Charles Butler

Date: March 11, 1997
Interviewer: Phyllis Boeddinghaus
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, March 2006 and Laura Cubbage-Draper, April 2019
Editor: Jennifer Warren, October 2019

Abstract: Charles Lee Butler (1931-2007), often referred to as "Charlie" or "Charley," was the youngest of nine children born to Marion and Parthenia Butler. Born and raised in Metuchen, Mr. Butler graduated from Metuchen High School in 1949 before entering the military and serving in the Navy during the Korean War. Mr. Butler was the 1952 All-Navy light heavyweight boxing champion and spent his formative years training at the Metuchen YMCA. In 1951, Mr. Butler lost a controversial decision to become the Eastern boxing champion of the Golden Gloves tournament; this controversial match became local news in Metuchen. Mr. Butler worked as a corrections officer at Rahway Prison and he was an active member of the New Hope Baptist Church, the Metuchen YMCA, and the Bethany Masonic Lodge in Newark (part of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of State of New Jersey).

During this interview, Mr. Butler discusses his early childhood experiences in Metuchen, his education, his boxing career, his military service, as well as his experiences as a corrections officer at the Rahway Prison and his involvement with Freemasonry. Mr. Butler also touches upon the racial discrimination he experienced during his life both locally and nationally.

Interview note: The background noises on the recording are a renovation project going on at the Metuchen Senior Citizen Center.

P. Boeddinghaus: [recording begins mid-sentence] … contains an oral history done under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society. The date is Tuesday, March 11, 1997 and Charlie Butler is being interviewed by Phyllis Boeddinghaus at the Metuchen Senior Citizen Center on [15] Center Street in Metuchen. [recording paused]

Good morning Charlie and thank you so much for coming this morning to chat with me and do an oral history, and it's going to be very informal. So, let's start with your genealogy. You already mentioned to me that you were born in Metuchen.

C. Butler: **Yes, I was born in Metuchen on 292 Central Avenue–that's the corner of Central Avenue and Midland [Avenue]. Part of my family was born in New Jersey and part of my family was born in Florida. My father–who died in 1941, May the twelfth–was much older than my mother. In those days, you know, my**

mother was married when she was fifteen years old and my father was much older.

It was such a coincidence now–I was telling a friend of mine–my father used to live in Rosewood, Florida where they have the movie out now called *Rosewood*. And when I was a child around nine and ten years old, my father was a mason and I know that people used to come to the house and do the handshake and I was a little kid, I used to watch it, and my father used to tell me how in 1923 there was a bad riot in Rosewood. In fact, my brother Marion, who is my oldest brother, was born in Florida; he'll be eighty-two years old, April the seventeenth. My brother Marion can remember my mother hiding him, my sister Thelma, my sister Atlein, and my brother Ekker in the well from the riot, you know, the [Ku Klux] Klan and everything. And if you see this movie, it tells you. It's out in the theater now called *Rosewood.* It's a little town; it was a little black community in Florida and it was overrun by the whites in 1923 because of the movement started. And I told my brother about it. He was very upset because the movie really wasn't true to what happened. But it did tell a story. I remember my father always telling that he was a mason and he was saved by–there were some white masons that hid him in a horse and buggy and took them out to another town in Florida and they made their way to Jacksonville [Florida], and from there my family came up to Newark.

P. Boeddinghaus: So you're saying that's the Masonic Order, the lodge–

C. Butler: **Masonic Order, yeah**

P. Boeddinghaus: And there are two groups, the black group and the white group?

C. Butler: **Well, right now they are more together.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Integrated?

C. Butler: **Yes, they are. But in other states, they're–is this still on? [referring to the tape]**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, do you want it off?

C. Butler: **No, I'll tell it like it is.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah.

C. Butler: **In other states, in fact in thirteen or fourteen states, black and white masons are together. We are bound together. We visit their lodge, they visit our lodge. In fact in my lodge, Bethany Lodge [No. 31] in Newark, we have white brothers. There are white members. We don't call them members, we call them brothers. That's where they're all brothers.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You had mentioned to me that you belonged to the lodge.

C. Butler: **Color has nothing to do with Masonry. We're brothers. But I hate to say it, and New Jersey still has that racist mentality and there are the white lodges and the black lodges. I don't blame it on the white lodge; I don't blame it on the black**

lodge. But I think one day they may get together. And what makes it so ridiculous is we all read out of the same book, the same ceremony, same words, same passwords–everything the same.

P. Boeddinghaus: Can you see if it's going around? [referring to the tape]

C. Butler: Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, I just want to make sure I get all this. Great.

C. Butler: So Masonry leaves a lot to be desired in New Jersey. Now I can go to a little state like Connecticut, and I can go into the white lodges; they come into my lodges. Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], other–you know. So it's just New Jersey has yet to want to recognize that Prince Hall is an authentic masonic group. I'm a Prince Hall mason.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then your father was saved by [a mason]?

C. Butler: My father, who was a mason, was also saved by a white mason in the South. And if you see this movie [*Rosewood*], you will see a lot of Masonry in this movie. Masonry is the oldest fraternity I guess there is. It goes back to King Solomon.

P. Boeddinghaus: I know Jack's [Jack Boeddinghaus, interviewer's husband] father was very active in the masonic and in the Shriners.

C. Butler: I'm very active myself in the clubhouse.

P. Boeddinghaus: You've always mentioned that to me when we talked, yes.

C. Butler: I enjoy it.

P. Boeddinghaus: So then your parents migrated north?

C. Butler: My parents came up to Newark, and then they moved to Metuchen. And my family [has] been in Metuchen, I guess–well I was born here, and I'll be sixty-six April the fourth and they were here before then. So, my parents at least seventy, seventy-five years in Metuchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: And what did your father do for a living?

