to conduct my life in a way I was not going to do that. But when you really look at life with 60s, the 50s and 60s and the 40s, the South and the North, it was so much injustice that was done. And that injustice certainly kept America back, it didn't advance the cause of America. And there are a lot of Obamas out there. I told some kids the other night, I said that there are a

lot of Obamas out there. And this country could've been a lot farther ahead, had it not so, been so busy trying to hold some people down. But it was because of fear and prejudice.

But that was the system, if I ever want to talk with you about something, it is at a couple of opportunities to change. It had the opportunity when Andrew Jackson took over from Abraham Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln was killed. Then Andrew Jackson was not liked, because he was a little guy and didn't like him too well in Washington as vice President. And when he was made president, after Lincoln was killed, he really had an opportunity to set this country on a course that was going to lead to what Lincoln eventually did you know. But he elected to set up the deal where blacks could not have land again. And then remove the [peace offering] from the South, which gave rise to the Klan, which then suppressed the Africans, the slaves, and then they had, the slaves had fought for freedom, and then they took it away from them. You know, and that was the sad thing about life, so. That would be something I would, you know, eventually like to talk about.

LF: when your father got to Rockford have defined a place to live?

VB: Now there were certain people in Rockford in those days, who just had rooming houses and they were just part of the underground, they didn't realize that what they really were, where you could always go to some of those people and they would say "Well, I don't have any space, but over here we have some space." And if they don't have a space somebody else will have some space. So my father was working with one gentleman who they got along real well. And he said, well I've got some space for you and I will build an additional room onto my house for you and your family. And he did that. And he didn't personally have any kids of his own. His name was Mr. Wally. And so that was how my father did it, by working with the person and saying he wanted to get his family here that person then made it possible for him to get his family here. And then later on, my Uncle Precious was coming to Rockford, and then he built another little room upstairs for him. But as I said earlier. It was a common kitchen, common living room, and that was, you know, you just weren't going to run anything down, you were just going to [unintelligible]. That was how he got that rooming house.

LF: so it really would have been a rooming house, this gentleman owned the house and invited everybody in?

VB: mm hmm. And we were, he was living in the same house with you. It wasn't you were a friend of the landlord, you were living right in the same house. And there was probably four families, independent families living in the house. And then my sister, when she got married and she had another place so that's where I stayed during the day. You know, cause my sister when she started having kids I was the babysitter. So I'd stay over there all the time.

LF: with the rooming house did everybody then have a share of the rent payments, were you making monthly payments...

VB: my father, my father paid for his five, my uncle than paid for theirs then. . .

LF: okay.

VB: it was a reasonable... and then we had chores, man! You know, we had coal, you know coal, coal stoves. And so you know two or three of those babies sitting around and you have to get home, get the wood, and stove, you know, going and then when it comes time for cooking, you know it different types to eat and stuff like that, you know, it was an experience. But it was a lot better than Mississippi.

LF: so there was a schedule drawn up of who used... which spaces when...

VB: yeah. There was. There was.

LF: Do you think your parents, or other family members were faced with housing discrimination?

VB: oh, no question. Yeah, no question. It was just blatant. Sure, it was blatant at that time. And it was all tied in you know. The banks were not going to lend money for houses, but the banks would lend money for cars. I was discriminated against when I was working for telephone company as a janitor, I started out as a janitor. And was, needed, I saw a house that I liked. Nice little house. And so I said, I goes to the bank, and said, you know, I'd like \$1500, only get \$1500 to get this house. That's what I'd have to pay down to get this house, \$1500! And the bank says well, I don't know if it's your credit, your job record or something like that, I worked for the telephone company, started working in 53. So I was married them. So anyway, you know, you don't, you have to get a cosigner something like that for the house, and so I thought what? That's strange. Can't get a house.

