YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

African American Migration to Youngstown, 1940-1965

Personal Experience

O.H. 1914

KATHERINE & GOVERNOR BOWERS

Interviewed

by

Michael Beverly

on

August 13, 1998

MB: This is an interview with Katherine and Governor Bowers for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on African-American Migration to Youngstown, by Michael Beverly, on August 13, 1998, at the Bowers' home.

I just want to start off the interview by asking your ages.

KB: I am 57.

GB: I am 67.

MB: Okay. Where were you both born?

GB: I was born here in Youngstown.

KB: I was born in York, Pennsylvania.

MB: What do you do for a living now?

KB: I am retired. I was Executive Housekeeping Manager at YSU.

GB: I was a Republic Steel employee, and I was a heater when I retired. I am retired now.

MB: Can you give me the birthplace of both your parents?

KB: I think my father was in North Carolina, and my mother was in Virginia.

GB: All I know is the state, Alabama, where my daddy was born and Virginia where my mother was born.

MB: Mrs. Bowers, you were telling me earlier about your parents and why your father came to Youngstown.

KB: We had originally lived in York, Pennsylvania. The job went down there that he had, so we came to Youngstown. He had gotten a job at the Ravenna Arsenal which is where they were making bombs and whatever, war products.

MB: I read about that.

KB: Because of that he moved us here to Youngstown. The first place that we lived at was down on Rayen Avenue at what they called the crossing because it was a railroad track that ran right straight across it. On one side you were on Rayen Avenue. Right across the track you were on the upper north side of the city.

MB: Was that any where close to the Monkeys' Nest? Have you ever heard of that?

KB: Yes, yes. Right on down the road was the Monkeys' Nest. (Laughter)

MB: I have heard a lot about the Monkeys' Nest.

KB: Yes. That was a very rough section of town.

GB: That was predominantly Slovaks and coloreds up in that area.

MB: Okay. All blacks and Slovaks up there.

GB: Up in that area. That was heavily Slovak.

MB: So it was not just black people who lived there.

KB: It was not just blacks.

GB: Black and white.

MB: Okay. I was under the impression that it was mostly black people.

GB: You only went out to Idora Park, and Idora Park was segregated.

MB: Really?

GB: Yes, it was really segregated. They would let you ride, but you could not swim. You could not go to the dances. Downtown you had your theaters. Palace, Warner, Paramount. Palace, Warner, Paramount, them was the biggest theaters. They were segregated. You sat upstairs. Whites sat downstairs.

MB: Blacks had to sit upstairs in the balcony.

GB: Yeah.

MB: How about Idora Park?

GB: [At] Idora Park you could ride on all the rides, buy the food. You could not go to dances out there.

MB: Could you go out there any day that you wanted to?

GB: You went out there any day that you wanted to, but you just did not swim out there. You just did not go to the dances out there.

KB: They changed the laws that said that swimming was open to everybody.

GB: They filled the swimming pool in with concrete.

KB: They concreted it up and made a skating rink out of it.

MB: Really?

KB: Blacks could not go to the skating rink.

MB: Which swimming pool was this?

KB: This was Idora Park.

MB: I heard that about north side, too, that blacks could never swim there.

GB: You did not go up to north side swimming pool. You had one swimming pool in the city of Youngstown. That was in Lincoln Park.

MB: So blacks were able to swim.

GB: They had a pool, but it was not up-to-date. They filled it by a hose and a fountain. The water hose and the water fountain. They let the water run. It was not up-to-date for swimming, but we had a sandy beach which nobody else had. We had trees. That was out in Lincoln Park. That was the only swimming pool.

MB: I heard there were a lot of boycotts and different things that went on in the 1950's about swimming pools on like north side and south side.

KB: Yeah, they did. They finally built one at Chase Pool, which is up in the projects.

GB: On the north side.

MB: Like Briar Hill area.

KB: Yeah. Briar Hill area. They finally let blacks into that one because that was a Slovak area all back up in there behind those projects. Those back streets all back up in there is all Slovak and Italian. They finally let them swim there. It took a lot of marching and that, especially after the riots and all of that when they finally -- and we are talking up to the 1960's -- opened up the pools to let everybody in where you could swim in any pool you wanted to.

GB: Any pool in the city.

KB: The north side was the last one they opened up to you.

MB: Really? Did you recall anybody getting hurt through these riots or anything?

Were they real bad?

GB: Not necessarily. Fist fighting or something would break out.

KB: The riots that we had here in the 1960's were . . . They did a lot of burning. They burnt down a lot of their own property. But, it was not like it was in some of these other cities, where people were killing each other and all that kind of stuff. As a matter of fact, the biggest part was done on the south side. People would go over there and sit over there and watch them turning cars over and stuff like that. They did their damage, but it was not the killing and what ever as much as it was in other cities.

MB: Okay. How did you go about churches or black leaders like the councilmen? I think McCullough Williams was a councilman back then.

KB: Yeah, McCullough Williams was.

MB: Did they respond the way you liked back then?

KB: Pete Starks was the best councilman we had.

GB: We had councilmen before Pete came in. It was Vaughns. W.S. Vaughns was a councilman here in Youngstown.

MB: How did they respond to all this segregation going on? Did you feel that they were leading blacks in the right direction?

KB: No. In the 1950's and in the 1960's, there was a hesitancy. It was not where you could just speak up and speak out. "I do not like the way this is going." Or, "We are going to get together and do it." Most black people was, "I am alright where I am, so do not stir up no mess. The less mess you stir up the better we are." You had a few that were radical or that were able to stand up for what they believed in, but for the most part, in order to survive, you just did not go out and, "We are going to march today. I am going to march on this group." You had people that did that, but most people were hesitant to get into that.