C. Butler: My father was always sick. I remember my father was much older than my mother and he was always sick. But my mother did day's work. She worked for a family on [661] Middlesex Avenue called Ms. [Ida] Brown. I used to remember Ms. Brown–Mr. & Mrs. [Aaron] Brown, a real nice family. And then she also worked on [431] Main Street for a Chinese laundry called Leon Chin Hand Laundry. My mother worked there.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was her name Sunny?

C. Butler: No, Parthenia. My mother's name was Parthenia, like the actress.

P. Boeddinghaus: Because you had mentioned that you cut grass at the Molineux's and I thought they had a lady there too.

C. Butler: **No. I cut grass all over Metuchen. I cut grass, delivered groceries, delivered ice before people now who are rich and got refrigerators; those same people used to have iceboxes. And I used to deliver their ice when I was nine, ten years old–deliver ice. And I used to work like at Costa's Ice Cream Company right here on [16] Pearl Street. Costa's had the best ice cream in New Jersey. We used to sell ice. I used to sell ice with my brother Marion, who also worked there. My brother Marion worked the night shift, and I used to come down and stay with him. Sometimes he would bring us ice cream home and we'd be so cold because at the time, we didn't have a refrigerator and we couldn't keep the ice cream. We couldn't save it, so we had to eat it. So we'd get up one, two o'clock in the morning and we would eat ice cream. It was part of growing up that the kids nowadays will never, never experience. Children today have so much given to them that they're missing out, missing out on so much. Things I have experienced, they will never experience.**

I had a friend of mine, I remember, I had a sister that worked for a family in–I think it was Lester's–but anyway, he gave me [an] electric train and I took the electric train home, but I couldn't use it because we didn't have electric at the time. I'd used to just push it around the track, push it around the track.

P. Boeddinghaus: And like make believe.

C. Butler: **Yeah, make the sounds–make believe. When you don't have television, your mind works more. Television destroys the mind because it does everything for you. When you have a radio, you can put your mind to work. Because what you hear, like *The Shadow, The Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger*, you can put that in your mind and you can make it anything you want to make it and your mind is constantly working. In those fifteen minutes that program is on, your mind is working. For the fifteen minutes that's on the TV [television], you're laying there sleeping or just looking at something. It means nothing.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So, did you have a happy childhood growing up in Metuchen?

C. Butler: **Oh, of course I did. I had six sisters and two brothers. And number one, I never, <u>never</u> in my life heard my mother and father say one curse word or have one argument. Never. <u>Never</u>. I never heard my father use profanity. I never seen my mother and my father argue. I was the youngest out of nine children and I never seen that. We had a close family. I only have one sister left out of six, but we had a beautiful family and I had a beautiful childhood.**

We were–I can say now–we were poor. You know, I can say we were poor. But I'll tell you this, back in 1930s, a lot of people were poor, believe me. You know, you had to go down to the relief. Now that's called welfare, then they called it relief. See now they give you money, those days they used to give you food. And my brother and I used to go to town, go behind the stores and get the boxes and use them for wood, and get the old fruit and vegetables. Go behind Dessel's [Metuchen Fruit & Vegetable Market] and get some of that fruit they used to put out for us or go to the bakery. There used to be a bakery on Hillside Avenue

and Main Street, and we used to get the day-old–they used to have boxes of day-old cake and bread. It was beautiful growing up there.

P. Boeddinghaus: And then your mother would make something out of it.

C. Butler: **Yeah. And then we lived on [301] Durham Avenue–there was the Eossos. There was Tommy Eosso [Thomas Eosso] on one side and Pat [Pasquale Eosso] on the other side. And my mother would cook rolls on Sunday, and my mother would give them hot rolls and they would give us spaghetti and milk or things that were left over. We'd exchange food like that. It was truly a neighborhood. We lived in a neighborhood. I don't know if you call it a neighborhood now. Some people don't even know their neighbors and live together ten, fifteen years.**

P. Boeddinghaus: That's true. So then did you go to Franklin School?

C. Butler: **I went to Franklin School in kindergarten. I had a beautiful teacher named Ms. Wittnebert, who I think about so often. She lived right down the street there where Wayne[1] Street comes in on Middlesex Avenue. She lived on [561] Middlesex Avenue, next to Pearl Street.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember the house.

C. Butler: **Ms. Wittnebert; she had beautiful white hair and she was so sweet to me. I always remember Ms. Wittnebert. She used to always give me extra graham crackers and extra milk. Ms. Wittnebert, that's my kindergarten teacher and I'll never forget.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So you went through the school system?

C. Butler: **I went from kindergarten to twelfth grade right in Franklin High School. I graduated in 1949. And then most of my buddies–I remember in 1949, they joined the Marine Corps. I had a good friend of mine I played football with, Tommy Peake [Thomas Peake] and Lester Regitz; they joined the Marine Corps. And then when the Korean War broke out, I joined the Navy. And my friend Tommy Peake was killed. Tommy Peake–he had a twin sister named Marilyn Peake; we all went to school together.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So that was, what, in the 1950s?

C. Butler: **The Korean War came in June 1950 and he was killed in–Tommy and I played football together. We were in the same class, graduating class. He lived in Menlo–he lived in Clara Barton section. But at that time, you know Clara Barton and Potters Crossing and New Market, they all came to Metuchen High School.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Right. I lived in Clara Barton and I came in to Metuchen by bus.