So, we go to the one on Broadway and looked at a car, and the car needed \$1500 down or something like that, and so the guy says what do you need, is any special place you'd like the car financed? I said, you can call my bank, anybody you want to. You know, my credit is good. You can call. So, he said, well we'll call you back this afternoon and let you know if it's okay or not. The guy called me back in the afternoon, and I didn't tell them what bank to go to, guy says everything is fine, you can pick your car up. So I goes to pick up my car up, and then my book came at the end of the month, my payment book came right from Illinois national Bank. And that's where I'd gone to to get a house. And I can't take that house back to Mississippi and leave it. I can take that car. And that's when I learned man, you have to be very careful, you know, how you treat people. So, discrimination, yeah, I've seen it. I've seen a lot of that, lot of that.

LF: when your sister got married and had another house did. Your whole family go and stay with her or...

VB: no, she stayed at her house because she was having kids at that time, and she did have eventually six kids. But we didn't live very far from each other, I could walk, because I lived, she lived on, I lived on the west side of the viaduct and she lived on the

east side. She lived right on me, we both lived right on the end of the viaduct. And she was living with Mrs. William then and so she had an upstairs apartment and I'd go downstairs with the kids all the time. But then we had little rooms, well naturally my brothers we all slept together, that was just normal. You know, the brothers slept together. And so there was no girls there and my father and stepmother they was together so that didn't take but just two bedrooms for that. And eventually my father and my uncle bought a house together. Yeah, they bought a house up on Winnebago.

LF: when was that?

VB: that probably was, I was working for the telephone company, it probably was about 52? 50, 52, somewhere in that neighborhood. Cause we lived, because we used to live on Horseman street too. I lived on Horseman Street, I used to walk from Horseman Street to Washington junior high school-- And that must've been 52 or 50, somewhere in that neighborhood-- every day. And sometimes at lunch hour. And man that viaduct's the coldest place in Rockford.

LF: you mentioned church. What church did your family belong to?

VB: my father, he, we belonged to a comma when I started off we, my father belonged to Bethel. And for some reason we left Bethel and then when I, he was still, that's right my father belonged to Bethel because that's where the Wilder's belonged to. They all belonged to Bethel. So that's just for my father and my stepmother, when I joined a church, I was going to Bethel, I'm not sure if I joined. But the first church I remember joining was Providence. In Rockford. And then, that was when I was in high school. And then when I got married I joined Pilgrim because we had started having a family and my parents then lived right next to Pilgrim up on Morgan street so on Winnebago so I could take my little son by them when he act up. But they want to Bethel.

LF: Did Bethel have any role in helping them get settled in Rockford?

VB: no. It was basically my uncle who came here and then those that got us here with the railroad. And anybody that came, what would happen is, the way the word spread you know would be that guys, every July and August they would be there. And they'd come there in their nice cars, and it you know, money, and so everybody else was gathering around talking about "oh man, how you have all this?" You know, oh well I work up in Rockford, I work in Chicago, I work in... and so everybody was wanting to get up here, that's the way it was. It was just seeing, it was just like pictures worth a thousand words. You saw it. They didn't have to tell you. And so that's how it came to Rockford at that time man. You could get a job, especially at the foundries. With the second largest tool industry in the world.

LF: what sorts of roles did Booker Washington Center play?

VB: Booker was extremely important to all of us. It was an anchor for us to feel we had ownership. But I guess that's what probably was, could the events in that, it probably was

what kept us focused. Because we had very strong African-American directors and coaches and staff at Booker. That was a continuation of the southern expectation of you. You know, you have to protect Booker, you're not going to be swearing in here, you're not going to be wearing hats in here, enacting the little girls in the butt in here or you're out of here, you know, for some time. Taught us how to take girls out on a date, taught us how to use silverware, and sit down and eat. Had a tutoring class for us there. Ping-pong, pool, checkers, I didn't play chess too much, but they had that too. It had a cultural climate that you could be exposed to. Had an area where you could just go just like you were in school, just an extra classroom where you could go and sit and study. And we had other kids would tutor you. That was another thing. So you had a continuation of you know what she came from the south with, was a commitment to trying to advance a race of people. And so that's what Booker meant, other than school and church has Booker with it. And then we had the sports. We had one of the best basketball team that came out of Booker that they had in Rockford. And that was, that was a real anchor, I'm glad you mentioned that.

LF: what other social organizations were there that were helping?