GB: A lot of people were scared of losing their jobs and stuff.

KB: Right.

MB: They did not want to lose their jobs.

KB: Right. You stood a chance of losing your job, and if you were renting, you might get kicked out of your house.

GB: Get kicked out.

KB: There were a few that owned their home. Most blacks did not own homes. We worked. Then, there was only certain jobs you could have. You worked as a maid.

GB: Manual labor.

KB: You did labor. The men worked in the mills. They made good money in the mill and what ever, but they could make it hard for you. So, you were kind of hesitant.

GB: They was still hesitant because if you wanted to buy, most people then, they could not get a loan at your banks here in Youngstown. They would not loan them no money. They had to go out of town, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, some where else, to get a loan for somebody to get a loan to buy a house. A lot of them bought their houses from Cleveland but not by Youngstown, until they found out they was losing a lot of money.

MB: During this time, the 1950's and 1960's, even if you had the money, did either one of you feel that you could live any where you wanted in Youngstown?

KB: No, no, no.

GB: No, no, no.

KB: You definitely did not.

GB: As I told you before, you lived from Rayen Avenue only so far up Belmont. From there on, you could not buy up in there. The real estate would not sell it to you.

KB: The lower south side, you could buy in there. There were black people that lived there, but they were more prejudice than the whites. If you lived on the south side, you are doctors, you are lawyers, teachers. If you did not have a certain amount of money, if you did not work at a certain type of job, you were not welcome in the neighborhoods. On the east side, it was more a mixed neighborhood. You could live over here just about anywhere you wanted to. West side, forget it. You still cannot really live on certain areas in the west side. The lower part of the west side you can live on. North side, I would say if you pass Madison Avenue, Expressway now, above that there were very few blacks. Those that lived there were like Hugh Frost's family, Ezel Armour's family, people whose parents had been here for years and years and years and years. Those were the people that lived there. You could count the number of places that you could buy.

GB: Predominantly it was the Sharon Line.

KB: Right. If you did accidently find a realtor who would sell you a house, you stood a chance of having it burnt down or having paint thrown all over. I know one lady that moved -- I think she moved on Norway, Norwood, or something up on the north side. She was a fortune teller. Her name was Pearl Spencer. Everybody, black and white, went to her. All they knew that this black woman had put this down payment on the house, and they went in there and just put paint all over everything. They destroyed that house. When they found out who she was, then they got scared, and they was like, "We will get it cleaned and everything." She gave it up. She told them she did not want no part of it.

GB: She was the wife of one of Youngstown's policemen, one of Youngstown's colored policemen. Earl Spencer was his name.

MB: Mr. Bowers, you said your father came from Alabama.

GB: Yes.

MB: Do you know why he came here to Youngstown?

GB: He left Alabama because of economical conditions. Him and his brother went up to Lorain, Ohio. I do not know what happened, but anyhow, the brothers went back to Alabama. He stopped off here.

MB: You do not know how he heard about Youngstown?

GB: No. He just stopped off here because he was not going back to Alabama to live no more. He got a job here at the mill. That is why he settled here.

MB: Growing up, did either of you work outside the home? You and your brothers and sisters while you were growing up, did you have jobs?

GB: Yeah. I had little light jobs. That is about all. I did not have nothing taking away a lot of time or nothing like that, just something to make some extra money.

KB: I did not work outside the home until after I got grown, after I became an adult. Then, I did house work out in Boardman. I worked about two blocks from where the Southern Park Mall is now. That was before the mall was there. In working and talking about the neighborhoods that you could not live in . . . After the buses stopped running, approximately 6:30, 7:00 the buses stopped running. If you were in one of those white neighborhoods, the police would be there to find out why. You did not walk through the neighborhoods like Gypsy Lane and all up in through there, up by Fifth Avenue, all of that. If you were up there after dark, you had better have an awful good reason. You did not walk through there, and

you did not cruise through there with a car because the police would be there to stop you.

MB: How did both of you feel about the police? Did you feel that you could trust them?

GB: No, you could not trust them.

KB: No.

GB: I am going to tell you about them. They were prejudice as heck.

KB: We had some black ones that were vicious.

MB: Black policemen?

KB: Black policemen. Sam Holmes, I have seen him actually handcuff a man to a parking meter and beat him to the ground, and he was a black man. Then, they had this man. What was that guy's name, that one? He was a detective. I cannot think of this man's name, but this man was vicious. I know he was on the take because I have been at after hour clubs when he would come to get his money. I remember one time making a statement, "Oh, you come to get your money. Got to get your pay off this morning." He was like, "What did you say?"

MB: Really?

KB: Yeah. He was one of them people that, if he came to your door, he would kick it open. He did not bother to knock on the door. I cannot think of that man's name, but he was rough. It is a wonder somebody had not killed him because he was just that type of man. He did not care nothing about no black people. Say for instance you and your wife got to arguing and got to fighting and they called him. When they took you out, they whipped your behind, and then they took you to jail. I have actually seen them. That is one thing they did not stand was wife abuse, that abuse. They would have to keep coming. Every week they would have to come to your house. They would carry you out the door. When they got you out there, they would take them little black jacks they had and whipped you half to death with them then put you in jail for the weekend.

MB: You do not think it was based on color?

KB: They were just mean.

MB: Police were just mean back then.

KB: Police were just police. They were like, "We are the authority, and you do what

we say." They did not care whether you were black, white, what ever. I cannot testify to what they did to white people.

GB: They whipped their butts.

KB: But, I can say what they did to blacks. I have seen what they have done to some of the black people. Now you had some that were good. You had some that they were concerned about the neighborhoods because at that time you had police that walked the beat. They walked the street. They were concerned about the young people.