C. Butler: **When Tommy got killed, I went into the Navy. But back before then, I used to hang out at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. And so Mr. Harry**

[1] He possibly means William Street.

Williams was director of the Y. When I was boxing, he talked me into going in the Golden Gloves. So in 1950, I went into the New Jersey Golden Gloves, and I went to the finals and I lost the decision in the finals to a fellow from New Brunswick named Dennis Cronin. We were novices, you know just beginners. And then next year, I went in the Golden Gloves again. I fought the same fellow in finals and I beat him this time. And then I went to New York City to fight what was the Eastern [District] Championship from Florida to Massachusetts. We all had a big tournament and I did very well in that tournament. I had a lot of knockouts and I fought in the finals in Madison Square Garden; we fought twice in one night. And I remember the semifinals, I remember when I knocked this fellow out, I looked down, I see some of my Metuchen–I don't know if you know Bill Sheehy [William Sheehy]? He used to have the sweet shop?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes. He's passed away.

C. Butler: **God rest his soul, he's passed away. Bill Sheehy, I'll never forget him. Bill Sheehy, Frank Lankey, Bobby Heroy [Robert Heroy] and some of the other fellows had come to Madison Square Garden when I was fighting the Golden Gloves. And I lost a very unpopular decision at that time, which I thought I won the fight, which a lot of people did, but I lost it. And we went to Bear Mountain [New York] to train, and I was working at the time at Freedman Motor Services [at 19 Pearl Street], the trucking company at the parking facility. And I really couldn't afford to leave, to take the time off, two weeks up in Bear Mountain to train. So anyway Mr. Stockel–you know Mr. Stockel?**

P. Boeddinghaus: John Stockel.

C. Butler: **John Stockel Sr. He was a heck of a man. He approached me and gave me an envelope with some money in it and I could afford to take the two weeks off. And I trained and he flew me to Chicago [Illinois], and we had a good–you know. And then after that, I went into the service and I kept fighting. First of all, they put us on a ship that took us out, that went to sea, but then I started fighting. Then you win one district, you win another district, and then I got temporary duty to Maryland, and I won a tournament, and I won the All-Navy in San Diego, California. There's a big tournament they have–the East fights the West–and I won the All-Navy. And then they trained us, they took all fighters–all the service fighters–they took us to Annapolis [Maryland], where we trained under Spike Webb and we trained for the Olympics, the 1952 Olympics. And I fought up in Albany, New York, which I won that tournament. And then they took us out to–we fought in the finals out in Kansas City, Missouri. We stayed in Kansas City, Kansas, but we fought in Kansas City, Missouri. And I fought about four times, and I fought twice in one night. I fought another Navy guy, who I had beat twice previously. And I beat him, but I broke my hand on his head. But I had to fight again, I had to fight a fellow named Chuck Spieser, and he beat me. He beat me and they had to stop the fight. I couldn't finish myself.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Because you were injured.

C. Butler: **And I lost my big chance of going the Olympics. Had I won that fight, I would have been in the [19]52 Olympics. And I couldn't even go as an alternate because I had a cast on my hand, and I was still in the Navy.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes.

C. Butler: **And they flew me back to Maryland. We were down in Annapolis, I had some friends of mine from–they were Marines and they had been to Korea. A professional black fellow named Jesse Barber–he was a good fighter. He was also a light heavyweight, and he had got wounded in Korea and frostbitten. So, one day all of us guys, we wanted to go to a movie in Annapolis. We went to town to go to a movie, and they wouldn't let us in unless we sat upstairs. So Jesse and all these guys–we had all been in the military and in combat, and we were very upset that we come back to our own country and couldn't go to a movie. So we went back to the academy. At that time, the academy had all black stewards, and very seldom you saw a black enlisted–I mean a black military officer, you know a cadet. And you know, to make it so–at that time–to make it so unbelievable, my son graduated from the military academy [United States Naval Academy]. He was in the Honor Company in 1983, and he's a lieutenant commander now. And I think a first for Metuchen, is two brothers' sons graduated from military academies. Because my brother Ekker, his son graduated from West Point in 1977, and he is a lieutenant colonel. And my son graduated from Annapolis in the Class of 1983, and he's a lieutenant commander. I think that's a first for Metuchen for brothers' children to graduate from the military academies.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Just a little quick P.S. [postscript], Mr. Williams, Harry Williams, is still living. I deliver Meals on Wheels to him on Mondays in Redfield Village.

C. Butler: **You don't have his phone number, do you?**

P. Boeddinghaus: No, I know his address–I could look it up to you–at Redfield Village.

C. Butler: **I appreciate it. I'd like to call him because Mr. Williams and I were very close at the time when I was fighting. He traveled with me to Newark.**

[responding to muffled interviewer's question] Oh yes, he stayed with me all the way, Mr. Williams. He's a good man.

P. Boeddinghaus: He still smokes his pipe.

C. Butler: **Yes, his pipe. Still combs his hair over, try to hide the bald part because he doesn't have any hair to comb over. Good man, Mr. Williams**

P. Boeddinghaus: So you traveled all over with the boxing and with the Navy?

C. Butler: **Oh yeah. When I was in the Navy, we traveled in the admiral's plane. In 1954, we fought for the President at Quantico, Virginia. I got President [Dwight] Eisenhower's autograph, I got Vice President [Richard] Nixon's autograph, I got Secretary of Defense Charles E. Lewis[2], I got Admiral [Arthur William] Radford, Admiral [Robert B.] Carney, Admiral [Frank Jack] Fletcher, General**

[2] He possibly means Secretary of Defense Charles Erwin Wilson.