VB: St. Elizabeth's. St. Elizabeth's social center. The Catholic sisters were just right there, they were just angels you know. They, we would go there and have doughnuts, and they teach us different things. You know we could talk with them about a lot of personal things. They were just there. Faneuil as of this was a very strong organization for us. Martin House was the come right down by where Zion's at now. The churches were strong supporters of where we was at. The clubs, the Italian clubs were very nice. You know, we had a lot of functions there. And then to the Italian ma and pa stores was where the Blacks used to go and sign on the tad because a lot of them didn't have any money so they'd go over and get their groceries and when they got paid they'd go pay the grocery man. We lived through all that stuff.

LF: in the black Rockfordians you talk about the lush head club...

VB: lush head club was where we used to go. That was you know that was our little entertainment. On Sunday night you know they'd have a lot of live bands there. You know I think at that time [Burt Legg] had a fantastic band in they'd have all kinds of quality performance, and the people were always very friendly. And we go up there, and we could go and you know, but we'd sit up there and talk, flirt with the girls, just you know being young people, growing up, but it was a, right in our neighborhood and it too gave us quality of respect because the people who went there were respectful. You never, never really saw people coming out of the Lush Head drunk, intoxicated. The women were all respectful, you never saw any girls that was you know street girls, at the Lush Head. You never saw that. Saw a lot of that on Cedar Street. You know, Briggs Hotel, Briggs Hotel was a come right at Cedar and... where the federal building's going now. And then you had Joe's Café there and Joe's Café was a nice place for us to go. And it had excellent food, Southern food, a lot of things that people from the South liked. But lush head with a quality club for, and are not sure if it was segregated or, I think a lot of whites used to go to it too.

LF: so it was more of a nightclub in not a social membership organization?

VB: it was a membership one. You had had a key to go there, but you know, you're supposed to be a member to go there and you could not just go and buy liquor, but I'm sure they sold liquor because it was, but they never brought any embarrassment down to the city so the city never was out there checking on it. It was just a nice quiet quality club.

LF: the other one you mentioned was the El Dorado?

VB: the Eldorado was where, you know I got to be an adult then so, it was, it was a social club in Rockford, dinner club and dance club. And lunches. And that's where all of your professional people went, African-American, Hispanic and everybody it was a club for a social status. There was very strict group, carried a lot of respect in the community, [Papa Hawks] himself was a statesman. He just went around to all other clubs and represented the African-Americans so, he paved the way for a lot of us. Because people were real comfortable with him so that we had an opportunity to be out to be treated fairly because of his kind of doing. And then Pat was the owner of the Lush Head and his wife was a young, beautiful lady, she, matter of fact she is to teach us dancing at Booker. She was beautiful. I mean she, I thought, when we grew up Lena Horne was the lady! You now, Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge. Those for the ladies, the African-American ladies, that we just admired, and Dorothy looked like Lena Horne. Beautiful lady. She was a good tap dancer, matter of fact she performed with the blue notes. Because we were up in Crystal Lake, my wife and I went up there and they were having a reunion. And Pat was there. Just a beautiful person.

LF: how do you think your education prepare you for your professional and political life?

VB: I think, I think being the youngest of five kids, it just kind of got me to the point where I was always competitive. I had to be aggressive to keep up with my sisters and brothers. And I was always inquisitive. And my mother, and my parents, my parents really taught us that you need a good education. I was drafted after high school for career, and school ended in June, June I think still in June then. And for some reason the war, Korean War ended in September and so they gave me until school was out to be drafted so then after the war ended they were not drafting people. The next time they drafted me my wife was pregnant, and I got a status, F status for that. And then they drafted me three other times and she was pregnant. But as I reflect back on that in looking at careers today, here we are in the same boat. That was when I got out of high school. Same works, you know. So how did it prepare me, my education? I think that just knowing that, like I said I had some good teachers, some excellent teachers in Rockford. They were really committed and I was always a person that the teachers didn't have to disappoint me. I was a, I was a person that I got my discipline home. I knew I couldn't go home if I was kicked out of school, you know, so that's probably what prepared me. And just always wanting to have some nice things in life. Nice quality of life. And I've been fortunate enough to do that.

LF: do you think that same sort of influence holds true for other migrant families who came up? How were, what difference did education make for them?