GB: They would run your butt off the streets like they was supposed to do. They would run you home. They take you home.

KB: You tried to steer clear of authority. That was the best way. You knew if you stayed away, you did not bother them, they would not bother you.

GB: You stayed away from doing stuff that you was not supposed to do to go to juvenile hall.

MB: How about the mayors during this period?

GB: The who?

KB: The mayors.

MB: The mayors.

KB: They were doing their little stealing.

GB: Like everybody else is doing now. They were doing the same thing. It has not changed. This town has not changed. Campbell, Struthers, Lowellville, Youngstown. All around these areas they are still doing the same thing, putting their hand where they are not supposed to have their hand.

KB: That was predominantly racketeer town, and it was run by racketeers. Wherever your people were down town they were their pocket.

GB: They was in the pocket.

KB: They did what they told them to do. If you wanted something, a lot of black people got the homes and whatever they had because they knew the racketeers. Either they worked at their houses as the maid or they carried numbers for them and whatever. When they got ready to but a home or something, these were the people that you went to who would give you the down payment for your home.

MB: Some people could not really go to the banks.

KB: No, there was no need to go into no bank.

GB: The bank was not going to loan you no money.

KB: Not only did you not go to the bank, you did not do no shopping above the square. Okay. It is Kaufman's now. It used to be McKelvey's. McKelvey's, Strauss's, places like that. If you went in there and you went above the first floor, they were behind you. They started walking around. If you were up on the second floor, third floor like furniture and better clothes and whatever, you would have people walking behind you watching you.

MB: How about hospitals then? When you were having your kids or whatever, did the doctors treat you any different?

GB: The doctors treated you fairly decent. Doctors treated you. Colored went to white. White went to colored. They treated you pretty fairly.

MB: The hospitals?

GB: They was still segregated.

KB: Saint Elizabeth's was the best one to me because they treated you good, but you always knew where your place was.

GB: You knew what section they were going to put you in.

KB: You had a certain section that they had for blacks.

GB: Even in burial. Even in death. You had a certain section to be buried in. Mount Hope Cemetery is out there on the Sharon Line still yet. That is where most of the colored people used to be buried at. Then, they finally started letting them go into Belmont, Todd and all them. Then, they had a certain section that was nothing but colored.

MB: When you had your kids and all that, or if you ever had to stay in the hospital, you usually had a black roommate then?

GB: That was kind of like they would herd them all off to one side.

MB: All blacks.

KB: Most of the time you had the same color. For the most part, because I did not have to go to the hospital too many times, that was one of the few places.

Where they had you without technically segregating you was by what you could afford. Okay? Most blacks could not afford a semi-private room, so they put you in a ward. So, you had most blacks in there. You had some poor whites. That is how they got around it. We could not afford a semi-private room, which might have ran $50 a day. That was like saying $2 million a day. They put you in a ward where it was maybe $6 or $7 a day. That was the way of doing it without coming out and saying the black go over here and the white go over here. That is how they got around it.

MB: How long did both of you go to school, if you do not mind me asking?

KB: I was in school until eleventh grade at East High.

GB: Eleventh grade.

MB: Did you notice any kind of racism among teachers? Did they treat you well?

GB: I will tell you. As far as teachers, I think they treated them pretty well equal up there at East High.

KB: They would beat your butt no matter what color you were. (Laughter) You could be green.

GB: You act up, you got paddled.

KB: Yeah.

MB: During this time, were there a lot of whites going to East?

GB: Yeah.

KB: It was predominantly white.

MB: Only a few blacks.

KB: Yeah, there was a few blacks.

GB: More and more and more blacks went to South and Rayen.

KB: You could not say there was prejudice. You could not see it. It was an undercover thing. You did not get called on as much, or if I did not like you, you got called on all the time. You had better know. Now, I will tell you where I found prejudice. I went to Catholic school for three years. I had a teacher in the third grade, a nun in third grade. She did not like me, and she did not make no bones about it.

MB: Really?

KB: There was only five blacks in the whole school. Saint Columba's school used to be right there on the corner of Rayen and Elm Street. She did not like me. She did not like black folks at all, and she did not make no bones about it. I could never please her. She would never come out and say, "I do not like you." We used to have to do what they call a catechism, and had to answer these questions every morning. Everybody else got them little easy questions like, "Who was Jesus?" I would get like, "Who was Frances of Assisi's brother's cousin?" [laughter] Never could please this woman. I never could get above a C in her class.

MB: Did it leave any effects on you? Did it bother you?

KB: No. I do not think I was really aware of prejudice until, technically, I went to YSU. That is where I began to really see prejudice. Because I lived in a mixed neighborhood, I was raised in a mixed neighborhood, and it was never something that maybe because I never went outside of my neighborhood that much. So, I really was not aware of how much prejudice there was.

GB: YSU was prejudice, too, a whole lot.

KB: They still are. [laughter]

GB: For the Catholics, I know one kid that used to go to . . . What is that one up there?

KB: Sacred Heart?

GB: No. Up there off of Wick.

KB: Ursuline?

GB: Ursuline. I knew a couple colored kids that went there. One was football. That is the only one. Then I knew another one that went there. He was the coach's son, Nick Johnson. He went to Ursuline. There was not too many coloreds going to Catholic schools.

KB: There again, subtly, the cost.

MB: Okay.

KB: That is what kept the blacks out. The only reason I got to go is because they changed the school districts, and where I lived at, I would have had to go out into the Monkey Nest to that school out there. My mother was like, "No, we are not

sending you out there." [laughter] So, I ended up going to Catholic school. Again, it was the cost that kept where only certain people could get to go.