Lewis–he was in the Marine Corps commandant–and I got those. In fact, I was offered some money for that one time.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, they are probably more meaningful to you.

C. Butler: **I still have them. But it was nice. And I met some friends of mine who I hadn't seen–well, I talked to them by telephone–who I hadn't seen since about 1952–servicemen, you know, we used to fight. One's in Springfield, Massachusetts and I met Jesse Barber. I went to Acapulco, Mexico on vacation and I was walking out of the elevator and we bumped into each other. He did twenty years in the Marine Corps, then retired.**

P. Boeddinghaus: When did you retire from the Navy?

C. Butler: **I got out of the Navy in 1955. Then I fought professional, and had one professional fight. And then I had a family. I was married and I had a family. The trainer–I mean, my manager–he took a third of my purse and you know, it wasn't that much money and I went back to my job. I went back to my job.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Which was what at that time?

C. Butler: **Freedman Motorcycles. I had that job before I went. And then I took the test for New York City Police Department. Then I took the [New Jersey] State Police [test] and I took the Department of Corrections in Metuchen, and I had problems with Metuchen at the time. You know some racial problems in Metuchen, really. You know I was born in Metuchen and I was promised a job, but they didn't give it to me; some bad problems in Metuchen at that time. Metuchen's a nice town, but it had racial problems that people don't know about. That you won't know about it if you're not black. If you're white, you say this is a beautiful town. But if you're black, you felt the racial tension that was here. When the chief tells another officer, "As long as I'm chief, I'm never going to have a nigger on the police force," you know there's a problem. And that's what another officer told me, who was white, who's not on the force any more. And believe me, he [the chief] kept his word because I didn't get the job and twice, three times I took the test, and three times I came out–once I came out top, and twice I came–once I came out one, two, and three. And they hired above me and below me, for no reason because I was in perfect condition. I didn't drink, I didn't smoke, never smoked a cigarette in my life, never did drugs, never got in trouble, had good conduct from the military. I was born in this town, I knew everybody. I always remember when I went for an interview, a question Eddie Leiss [Edward Leiss, former police chief] asked me–it was so ridiculous. He asked me, he said, "Butler, if we let you in the force and you stay for a while, would you let yourself get fat?'**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh. [gasp]

C. Butler: **What kind of question is that to ask a man? I wouldn't even answer it. I wouldn't even entertain it. Am I fat? I go to the YMCA three days a week, I work out. So I knew then and there I wasn't getting the job. [laughs] So when doctor–doctor what's his name–he's a psychiatrist who used to live on [407] Middlesex Avenue?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Brancale?

C. Butler: **Dr. [Ralph] Brancale! God rest his soul. Good friend of mine. He said "Charlie." He gave me a note, he said, "Take this note to Rahway Prison. They need officers." He gave me the note, I went to Rahway Prison and they took my fingerprints and they hired me. They hired me and the pay wasn't much at the time. And then, in fact, our pay scale started to go up, up, up. Right now, we're about the third highest-paid law enforcement department in New Jersey. And I stayed there for thirty years. I made sergeant and I made some good friends around there and I thank Dr. Brancale. He has since passed away, but he was a good man and he got me into that law enforcement [unclear] prison [unclear] retired.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Just backing up a minute. To do that law enforcement, did you have to take classes?

C. Butler: **I had to go to the academy. We went to an academy. It wasn't a main academy like it is now. See now they have an academy where you have to go for four months and you really got to learn the law because when I first went into the Rahway Prison, we weren't allowed to carry guns off-duty. We were law enforcement officers, but we weren't allowed to carry guns. Then after a while–I stayed there for about ten years–then they passed a law where we could carry weapons and had State Police powers. Now when they did that, then we had to go to school, had to go to the range to learn how to fire a gun, we had go to the school to learn the law. That's what they're doing now. But in the beginning, you know, it was just–**

P. Boeddinghaus: You were more like a guard.

C. Butler: **Just a guard. In fact, we were in another department called the Department of the Institutions and Agencies. And then after we got our title as correction officers, we went to another title as Department of Corrections, and they gave us uniforms. We all had the same uniforms. Before we only had shirts and pants. Everybody wore a different coat, overcoat. Now they gave us uniform allowance and–I mean, the pay is good. When I retired in 1993 as a sergeant, I was making about $56,000 a year, plus overtime. I could make all the overtime. I could go up to $70,000 if I really wanted to because overtime. You know Rahway Prison–see they give the officers fifteen sick days a year, plus if you get hurt on the job, you get off. They pay you while you're off. There are always fights and officers get hurt, get hit with hot water or hot coffee or, you know–and there's always officers–if an officer is gone, he's got to be replaced. It takes eight officers to run mess hall. I cannot run it with seven. I cannot run it with six. That's the law. You know, eight. If mess is held up for an hour because of that one man, I got to hold up because if something happens and somebody gets hurt and there is a supervisor, they're going to ask me, "Why did I run the mess shorthanded?" You got to remember there's about 350 inmates, so if they want to take over, they can take over. The only advantage we have is that we know that help is always on the way. There's always help coming. Years ago, we always had the State Police to back us up. Now we have our own assigned unit. We have our own special unit for that.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And Rahway is maximum?

C. Butler: **Rahway is maximum security. But there are minimum security prisons around Rahway. In fact, there's a Rahway Camp, and that's minimum security. But they are basically maximum–a medium to maximum security prison.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I'm very naïve about all this.