VB: I believe that the aspiration of most of the African-Americans who came through the migration that I came up under was really looking for the opportunity to have their own, they wanted their own home, they wanted their own economics, they certainly wanted to be able to have things better for their kids than they had it. So it was a mindset then. And it's difficult, even with my own kids, it's difficult for kids today to understand the importance of education because many of them have not exposed to how society can really be cruel to you.

And so education is the key to eradicating that but I think the parents, all of us probably wanted to make sure that our kids didn't suffer as much as we may have and sometimes we may have even gone too far for that to not give them a little bit more responsibility. I was talking to my daughter the other day and she is, my daughter is a CPA and her husband is an auditor, and they make good money, live out in Hazel crest. And one of my little grandson's just working himself to death and the other one, handsome as he can be, and he is just you know wants to get by, you know. And I'm saying to him, you know you ought to be kidding. And it's so, I understand how [unintelligible], you know, we just got to let him know, you know, you don't owe him anything. You know, he's old enough now to get things for himself. So I had a long talk with him.

But education is, my parents taught me right up front , well they didn't have any but my mother was always educated. And she was just a, you know Sunday school teacher, she marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, matter of fact she is with me in Memphis when we were doing with the Push organization. Two o'clock in the morning working on the personnel policies for Memphis and the Memphis personnel director was there and then she marched with Benjamin Hooks who was the first African-American appointed to the FCC commission by Jimmy Carter. He was the judge, he was president of the NAACP nationally. So she was always out there, my stepmother was not as knowledgeable, education-wise but she was a very committed, warm, generous giving person. We just knew that we had to give back something to society, to people that you know, because there's a lot of people that helped us along the way that were not just relatives, you know. Black people in, when I came up in the 50s were very committed and today you know the same commitment is not there. And the system to a large degree failed to treat everybody equal and some people could not handle that.

That's another story but I work for the Secretary of State's office now and I see people coming in there with no identification, no education can't even get an ID card, drivers license, is already driving without a drivers license, driving under the influence, and so they will never be able to get a drivers license. Can't even get an ID card and if you can't get an ID card you can't get a job. So all you're going to do is go out and rob and get yourself in trouble.

LF: how do you think your parents experiences shaped your political convictions?

VB: they believed in me. If I said I was going to do something they would always say you know you have to be prepared. So if you want to do this you got to be prepared, you know. And if you're going to go out especially if you're going to represent people, you know you've got to have a clean slate, you know. You can't lead, you know, if you have a bad reputation. So they was very upfront with that. You know, if this is what you want to do, we'll support you. But you know, there are sacrifices you're going to have to make. They were aware of that. And made me aware of it. And I guess that was one of the main reasons why I was so anxious to not allow myself to sail from being stupid. You know, I was on the city council you know, I never thought of somebody driving me to get a vote. But I was fortunate prior to that because I worked for telephone company for 33 years and I always had a good job. And that's the difference myself.

I always, I started off as a janitor in 1953 and worked for 10 years, in 1963 I was promoted into the supply room. And when I got into the supply room that was when I realized that as an individual you can make your own way. Even in a segregated city or segregated state. And so I started doing things that I knew was in my best interest. You know like I made sure if you know, I was not very comfortable in a room with just white women. A white woman I should say. That could lead to somebody accusing me of something. That was my biggest fear is when I worked as a janitor that of some of the young girls were staying around at night, that got me a little shaky. If it was an older white lady I had no problem with that. And then, when I was, I was the second installer that was hired in Rockford to be an installer and that was a challenge because the first installer was an African American who was 55 years old when he went out. And it was always a concern that you know an African-American guy out in the homes of white people, oh he is going to be chasing white girls. Just that simple. I knew that going in.