MB: What was your first adult occupation after you finished school and all that? Do you remember your first job when you got out of school?

GB: Yeah. Wilcox Scrap Yard down on Wilson Avenue, that was my first money-paying job.

MB: How about you, Mrs. Bowers?

KB: I worked in the grocery store. That was my first job. Then, I went to doing housekeeping. I worked out in Boardman for this woman. Her husband was a court reporter, and I worked out there. I had day jobs in that area.

MB: How were you treated by these ladies?

KB: I was treated good by them. I had no problem. The one that I worked for, she did not like housekeeping. I will put it like that. She was her husband's secretary. Her words to me was, "Do the house just like it was yours because I cannot stand housekeeping." None of them were . . . I only had one, and I only worked for her a week. It was not her. It was her husband. Again, subtlety. That is the big difference between the South and the North. South let you know where you stood. North, they did it in, say throw the rock, hide the hand.

I worked for this lady. I came in, and I did the laundry and ironed. I would scrub the kitchen floor, and I had scrubbed the floor and waxed it. She had three little boys. This one, he come in there, and he was walking across the floor. I told him, "Do not do that. That floor is waxed. You are going to fall." So, he goes in there, and his dad is sitting in the room saying, "You can go in there if you want to go. This is your house. You can go in there and slide on the floor if you want to go. Go on in there and do it. Go on if you want." So, he come to the door, and he is standing there. He is looking at me because he is not too sure whether he should come in there or not. I stopped what I was doing, and I went in there and told him. I said, "You are right. This is your house. He can go in there and break his neck if he wants to. I only told him do not come in there because . . . " He was one of them that, again, he never came directly and said anything to me, but he would talk to his children loud enough for me to hear it. So, I quit. I only worked there for about a week or two. The other ones I never had any problem working with. I have got to say only when I go to the university. [Laughter] I had bad encounters.

MB: How long did you work there?

KB: I worked at the university 31 years.

MB: Okay.

KB: That is where I ran into prejudice. When I first got hired, I was in the janitorial department. We scrubbed floors and washed the black boards and cleaned the classrooms and things. When I first went there, there was no problem. Then when the state took over, we got these bosses in. It was time for somebody to get promoted. They offered this lady the job, and she turned it down because they were trying to get the union in at that time. She was connected with this woman who was bringing in the union. Then, they offered me the job, and I took it, which was head housekeeper, which means I no longer did the work. I just went around and checked to see that the work got done. That is where the first stuff started because there were women that had been there much longer than me. I have literally heard them say, "I am not taking no orders from no nigger." These women became my best friends afterwards. It was there because they felt like who was I that I should be giving them orders. Once they got to know me, once they began to see how I operated, then I had no problem out of these women.

Then, the time came there was this white women, there was myself, and there was a colored man. I had taken GED tests to finish high school, and I had started taking business management at the university. This other lady, she finished the seventh grade at school or something like that. Anyhow, they told us, "We are going to give you a year's trial, and one of you three will be the head boss, " because the head boss was going on days. Now I had the seniority. I had the education. I had the background. When the time came, they gave it to this white woman.

MB: Really?

KB: They did not say why. It is just that that is the way it is. I had seven children. I had no idea how to fight them, so there was nothing I could do. They made her the head boss. They made me the assistant. This went on for 22 years. They tried to fire me. On day turn, folks went wherever they wanted to. They would be downtown shopping. As a matter of fact, there was this man who had this huge accident. [Tape stopped] Besides, all these people are gone now. This is beforehand. Anyway, I had class at night, and I had taken his car to go to school. Now, I got out of school, and I am like, "I got to go home and switch cars because he has got to go to work in the morning." So I come home, and I did not leave right away. I was sitting here doing my homework and everything. They come by the house to see the car was there. They thought I was home in bed. [Laughter] In the meantime, I get up, and I go on back to work. They get back to the job. They call my boss and tell him to call here. They are going to make it back here to be sitting out there watching me jump up and run out of the house and catch me. Well, I was already back on campus by that time.

Anyhow, when it all went down I had to go to this hearing. Hugh Frost was the affirmative action boss then. Before they could do anything they had to

go to him first. We had a hearing. Everybody comes in with their little, "You do this. You are not doing this. You have been doing this." But, nobody could prove. Number one, my boss came in with, "Well, I told you that if you were leaving this campus that you would be in trouble. Nobody was supposed to leave the campus." I said, "I was not leaving the campus. When I left the campus that time, it was to change cars. That was all." When it ended up, they were going to push it through. They wanted to dock me for I do not know how much time, and then demote me so that I went back into the custodian crew.

Hugh Frost, when he began to examine all this stuff, he wanted to know how this woman got this job over me in the first place. They tried to push him. "We are just going to head on. You have to go ahead and sign these papers." He [said], "No, I do not have to sign nothing. We will take it up with the president." They went to the president with it, and that was the last I heard of it. Everything just was like, "If you do not say nothing, we will not say nothing." [laughter] In the aftermath of it all when the man on day turn quit, they put me on days as the head boss. I ended up just where I was supposed to be. If I had got the original promotion . . . When I got ready to quit, I was right where I was supposed to be. Show you what the Lord can do for you if you be patient. [laughter] Then, they were afraid that I was going to sue them when I got ready to quit because they were asking me, "Well, how do you feel about it?" It is like no because I found that it was not just the prejudice. It really was not the prejudice that held me back. When I say the Lord knew what he was doing, it was literally through His doing because I was not ready for that job. I did not realize it until after I got the promotion that I was supposed to get. He used them to hold me back.

MB: To get you prepared.