C. Butler: **Trenton is the worst prison. Trenton is where they have the bad, incorrigibles, doing 100 years or seventy-five years and stuff like that.**

P. Boeddinghaus: What was that like for you to go to work every day? Did you feel frightened?

C. Butler: **Oh no. I had been in the military. I had worked in the prison in the military, so it didn't bother me. In 1971, I was detached to the State Police. See the State Police–we had a bad escape at one of our prisons. Five murderers had escaped and the State Police didn't have enough black troopers to go to the neighborhoods, like in Jersey City and Newark. So they got five black correctional officers and we were assigned to the State Police and we worked with them. We worked with two troopers and we caught all five. But I stayed with the State Police for about approximately two years. I just stayed there with them and worked–it was a learning experience.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did you entertain the thoughts of staying with them permanently?

C. Butler: **No, I couldn't. I was just temporary duty from the Department of Corrections. But it was a learning experience.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. And that you caught all five prisoners.

C. Butler: **The last guy we caught was Alfred Ravenell. They called him Alfred "Casanova" Ravenell. He was the originator of cutting heads off. He was one of the first black Muslims around that believed in cutting off heads. He said he believed if you cut a man's head off, he couldn't reach Mecca. And he had killed about twelve people. He was on death row twice and he escaped, and we looked for him in Newark [in 1972]. My buddy and I–Sergeant Bob [Robert J.] Santelli and the State Police–we were together for a while looking. And finally, a friend of mine got shot–John from Newark [possibly Anthony Spera], a Newark police officer. We were working in Newark and he got information that his [Ravenell's] girlfriend was babysitting. And actually when we went there, he [Ravenell] was there and two other fellows. And when the officer from Newark walked in, Ravenell shot him–shot him in the chest. And the bullet went right through and stayed in his collarbone, which he still has it. The trooper, from a guy named John Sempter [phonetic], shot Ravenell in the hand, but he never dropped the gun. He [Ravenell] went out the window and went over the roof and escaped. And then they really put a hunt on for him. And they got his girlfriend's sister. They questioned her and she told them where he was at. He was in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.**

So we went down there, Lieutenant Bill Miller and some of the troopers and myself–got traveling orders and we went down there. I know Lieutenant Miller

told the Pennsylvania lieutenant where this guy was and how dangerous he was, but the Pennsylvania state trooper wouldn't let us participate. He told us to stay in the background and that he would handle it. While we were going by this house, another trooper [Robert D. Lapp] ran out of the house, because I could see he was playing with two little boys. He ran out of the house, and he got into the car and then he went inside the house. He put a bulletproof vest on and they got on the bullhorn and told him [Ravenell] to come out and then threw some tear gas in there. And then he [Lapp] walked in there–I think it was street troopers from Pennsylvania–they went in there and we heard a gunshot and they started dragging him [Lapp] out. And Ravenell shot the trooper, shot him in the head with a shotgun right in the back of the neck and the bullet came out–back of the head, you know, the bullet–shot him in the neck and the bullet came out in the back of his head. And I have those pictures, a terrible thing. When they proceeded to fire in the house and killed him [Ravenell], I had to ID [identify] the body because I used to work with him. But it was unnecessary because had he [Pennsylvania lieutenant] listened to Lieutenant Miller, all this wouldn't have happened. And the fellow that got killed was the same trooper that was playing with the two little boys; he was off-duty, he volunteered to go in.

But I remember Ravenell. Ravenell was up at "Ad-Seg." It's a place in Rahway Prison on the fourth deck called "Administrative Segregation." That's where you put your worst prisoners. You separate them. Like in the morning, this half would go out in the yard; in the afternoon, this half would go out in the yard. And every time you go out, you have to strip frisk them and search them. When they come in, you strip frisk them and you search them. And there are about ten people in this department, this half, and if they knew that Ravenell was going to go out in the yard, they wouldn't go. They were all afraid of him because he had killed so many people, and how much time can they give him? He had double life and the electric chair; they had knocked that down so everybody was afraid of him. All the inmates were afraid of him. We used to talk at nighttime. I was in the third shift and, you know the inmates would call you names, and he would yell, "Don't talk that way to Mr. Butler." They would shut up. They would shut up. And then one day I was looking at him before he escaped and he said, "You know what, Mr. Butler?" He said, "You're the right color, but you're on the wrong side." "When I get out," he said, "you know you got to go." I said, "Well, Rav, when you get out, I'll be here." And I was the one who looked down on him to ID him. I must have counted a hundred bullet holes in him. Yes, he was a cold-blooded man.

P. Boeddinghaus: I wonder what makes a person turn out that way.

C. Butler: I have no idea what makes a person so cold-blooded and kill so heartless, to cut a man's head off and think nothing of it.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I'm sure you could tell a lot of bizarre stories about working in the prison.

C. Butler: Oh yeah. I could talk all year on Rahway. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: I just finished reading a book called *Spencerville*. It took place in Ohio and a lot of the stuff came out in that book. I was interested because my daughter lives in Ohio

and every town they mentioned, I could relate to it. But just what you are saying too, this police chief was very bizarre. It was sadistic.

C. Butler: **I just came back from Ohio.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, did you? Where were you?

C. Butler: **I went with the Shriners. I was in Columbus, Akron. Akron was cold. That's on Lake Erie, isn't it?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, the eastern side.