So I never was comfortable if, I wouldn't work in your house, if you were the lady of the house, if I went to your house as an installer, I wasn't really comfortable if you had a girl that was going to be in the room with me. Wasn't that uncomfortable if a little boy was going to be with me because we had seen a lot of things happen. So I was able to survive that by just being upfront, you know. I've gone to people's homes, you know, lady come out in a negligee, you know. And I says ma'am, I can't come into your place you know. That's for real, you know. I seen something in life that most people have not seen. And to be able to sit here with you today and talk about that without ever allowing myself to get into a situation where I could be accused of it. You know, that was some of the upbringing that I had. You know, you got to make sure you don't allow yourself to get in these traps, you know. And I think my parents taught me well, and I just had enough experience, even as a child, in watching how the system operated.

You know, when my father went to the grocery store in Mississippi, and didn't have money because he was sharecropper, and they said were going to put it On the books and then when they just take a piece of paper and write something down. And then he'd say he bought flour and he bought sugar and he bought this, and then the person would tell him to sign down here [gestures to what would be the bottom of a page]. And I'm saying, you know, why don't you sign up here [right after the list of items], you know, I'm saying

that at eight years old. Because somebody can add, I'm learning that at school, they said that at school. So you know, the guy, to the honest with you he just said, "you've got a smart little nigger," you know. And so that was like, you know, . . .

. . . So, you know, I grew up in the system. And I guess that's what I always say to people. I think I understand the system as well as anybody. And you have to learn when you're with the system that is against you, you have to find ways of surviving in that system. And then somebody in that system will be sensitive to you as an individual. Because they see where you're going. That's how I was able to move and navigate a telephone company. I appealed to the sensitive side of people who have the authority to make some decisions based on the observation of who I was because many people will respect you if you work and I guess that's the basic premise that I work under. I told my kids, you've got to work. That's all they've ever seen me do is work. You know, somebody says well why are you still working for now. And I says, well it suits me because I now work in a position that, in my opinion, is productive and there were many times when I was janitor that I didn't feel it was productive. But I did feel that it did a good job. Nobody had to stand over me, I never had to back up to get my paycheck.

And so those are the kinds of things I've taught my kids. None of my kids have been in jail. I've got six kids, none of has ever been in jail. Four of them went through college. My wife is a real estate broker as well as she's a very good nurse. And so I've been fortunate.

LF: one of the things we were going to ask you to go into a little more explanation on from the other interview was that you're saying that you "always knew you wanted the quality but didn't feel you had to leave the fifth Ward to gain some status".

VB: correct, correct. I was very committed to that. And that was my southern rearing. It is, I grew up in an area where, you know, black people didn't have the greatest homes in the city but they maintained what they had, and I always said that the Fifth Ward is a good ward. It has good people. It's the most integrated Ward in the city of Rockford. And I, I love the fifth Ward. I never wanted to leave the fifth Ward, and that's why I wound up with my first divorce. Is my first wife wanted to move. That's when blacks started moving east, you know, and I wasn't willing to do that. I felt like we could make a good standard of living where we were and that we didn't have to leave that. And so I've offered that premise and I think eventually that it was beginning to be accepted.

So, I think right now the fifth Ward is poised to be a very productive ward in the city of Rockford. And the citizens are still going to have to fight for it, because in the 70s, the city was not fair with the fifth Ward. It put a moratorium on a sanitary mains down near Levings Lake where Eclipse wanted to build a shopping, wanted to build themselves a nice residential living along with some other things, near Springfield where Harrison goes through now. And the city stopped with the moratorium. But at the same time they ran water mains from the sanitary District on Kishwaukee all the way up to Roscoe and took Roscoe, which was a small plant infested with contamination, and made it into a

growth area at the sake of destroying what was happening on the West side. So I believe very strongly that the fifth Ward now is poised to be a very progressive part of Rockford.