KB: To get me prepared because I was not prepared to deal. Once I got that promotion, I had to deal with the president of the university. I had to deal with vice presidents. I had to deal with the money, people that were bringing the money into the university. I have had to even deal with the governor of the state. So, I had to have a completely different change of attitude. That is what changed it because I was not ready to go on day turn because I had a mouth, which you can see. You said something that I did not like, I told you what I thought without thinking. Had they put me up there, I would have been fired. [laughter]

MB: But you can handle it now.

KB: Yeah.

MB: That is good.

KB: Yeah. I got that, like I said. When I say about the university being prejudice, I

do not mean that every segment of the university is prejudice because some of the best friends I have had up there were white. I will put it this way. What ever you are going to do if you got what it takes, if you have got the education, if you have got the know how . . . When I say education, I am not talking about no school education. I am talking about mother wit.

GB: Street sense.

KB: Right. That is it. Street sense. You know what you are doing, and you know that you know what you are doing. I do not care what color you are. You can make it because what I have found about white people is that, once they see that you know what you are talking about you can be green. They are willing to take your word. In fact, I can convince them better than I can some of my own folks now. [laughter]

MB: That is a great story.

KB: That is what happened. That was where my prejudice was because before then I never had a problem with it.

MB: So, you retired as the head.

KB: Yeah. I was right where I was supposed to be at head. In fact, if I had stayed, I would have went on into administrative management, which would have put me on a salary. Now, I probably would have had to fight for that job. But, had I stayed, that would have been the job I would have had.

MB: Did you enjoy your stay at YSU?

KB: I loved it.

MB: Really?

KB: I loved it. The people. That is what I say about the learning the different nationalities because there were Slovaks and Italians, Ukrainians.

GB: Colored folk.

KB: Yes. You have got to learn the different recipes, some of the languages, some of the stories that you read in history books about the concentration camps. Some of the these people had lived in the concentration camps, and I got to hear, first hand, the stories that they told just to survive. There was this one Russian man. He was born here, but his family took him back over there when the strike was going on. He almost could not get back here to the United States. There was some fascinating stories up there, and the people were nice. They

had their own way.

MB: Overall, you had kind of a great experience.

KB: I had a great time. Yeah.

MB: Mr. Bowers, you said you worked at Republic Steel. How was your experience there?

GB: It was an experience. You had to be learning and know your job and know the jobs in order to get promoted, know how to do stuff.

MB: Was it easy for a black person to advance in Republic Steel?

GB: No, not at all. They kept you out of the highest paying jobs, although they were not the best jobs in the world. That little clique kept you from coming in until they clamped down on them. Then, you was allowed to work in the better paying jobs. Then, you was allowed to work at all these other steel jobs. They had to give you the chance. I know what I did in order to advance myself. I would go around. I had a burning job, and I could go around. I did not have that much to do. I could go around. "You want to go off a spell? Show me your job." So, I learned their jobs. Well, I did not know that the foreman had been watching, and I had learned about three or four different jobs while I was burning. I had learned how to operate the machinery and set it up and everything. So, vacation time comes. I get moved into the spot. Now, my own people been there before I got there had been working on these other jobs which was lower paying, and they did not get the job. They went to the union and complained on me.

MB: The blacks did?

GB: Yeah. Them are not white folks doing this here. There was one told me, he said, "I know what you are doing, and I am not going to show you nothing." I said, "You do not have to show me. I watched you long enough to know your job." Anyhow, I let the rest of them go on a spell, and I learned their jobs. When summer come, they scheduled me on these jobs. My own folks is the ones that pulled me back down then turn around to make it bad. I had to learn them, the duty jobs. I said, "Well, I will be doggone." I do not know what just was holding me back. It looked like something was just saying, "I am not going to let you go." Eventually, I wound up with a top job before I left there. I wound up a heater before I left.

MB: How was the union? How did the union treat you?

GB: The union was something else. I did not join the union. I never have joined the union. But, my own folks signed my name and sent a card in. That is how I got

in the union.

MB: Were they sensitive to your needs, though, to blacks that worked at Republic Steel?

GB: Not hardly. They are half and half.

MB: I heard stories about when blacks went to Republic Steel, or different steel mills, that they were kind of held back anyway. When they entered the steel mill, they labeled them as unskilled workers.

GB: They labelled you as a laborer. First thing when I got hired, I got hired as a laborer. They had a labor gang, all the menial jobs and the low paying jobs like cleaning out the furnaces and all that stuff. They had a few good paying jobs over there. They had blast furnace, which nobody wanted. They did not want them jobs, so they gave them to the blacks. They were pretty good jobs, pretty good paying. They was killing jobs, galvanized.

MB: They were not safe jobs.

GB: No, they were not.

RB: Hazardous jobs.

GB: Hazardous jobs. Anyhow, they was pretty good paying jobs. Machine operating and stuff like that, you had a heck of a time getting on them machine operating jobs.

MB: Those were the cleanest safest jobs?

GB: Yeah. Operating the coiler, the shears, the man that operated the tilt tables, and the man that calculated the steel that was going through bringing down the gauge of the steel. Them jobs you did not get.

RB: The reason they gave them to them in the end is they knew the mill was closing. Like everything, you are the last to get the job, you are going to get fired in the end. My dad, he did not make steel wages until the mill was just about ready to close. Then, they gave it to him.

GB: I had to fight this here one guy. Now, I bidded on the job. Nobody else bidded on this job. This guy was younger than me, but he previously had been a heater up in the Strip Mill. He came up to the Bar Mill. They tore my bid up. I had bidded on the job, but they tore the bid up and said I did not bid on the job. I said, "What happened? I know I bidded on the job." The union was not no help then.

MB: This was the head people who tore up your bid?