C. Butler: **It was cold! Then I went to Cleveland, I went to Youngstown. Yeah, we stayed there a long time, about nine days. I had a good time.**

P. Boeddinghaus: My daughter's more to the western side, more toward Indiana. And her husband is a football–no, no, he's not a football coach–I'll cross that out, he was–but he's a teacher and he's a part-time farmer. It's a very nice laid-back life, nice family and so on. So let's talk about some historical moments like–where were you on Pearl Harbor Day? What were you doing when that news came through?

C. Butler: **I was a little kid and lived on [6] Weston Street. And I remember them talking about, "You know, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor! The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor!" I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was, you know. I can't say–how old was I? Eleven? Ten? It didn't hit me until my brother Ekker went into the service. When my brother Ekker went into the service–he was drafted–he left the house, he never entered that house back until three years later. He never came back on a leave or nothing. When he got finished with his training, he was shipped out. So often they never got a leave. And we used to always play, make guns and "I'm an American soldier" and kill Japs, you know how [unclear; speaking softly].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, I guess for us, as kids, that was so remote.

C. Butler: **To be honest with you, when North Korea invaded South Korea, I didn't know exactly where that was. I knew it was somewhere in the East, but I didn't know where it was or what it was all about. But I'll tell you what, I did find out about it after a while. But at the time it happened, I didn't know too much about the location.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So when you were in the service, was that during the Korean conflict then?

C. Butler: **Korean War conflict, yes. I remember, during the Second World War, we used to make butter. They used to get this white stuff and make that little dye and break the dye and mix it up. My sister used to do that, my sister Annie. She's dead now, God rest her soul. I can remember as a little kid, she would mix that up and you made butter. You made margarine or butter. I can remember when I was a kid, you know we ate fatback and fry it. I never had a steak until I was in the military, until I was in the Navy.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And all the things we had to deal with.

C. Butler: **I don't know if the kids could deal with the things we dealt with.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Like sugar shortages and coffee shortages and coupons and rationing and gasoline.

C. Butler: **Coupons and gas. I remember I ate a lot of ice cream, Costa's ice cream. I ate a lot of ice cream. I used to go down to the ice cream factory with my brother Marion. And he would dip down and get the cream, and get that good cream. And Sal Costa, I remember Sal Costa and Joe Costa–deliver ice cream, or I would do favors for them and they would give me some money. Or I would go out on the truck and jump inside and get the ice cream from the drivers and they would give me money to work with–**

P. Boeddinghaus: That was a big part of Metuchen, the Costa ice cream–was very high quality.

C. Butler: **Oh, Costa's ice cream. Oh, high-quality ice cream. Good ice cream.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I worked in the chocolate shop after school.

C. Butler: **Kalkanis?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, for John Kalkanis.

C. Butler: **Well you know my brother Ekker? He worked there in the chocolate shop. He worked there, but maybe before you though.**

P. Boeddinghaus: He's older.

C. Butler: **He's older. My brother Ekker is about seventy-three or seventy-four. He worked in the chocolate factory; he helped make chocolate with John Kalkanis. Yeah, he made chocolate in the chocolate shop.**

P. Boeddinghaus: He kept that very secret the way he did the chocolate. We kids that worked for him could clean up afterwards, but he never let us watch him or observe how he did it.

C. Butler: **Mr. Kalkanis, right?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. I think his wife is still living. She might be in a nursing home.

C. Butler: **I went to school with his son.**

P. Boeddinghaus: His son Teddy [Theodore Kalkanis]. But in other interviews that I've done, people speak so highly of the quality of the ice cream in the ice cream shop.

C. Butler: **That's right. That was Costa's ice cream. He made that beautiful–that good chocolate. I remember that. My brother used to bring some home. Yes, he worked there [unclear].**

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay, we talked about the Korean War.

C. Butler: **Remember Frank Zunino, the mailman?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. Yes.

C. Butler: I used to play with his son Francis [Zunino]. In fact, he was–first time I went to Coney Island, I think he took me. Yeah, him and his wife and my sister and his son.

P. Boeddinghaus: I still see the wife Emma at the [Metuchen] Savings Bank occasionally.

C, Butler: Mrs. Zunino?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah. I think she's still on Lake Avenue.

C. Butler: No kidding? I know Frank was working at a chemical plant in Mount Holly, I thought.

P. Boeddinghaus: The son?

C, Butler: His son, yeah. [coughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: So what are some of the highlights that come to mind that you were impressed with? Well one thing I'll mention, is that gas explosion in Edison[3] about two years ago. Where were you when that took place?

C. Butler: I was probably in Perth Amboy at the time, but I remember I saw the sky all lit up. But the one explosion I really remember, I was coming down the parkway and I was on my way to duty and the Bayway Refinery exploded. Do you remember that?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

C. Butler: I'll tell you the truth, my car shook on the parkway and I thought it was a bomb. I thought it was a bomb the way the sky lit up and the way that mushroom came. But the Edison explosion I didn't see because I was in bed and I only got the little glare. My room in my apartment was away from it, so I didn't see it. But the highlights I had too when I was a kid, was fire–I was always afraid of fires, house fires, you know. I seen so many houses in Metuchen–I was afraid my house was going to catch on fire. It did too. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: Well I guess, too, the way people heated their homes, perhaps with kerosene–

C. Butler: Oh yeah, pop kerosene

P. Boeddinghaus: Or kerosene lamps.

C. Butler: Kerosene and pop kerosene lamps. It was dangerous in those days. But you know the thing often bothers me. I lived on Weston Street at the [unclear]. Weston Street is a short street. It's only about, what, 200 yards long. And we all had wells–see we all dug wells. Some of them dug wells–we had John Heller, his

[3] Natural gas pipeline explosion near the Durham Woods apartment complex on March 23, 1994.

father, he dug wells. But most of them were just wells–dug wells. And I know–I counted over sixteen people off that little street that died of cancer after Gulton's [Gulton Industries] moved in, you know? See that place used to be a Public Service building, do you remember, by the railroad tracks?