My neighborhood I live in, I'm extremely proud of my neighborhood. I live in a neighborhood that is going to have some 300 homes in it, eventually, probably got about 150 now. Brand-new subdivision. Right down the street from that is Eagle meadow subdivision and Eagle Meadows is very nice too. Then Sunil [Puri] has a, and that's on Montague, then Sunil has on Montague and Pierpont a new subdivision with some 80 some homes going in. So we have basically turned the corner. And with Lowes and with Springfield Harrison, and were going further west, it's going to be that. But I did not want to leave the fifth Ward, just to be in an area to say that, you know, "victory has made it and he's out of the fifth Ward." That wasn't good enough for me. You know, and it was, I was just fortunate. Cause my wife has put some hard bargains on me you know. She was demanding that we were going to move and I just happened to see some land out there and she liked it and we bought it and built the third house in the subdivision. And that's what I really am proud of, you know. And I think of all the twists and turns from Mississippi and 2:00 a.m. leaving Durrant and getting into Chicago at 6:00 a.m. and sitting there until 12 o'clock and getting in near two or three, the satisfaction from all that is bad, you know, I live in a nice neighborhood, I'm proud of it, it's an integrated neighborhood. We have actually Africans, not African-Americans, we have African, we have Hispanics. we have whites, we have Italians, it's very integrated. Most people don't even know it exists. People don't even know it's part of the fifth Ward. I had a lot to do with that. Oh yeah.

LF: is there anything from Durrant that you missed?

VB: I enjoyed the high school, because I was in a lot of plays in high school. I did well in plays. I did well in communications in high school in Rockford. I was the only African-American there was in my communications class. I went to, as a sophomore and junior and senior, I went to all the proms because there was a shortage of African-American guys so I took the senior girls and I kind of liked that so you know, that wasn't all bad! But is there anything I missed from Mississippi? I think, you know, you have to, you always, you don't just kill your hometown, you know. Matter of fact I just, I was looking at the wall last night, and I've got all kinds of proclamations and everything from all over. I got it from the governor and I've got it from the mayor down in Cincinnati and just everywhere you know! You know a guy from Washington, you know just, I didn't get one from Obama. I was thinking last night, you know how do I have one for my hometown. So I was thinking of calling, one of my way down friends, something like that, may be the mayor now, I've got to call him. But I did have the second longest office holder in the United States. Well he was the first because I'm, well he's the first as a state representative because I'm, I was actually the longest office holder in the United States as an alderman. In the whole United States

LF: wow.

VB: so I'm going to call him up and get a proclamation from him. but to say that, it was a time, it was a system. And Durrant happened to be part of that system. And I'm not, I'm not going to down my, my city where I was born, because of an era or because of a system. I would rather say that in spite of that I have been able to survive, and that's what I said to my kids, you know, you've got to find a way of surviving and trying to obtain some of your goals. So I don't regret anything, and that you know you can't say you don't regret discrimination but as far as an individual, you know, I'm comfortable with the fact that I was never confronted with a life-threatening situation in that system in Mississippi.

But Durrant was just like the rest of the city I still have an interest of going to the courthouse there and sitting on one of their sessions or setting in City Hall. That I wanted to do. Because as a child, as a child I went by this courthouse and just wondered what's going on in there? And so you don't forget those kinds of things. And so I was going to take off as soon as I left the city Council, travel for six to eight weeks, and then my father, my wife's father got kind of, having Alzheimer's problems so I've not done it yet. I just didn't want to leave her back here with all of that.

LF: yeah.

VB: I wouldn't come back to a happy camper you know!

LF.: just one other wrapup question. Do you have any photos of your family about the time you were making your trip north?

VB: that's the sad thing I was looking at the other day. I may have a few pictures of my father, and then I went through the divorce and when you go through the divorce you know the ex-wife just throws away anything looks like you in the past. I may have, I'll check around and see.

LF: we'd love it if there were anything you turned up if we can have a peep that would be great.

VB: I'll check, I'll check.. my sister probably have some. My sister in Memphis, oh god, that reminds me of, man, my sister sent me, my wife a picture when I was a baby, had a little leather jacket. And my wife I think hasn't found that picture. And I [unintelligible] that was my mother's picture, you know, she just thought that was, oh man! I have a little top-notch hair, but guys you know. And my wife got it and she, we were getting ready to do a documentary film, I mean a video. And man, I always tell her she doesn't keep up with things as well as I do. So I'll, I really want to write a book. So last that I was giving stuff, putting it in order. I have a lot of history. I mean I've got a lot of history. And I've got to do a pretty soon as I've got the dates now where as I, you know, don't know how long I'll keep it together like I am. So I, I'll check to see. If I possibly could.

LF: Perfect. Anything else we haven't asked you want to make sure it's part of our record?