GB: Yeah. One of the foremen.

MB: Okay. In the steel mills, how did they work? [tape stopped]

GB: You did not have no colored formen, and you did not have no colored management. They kind of haphazardly give you. Then if you are caught too much, your butt got some cut or you got fired. In them days, it was not nothing for you to leave one mill this morning and go to the next one and get hired at another in the afternoon. Jobs was plentiful, good around. Then when it started to slow down, I remember when they started laying off. The lowest man on the rung had to go first. I can remember when I got laid off there one time, and I got babies. I need a job. You could not go down to welfare. Welfare would not give you nothing. So, I worked as I could, lumber yard, anywhere I could make a dollar to keep my family going.

MB: Were there many strikes? Did you have to go through any strikes?

GB: There were quite a few strikes down through the years. Yeah. There were many strikes.

MB: Do either one of you remember blacks coming to Youngstown during this period?

GB: Yeah. During this period, a lot of them came out of the south. A lot of them came out of the south. When I was a kid, a lot of them came from down south. My family, a lot of them migrated here. As they say, the stopping off place was my aunt, Phyllis. The cousins, they saw what money they could make, so they came up. They came up. Then when they got their jobs, they sent back and got their families and brought their families here.

MB: Were they different? What were they like? Did they seem different than people who lived here?

GB: No.

MB: They were the same?

KB: Youngstown was not a sophisticated city. It was a city, but it was not sophisticated. It was made up of country people. That is what it was, country folks.

GB: Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia.

KB: Right. That is all you had around you. We were not exposed to a whole lot of

city things. Cities are always like, "Wow! We are in the city now." I think IT was 1953 before I ever saw a television set, and I was in Detroit. My aunt was like, "We will turn the T.V. on." "The what?" (Laughter) I was not exposed to those things. That was a modern convenience. Like I said, it was just a country town. It was a city, but it was a country city.

MB: Did you help these people out like at school? Did your family help the people that came from the south?

KB: Yeah.

GB: That was family oriented.

KB: Definitely family oriented.

GB: They came, and you helped them.

MB: Would they live with you sometimes?

GB: I told you that was the stop off point, Phyllis.

KB: His aunt's name is Phyllis.

MB: Okay.

GB: Stop off at Phyllis's. Then when you come through, you got your job, and then you got your place to stay. You stayed with Phyllis.

KB: That is the same thing with my family. After we got established here, then my uncle came here and got a job. In fact, two uncles came and got jobs here for a while. That was a standard thing. If you had a job and had a house, then when I had to come, I stayed with you.

GB: I stayed with you until I got on my feet.

KB: Right. When I would get on my feet, then it was time to send for somebody else. I have an aunt. There was 14 children. My aunt, she was the youngest. She wanted to be a nurse. So, the other 13 went to work, put money together, and sent her to school. That is how she got to be a nurse.

GB: They was more helpful than they are today. People was more helpful. I am talking about both white and black. White folks, some of them was dirt poor, too. They helped each other. It is not that way no more.

KB: It used to be like, if I cooked a pot of soup I sent some over to your house. It did

not matter what color you were. If somebody over here was Italian and they made bread today, they sent a loaf over here to me.

MB: In your neighborhood?

KB: In the neighborhood. If they had a garden, you did not run to no store. You went to the garden. "Miss So and So, I am picking tomatoes. Come on over here and get you some tomatoes. I am picking some beans. Come on over here and get you some beans. I got some cabbage over here." Everybody shared. If you were at my house and it was supper time, then you ate. It did not matter what color you were. You ate. If one of the women in the neighborhood got sick, the other women, whether you were black or white, went there. They raised the children, washed and ironed, cooked, cleaned house, whatever had to be done until you got back on your feet because as poor folks we did not have insurance like HMO. We did not have none of that stuff. So, you did not run to the hospital or the doctor every time something happened to you. When you got sick, your neighbors were there to pitch in for you. It was a neighborhood thing, especially this side of town because black and white was raised up right along together side by side.

GB: They still had their prejudice.

KB: They had their prejudice. They would call you a nigger. Do not get no mistake. They would call you a nigger in a minute.

GB: You called them a honky.

KB: You called them a honky and whatever and whatever. When Daddy got ready to whip, Daddy would whip all. He would whip the black, the white and then send you home. Then, that daddy would whip. In other words, you were a family within the community. You were a community, and that is the way you lived. It was not, "I am in my house. As long as my house is alright, I do not care about yours." That was not the way people did things.

MB: Everybody was kind of accepting.

KB: Right. They accepted. Now, they had their little gangs, and one gang from one side of town was not accepted on the other. If you wanted to get whipped, Sharon Line folks, you did not go out there on Sharon Line. They will tell you about getting whipped out there on Sharon Line and fighting out on Sharon Line. East side did not go on north side. North side did not get caught over here on the east side. They had the gangs. It is just that they did not fight with guns and whatever. They fought with fists, but the gangs were still there. I do not say that all the whole city was one big city of brotherly love because it was not, but the communities were.

MB: When they came, they kind of just melted.

KB: Right. You just melted right on in. You would say, "This is my cousin from so and so." "Oh, come on in." Because somewhere down the line there was another cousin at somebody else's house from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia so that people knew one another. They knew one another. That was one of the main reasons the people from the southern states began to come up here. Once they got on their feet, that was the whole idea. Send for somebody else and let them come on up here. It is something that you do not see now. You see more with the Arabs because that is what they do. The first place I worked was in the store, and that is what it was, an Arab store. There must have been 12 cousins or whatever living in one or two rooms over the store.

MB: Right.

KB: Now all of them have stores, and their families' families have stores. That is the way they did it, but black folks used to do that too.