P. Boeddinghaus: No.

C. Butler: **Durham Avenue? That was a Public Service building. And they had a guy there who used to cut the grass–kept that place immaculate. It was beautiful. And then Gulton's moved in and they made those watches with the radio that used to shine at night and all that. And I know a couple of women there who died of cancer. I remember we used to go swimming in the creeks–couldn't–they killed all the fish. They didn't have this environmental protection. Gulton's–they killed all the fish and we couldn't go swimming in the pool, we couldn't go fishing in the pool. And I do believe in my heart, he poisoned those wells.**

P. Boeddinghaus: With the toxic waste or whatever.

C. Butler: **Yes, because a street, one block–sixteen people or more die of cancer?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, I think that property is still contaminated.

C. Butler: **See years ago, that would have been investigated–I mean not years ago–now, I'm sorry–now it would have been investigated. Years ago, they had no environment program, committee.**

P. Boeddinghaus: But over there in Edison, too, that Chemical Insecticide Corporation, they were guilty of toxic waste going into the streams. And it was proven and now that site has been cleaned up.

C. Butler: **That's right. Young Cecil Jackson–he lived down there. He died of cancer. He was my neighbor on that street. He died of cancer. Judy Johnson, young girl, beautiful girl, she died of cancer; three of my sisters, my mother and my neighbors, all of them. I get so … [recording ends]**

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

C. Butler: **[recording begins mid-sentence] … because if they kill the fish, it can kill humans. That's what happened, it got into the water–the water shaft–you drink it, eventually it's going to get to you.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So let's see, what other topic here can we pursue? Do you have any other interesting stories about your–well let's see now–I talked to Roger Johnson. He did a tape.

C. Butler: **Roger and I were in the Navy together. Roger was on the ship right across from me, in Norfolk [Virginia]. Roger was on the USS [United States Ship] *Orion*. It was a submarine tender. I was on the USS *Jarvis* (DD-799), which was a destroyer. But we were tied up to the [USS] *Sierra*, which was an AD-18. And I had temporary duty aboard the *Sierra*. And one day I was getting off my ship**

and I meet Roger Johnson. Oh, what a beautiful feeling! And then one day I'm walking down the pier and this destroyer–I don't know the name of it–it was coming in the pier. I looked up and I saw Dick Fenton [Richard Fenton]. Dick Fenton and I went to school together. You know Dick Fenton–his father lived on Middlesex Avenue, that little blue house? We went to school together right from here in kindergarten. In fact, he was bringing the ship in–the destroyer. Well, we hug each other and everything and everybody wanted to know, "That's an officer!" You know, "That's an officer!" Yeah, we were friends. Dick and I and Roger, we were walking up the pier together. It's a good feeling to see somebody from home, you know?

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh definitely. Well on Roger's tape, he mentioned knowing you and about the boxing.

C. Butler: Yeah, Roger. We met, saw each other in the service.

P. Boeddinghaus: So it's a small world.

C. Butler: Small world, yes. Small world out there.

P. Boeddinghaus: So now that you're retired, I have the feeling that you're still active–very active in the masonic lodge and what other–

C. Butler: And my church.

P. Boeddinghaus: And your church. What church do you attend?

C. Butler: The old [New Hope] Baptist Church–Rev. [Ronald L.] Owens. I go there to the eight o'clock service–and now that I'm retired, I visit the sick. I visit the widows in the nursing homes and take people to the airport and help the people [unclear; speaking softly]. We have a sick list in our church, so I try to visit them. [coughs] I'm not working–they offered me a job at $52,000 a year, stipend.

P. Boeddinghaus: To do what?

C. Butler: They have halfway houses; they're run by civilians, but they are going to take state prisoners. And they wanted people who had worked in a supervisory capacity. But I turned it down. I turned it down. You know what I mean?

P. Boeddinghaus: Do you enjoy like setting up your own schedule?

C. Butler: Yeah. I go to the YMCA maybe three days a week.

P. Boeddinghaus: You work out. You're upstairs using the equipment or you're downstairs?

C. Butler: Upstairs on cardiovascular. I'll tell you what happened. I had a bad pain in my foot and I was working in Newark Prison at the time, Northern State Prison. And oh, what a pain I used to have in my foot! And I went to this doctor and he kept telling me I had bursitis. He was giving me lotion, Laprosin, and all type of junk. It just wasn't getting any better. So what I did, I changed doctors. I went

to Dr. Weisfolk [phonetic], right here off of New Durham Road; that place on New Durham Road where Middlesex Avenue come together–that building, Dr. Wiesfolk [phonetic]. So he sent me to Dr. Lombardi.

P. Boeddinghaus: Robert or Joseph?

C. Butler: **Brothers, both of them. They both are doctors. So they gave me an MRI [magnetic resonance imaging] and I had a tumor in my foot. I mean this was going on for two years! He said I was very lucky. I was in the hospital eleven days. So they removed that out of my foot. Like I used to go to do grocery shopping, I would ride around and ride around until I could find a parking space close because of my foot. And now I don't care whether I park a mile away. I love to walk, because I remember when I really couldn't. Oh it was painful! You wouldn't believe it, living off pills, you know.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Dragging your foot around.