VB: I think basically, you know, I have not been inclusive of my telephone career. I think my City Council career overshadowed my telephone career. I was promoted at the telephone company in 19, April 1st, 1970. I was elected as an alderman in March, well probably the February primary of 1971. And so I had two major careers at the same time. But the telephone career is what I kind of planned more. I loved both of them, I loved telephone company work and I started off as a janitor. And finally was promoted to the supply room, into the supply room to inside switch room, switch room to the plan assign. . . I did plan assignments and all that. That's how I knew so much about the sanitary district and how they really robbed the west side because I was a plan assigner manager and the manager and the [person] who worked for me was the engineers really. I had actually engineers working for me. And that well they were the ones that transcribed the information from the prints too so it was not so much it was the engineers it was the assigners. And they took all the information and put it, documented it and I had to go out and check the path of it as they went up the river.

But my telephone career was something that was very special to me. It taught me a lot. The telephone company really is where I got my training. I went through every kind of training in the telephone company that you could go through, it was probably about as good as a four year college. I mean they taught me, AT&T and Illinois Bell and Ameritech, they taught you what they wanted you to do. So when I talked on any aspect of the telephone business it was, out of respect. And if I said it, the president of the company said it. It was just that simple. And so it was the base of my real learning opportunities. And I met a lot of, you know, high department heads and things like that, top notch department heads. But that was the side we didn't talk about as much. But that was very important to me.

LF: When was your last official city council meeting. . . ?

VB: April 28 or something like that. Last Thursday, last Monday of April. I was, really, I must say there was, Rockford treated me exceptionally well. I was, I was really surprised. I, I, [I wasn't surprised] at what they said, but it just, you know, the way they did that. I mean I was going across the video last night. I was looking for something else. And under the www. And it was, they did a video, and I'm going to get the video and it just did things that I was working on. It showed different areas. It showed me working at city hall. Actual video. They came out to the house [unintelligible]. I mean they must have spent three hours out here talking with me at the house, you know. And, I mean, my life was just, once I got to the Democratic National Convention in August of 80. . .of 2008, and then went to the National, Democratic, to the Inaugural in January, that was just it, you know. That's the life that you just dream of, you know. And [Congressman] Manzullo got me some excellent seats at the Inaugural [of President Obama], and at the convention, I mean, at the Democratic Convention. I was sitting right behind Daley.

David Byrnes: Really?!

VB: right in front of my boss which is just. . .you think I didn't feel good about that!

LF: Well, anything else we missed? This has been wonderful.

VB: I think, I think we got, you know the one thing about it is I, you know I'll go into different areas because my mind starts speeding up but I hope I stayed focused some time on it.

LF: This was great. There are other things that its good to have talked about even if they're tangents from [immigration].

VB: I plan to, I plan to really. . . I've talked to my grandkids about it and, but I . . . Obama has a second chance for America to make a major change and I really am impressed with how he's going about it. I think that you know Cheney and some of others need to understand that its good for America. And you only can have one President and we need to move away from the rhetoric and say that, you know, we gotta make this thing work, You know, when you start closing down General Motors, you know, that's some serious thinking here, you know, We can't keep the Republicans, Democrats, Black, white, Hispanic, you know, we've got an American crisis here and how can we defend ourselves with North Korea and then go there and deal with what we're dealing with in Kuwait and all these other areas in Afghanistan, good grief! We've got some serious problems! And jobs are not going to come back. You know, and here we are with the City deciding that can we fund the Metro Center, can we fund the Coronado, can we fund the Arts Council, . . . you know. . .

LB: Some very basic questions. . .

VB: Yeah, and you, we don't have the luxury of saying that we're not going to be globally in the work place because they got you. They can strangle us too! And you know, regardless of what Obama says he was going to do to China, you know China is disciplined and you can't mess with a disciplined country. You know with everybody in Rockford and in the United States, why is it that they're not all, you know, souped up on pot? You know, we're the one that's the civilized country and here we are supporting all these non-civilized countries. And when a sheriff says that, in California if they stop us from growing our pot our city's going bankrupt! Gosh! I mean! So that's about it!

Well it certainly has been nice chatting with you.

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