MB: Mr. Bowers, did you grow up in a neighborhood that was mixed or was it all black?

GB: It was mixed. Center Street was plenty mixed.

RB: All ethnic groups are down there. Chinese, Puerto Ricans.

GB: Italians, Degos, Chinese.

RB: Because it was a stopping point.

GB: That whole east side area.

MB: Overall, at different places that you worked, do you think you were treated fairly or the same as any other group?

KB: I was after I got established. Like I said, I found out that you have to speak up for yourself.

GB: You had to fight for what you wanted.

KB: Right. You have to fight for what you want.

GB: Blacks had to fight harder than most of them.

KB: Like I said, there was a . . . We did not know nothing about that. You had some that were radical or what we considered radical. Most of the people in my

generation had no use for Martin Luther King because they felt he was stirring up trouble. "I do not know why that nigger does not go somewhere and sit down. He is just stirring them white folks up. They are not bothering us. Why should we bother them?" It was only after he died that people began to appreciate what he was trying to do for them.

MB: In Youngstown?

KB: In Youngstown, all over the United States. But yes, in Youngstown because before then . . .

RB: Afraid of change.

KB: Right. Folks did not go no where to hear him speak. If he came through Youngstown it was like, "So what? I do not know why that nigger is up here." Those were the words, "Why that nigger is here, no how. He is stirring up them white folks. They are not bothering us." It was like I said. As long as I was not having no trouble, then I do not want no problems because I stood to lose more than just an argument or something. I stood to lose everything I had because they controlled all I had. The money, if I wanted some money from the bank. Where ever I am going to get this money from, I had to go a white man to get it. Our food. Like I said, we did not run downtown to no store. So you had a little store in the neighborhood that that Jew owned.

GB: Serbian.

KB: A Serbian or whatever. He had that little book, so you did not have to have money every time you went to the store. You took that list and he would open up that little book and he would write down what you had bought. Then on pay day, you would have to go there and pay your bill for the food. The clothes, you had to go to the white man to get the clothes. Everything you had you had to go to that white man for it, besides the fact that you are working in his house. You are working on his job. I cannot go act foolish because I can lose everything because, like I said, they did not do it openly, just subtlety. "Well, we cannot give you no more credit." "Well, you owe so much and so much for food, so you are going to have to catch up this bill before you can get any more food." Those little subtle things, they could kill you.

MB: Right.

KB: So black folks learned to keep their mouth shut. Be seen and keep my mouth shut.

MB: In Youngstown, you do not feel that blacks were really involved in the civil rights struggle?

GB: Some of them.

KB: Some of them were.

MB: Was it like preachers or everybody who would come out?

GB: No.

KB: Some of the preachers would. I remember when Jesse Jackson came up to the Elks. There was not that many people up there. I mean, there was a room full of people but not . . .

GB: Overpowering.

KB: Not where you would run out there and say you could not get in there and all that. People were there.

MB: This is like the younger people?

KB: The younger people were more in tune to what was happening in their lives. We were taught to accept things as they are, whereas this generation is like, "No. Why? How come I got to do this?" It was a constant battle between us and them. For instance, when the riots were going on, I have five boys. Five boys together, black, together, meant trouble automatically. That white guy would drive down there and, "There is five black boys standing out there on the corner. Let us go back and see what is going on." I could not get that through their heads. "What do you mean? We are brothers. We are standing up." It was a constant battle because I am fearing for what they can do. They are like, "Well, if they do it, so what? We got a right." It was a constant battle going on.

MB: Between generations?

KB: Between generations.

MB: Okay.

KB: That is where generations began to pull apart. Up until then it was whatever my parents say. From my generation down, if Mama said it was raining outdoors, it was raining outdoors. I do not care how bright the sun was shining. Mama said it was raining, it was raining. Then when this generation come along, it was, "What do you mean it is raining out there? There is not no rain out there. You cannot see that it is not raining out there?" Then it went on and on and on and on, whereas in my household, my children were allowed to sit down and voice their opinion. They understood that Daddy had final say so, but they were allowed to voice their opinion. "I do not like this. I do not see how come this got

to be." Especially this one [indicating son, Rick]. "I do not like this."

RB: But, it was in a respectable way.

KB: Right.

RB: You knew your place as a child in the house, and then you would talk to your parents as a child, but in a respectful voice, and let them know exactly how you feel. That is how you become a man or a woman in life, letting somebody know how you feel instead of keeping it inside and accepting what somebody tells you.

KB: Especially when they began to get jobs. The stuff that we took on the job, "We are not taking that. No."

MB: They would not take it.

KB: "No, we are not taking that. You do not come tell me I got to sit there." Do not be arguing with the boss. "What do you mean? That is wrong." They all had good jobs, but what they had to say they just up and said. [Laughter] Like I say, that was where your generation gap started in the 1960's, because the job opened up for them. There were jobs opened up for them that we could not even think about getting.

RB: We knew our rights, whereas our parents did not know their rights. What was entitled to you in this country, we knew because we were more educated than our parents were. They stressed very much in our household education is the key to success in this country.

KB: And they were willing to give up. If it means that I cannot have such and such a thing right now, then I am willing to lose it, whereas we were not willing to. "I scuffled hard to get that. I am not going to jeopardize this just to say who is right and who is not."

MB: So you were more afraid of what could be done to you.

KB: What could be done to you because it was an overall picture that I was looking. Until you could become independent, I had to learn. You cannot tear nothing down outside. You have got to get inside of it. Everybody has their way of tearing things down, whereas you have all got that, "I am macho." I have found that by, getting inside and using education and con, a little con here, a little con there, I can get the same results. Now, it may take me a little bit longer, but I can get the same results.

MB: So your generation kind of wore masks, then?

KB: Right. That is what we wore. Now, it did not pay to push too far. When it got down to the point where I saw you was going to mess with my stuff anyhow, then it was like . . .

RB: The bottom fell out.

KB: Yeah, that is right.

RB: Because they need us more so than we need them because we are the ones that make the money for them.

MB: So they kind of needed blacks to work those hazardous jobs in steel mills and different things like that.

KB: Yeah. Nobody else was going to do it. That is why they brought us over here in the first place, because they did not want to pick that cotton.

GB: No, they did not want to pay.

KB: Right. They did not want to pay nobody else to pick it. Then they could not stand the heat, the temperature, the climate and stuff. They could not stand it being out there. When that cotton come ripe, it has got to be picked, and it does not matter whether it is 110 degrees or it is 50. You have got to get out there. So we have got to find somebody that we can put out there and they have not got no choice but to go. So we take them out there. It has always been the same thing. If I do not want to do a job, give it to the black folks. Let them do it.

GB: I will tell you what. You think it is any better today than it was then? Look at the economy situation today. What are they doing? What they want? It started back then. "I want cheap labor, and I want a higher price for my commodity." You can go all the way back down through history. They want cheap labor, and they do not care who do it, you see, because they used to bring them over here from England.

RB: Ireland.

GB: Wait a minute. England, Ireland, Germany, wherever. They brought them over here for cheap labor. The rich man did not care who did it, just as long as he did not have to pay too much for it and he could profit from it.

KB: You are right. That is still going on today.

RB: That is still going on today.

KB: There again, when you talk about that earning money, that is where I say where

the black man with an education has the advantage because that rich man, if he see where you can make him some money, he do not care what color you are. That is how you get where you want to be. Learn what has to be. What is it that he wants? How can I earn him some money and in the process earn me some, too? That is how you get ahead. I used to get after them when they could get, "Black power. I am black, and I am proud." You are black and cannot help it. You did not have anything to do with being black. (Laughter) That was your mom and daddy. You can only be black and proud if you are doing something that you can be proud of. Standing on the corner with your fists up, that is nothing to be proud of.

Like I said, I got into some big debates because at that time I was also going to school at the university. I never will forget. I had walked up four flights of steps in the engineering building, and I come in the room. I sat down in the chair. Some kid that graduated from school with my kids, he had his foot across this thing. I am like, "Boy, get your foot out of the way." He is like, "Boy?" I am like, "Look, I did not mean no harm. Right now I am tired, and as far as I am concerned, boy, because I got sons older than you." [laughter] They were the same way. I would say something about, "Boy, you had better go." They were like, "Boy? Boy?"

RB: I become a man.

KB: Then I would have to break it down, "Well, son, let me show you it takes more than a pair of pants to make you a man." Then we would get into that discussion. Like I said, we had just two different outlooks.

MB: Overall, do both of you feel that your parents did the right thing by coming to Youngstown? Has Youngstown been good for you?

KB: Yeah.

GB: That has nothing to do with it. [laughter] I am going to tell you something. Let me tell you something like I would tell anybody. Look, I had no influence on Daddy, and I had no influence on Mama. They did what they wanted to do. I did what I wanted to do. So it did not make no difference. As far as living in this society, I lived in the society. I learned to accept what society was about including, from work, religion, and raising a family. The best thing that I can tell you is religion won out over all of them.

KB: As far as Youngstown is concerned, there is something about Youngstown, because I lived in Detroit. I went to school in Detroit, and I could not wait to get back to Youngstown. I was up there for three years. Like I said, maybe it was the community, and maybe it was the way people treated you and all that kind of stuff. I preferred Youngstown.

GB: It was not too bad. It had bad moments and its bad points. But still, out of all of it, I say Youngstown is one of the best places and still yet, as far as living.

KB: Yeah. People were friendly. There was a time, like if you were on your way downtown and you were walking down the street, they would stop like, "You going downtown? Come on." They did not know you.

MB: Was this black people?

GB: Black people, white.

KB: Black, white people. Anybody.

GB: If they knew you, they would tell you, "Come on."

KB: Yeah. "Come on."

GB: Now you are scared.

KB: If you were out somewhere and you were on your way home, like bar close-up, "You live on Sunset? Come on. I am going that way." And no strings attached.

RB: They all lived in the same part, the poor part.

KB: Right. We were all poor. No one had anything to steal. Folks did not lock doors and all that kind of stuff, like if I was going somewhere, because we still do that in this neighborhood.

GB: Except for locking your doors. You lock them up tight. (Laughter)

KB: I mean like if we are going out of town or going away somewhere we tell them, "I will be gone tomorrow. I am going the weekend." When she gets ready to go out of town, "I will be out of town for the weekend." This one over here, she is getting ready to go out, "We will be gone for a couple days." So everybody watches everybody else's house which does not mean nothing because folks still come in when they get ready, and they never see them when they come in.

When he was in the hospital and I used to have to come home, I would come home like about 9:00, 9:30 at night. They both would hear me. They would be listening out for me when I come home. They even got my mail out of the mailbox, got the paper off the porch, and they would check in. If they did not come over, they would call on the phone, "Are you home? I was just calling to see if you were home now." That is the way it has always been.

MB: So Youngstown, overall, has been good to you even with all the problems.

KB: Right, right.

GB: Even with all the problems. There are not too many problems any how in Youngstown, except for them people stealing all the money down there.

KB: Well, they have been doing that all along. [laughter]

MB: Well, this is the end of the interview. I thank you all very much. It has been a fantastic, fantastic interview. Thank you.

End of Interview