C. Butler: **Uh-huh. So then, my doctor he gave me a stress test–because he's a new doctor–he gave me a stress test. And he called me back and he told me he didn't like what he saw. He saw these dark shadows. He said your heart isn't getting enough blood, so he said he wants to do a catheterization with the dye. So I went to Robert Wood Johnson Hospital [in New Brunswick] and did a catheterization and he showed me I had two blocked arteries. So he said, "We're going to give you an angioplasty." He said, "It's basically the same thing." So I said, "Okay." So I went to work the day I had to go to the hospital. I worked because it was Dr. [Martin Luther] King's birthday; I had to get the time and a half.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes. In January, yes.

C. Butler: **Yeah. So I'd make the overtime, and then go to the hospital, so I'd be out the next day. So I thought. So I went to the hospital. So the next day we went up for the angioplasty. He explained to me–the doctor–that it was just a balloon. I said, "Sure." So while he was doing this about nine o'clock, I fell asleep. And I woke up, it was about a quarter to twelve. I said, "Doc, aren't you finished yet?" He said, "No, Mr. Butler. We have a little problem." So he showed me the screen. He said, "You see this screen here? You see that little spot there?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "That's a blood clot, and I can't get it." I said, "You mean to tell me I have to come back?" He said, "No. You got to go up for immediate surgery." I said, "What! What's my option?" He said, "Well you could go home but you're going to have a massive stroke or a massive heart attack." I said, "Where's the paper?" I signed it and the next thing I remember I was waking up, and I couldn't talk and I couldn't move my hands. And I said, "Oh my god, I must have had a stroke and I'm paralyzed." And the nurse said, "No, no, no, Mr. Butler." He said, "Your hands are tied and there is a tube down your throat." So, they untied my hands and I could write to my sister and my girlfriend, who was there at the time, and that was it.**

You know I remember the doctor came over and I said, "Well–." I didn't have time to even call for my minister to come, so I just said my prayer. I just asked God to bless me for my strength and forgive me for my weaknesses. No sense in making promises under duress that you're not going to keep, which is already

known by God whether you're going to keep them or not, right? So I just asked him to bless me for my strength and forgive me for my weaknesses, because if anybody ever been in the hospital and been unconscious, you know that actually to you, that's death. And then you get another chance to come back, because if I hadn't woke up, I would have never had known it. But I had another chance. So that's what life is. Life is taking your chances, doing what you can. You know me, I hold no grudge. I try to be nice to people. The town has some bad memories, but I don't let it–

P. Boeddinghaus: Dwell on it.

C. Butler: **Dwell on it. I got some good friends in this town–excellent friends–white and black. I don't check a friend by his color, I check a friend by the way he treats me and the way we get along and the kind of person he is. I have some good masonic friends, white and black. I have masonic brothers right here from Mount Zion [Lodge No. 135]. I think I was the first black mason in that lodge, Mount Zion Lodge. I was the first black Prince Hall mason. See you probably don't know who Prince Hall–**

P. Boeddinghaus: No, I don't know the terminologies.

C. Butler: **Well, Prince Hall was the name of a man. He was a free black man from Barbados. See, at the time in the 1700s, the whites would not let a black man become a mason. So Prince Hall was a free [black] man. So at the time, they were fighting the Revolutionary War. So he was raised as a mason–that's a term they used, to be raised or to be initiated by a mason–by the British soldiers from England. They raised him as a mason. He became a mason. He was the first black mason. But he had no authority, so he went to England to the Grand Lodge, petitioned the Grand Lodge for a charter where he could hold funerals and initiations. And he came back and he started–it was called the African Lodge [No.] 459. Prince Hall–and then when he died, then they took the name as "Prince Hall." They said, "Are you a Prince Hall mason?" You see. And that's when black Masonry started. We're from the same Grand Lodge in England and we have the same books as the white lodge right here in New Jersey. And yet they don't want to recognize us, and we go back just as far as they do.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Jack's dad was very active in the masonic and enjoyed it very much, and was in the Scottish rite–

C. Butler: **Metuchen?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, and the Shriners in Trenton and traveled back and forth.

C. Butler: **Clinton Avenue.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I used to do a lot of typing for him, different projects, and–

C. Butler: **Yeah, I never joined the Shriners. They called that the party house of Masonry.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah, it seems to me there were a lot of dinners and dancing.

C. Butler: **They do a lot of good, but they do a lot of–I was hanging with the Shriners when I went to Ohio. Boy, they move. They do a lot of good, but they move a lot. I'm what you call a "blue house mason."**

P. Boeddinghaus: What's that mean?

C. Butler: **The blue house is when you first come in; the first house that you come in–the lodge. That's what they call it, the blue house. I'm a blue house mason.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well, you've seen a lot of changes around Metuchen.

C. Butler: **Oh yeah, I remember when Durham Avenue was blacktopped. Durham Avenue used to be a dirt road–sand. We lived at 301 Durham Avenue. I woke up one morning when I was a kid, and I looked and I see maybe fifty, sixty trucks all lined up and down the road and these scrapers and they scraped Durham Avenue and they blacktopped it. We used to play baseball on Durham Avenue. When we were kids, we could play baseball.**

P. Boeddinghaus: In the street?

C. Butler: **On the street.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Is your house still there?

C. Butler: **Well the house I lived in is not there, but it's another house at that 301–that address. The house on Central Avenue is there–292–but they have fixed it up nice though.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I think I mentioned to you on the telephone that I had listened to the oral history of Gardena Emanuel.

C. Butler: **Ms. Emanuel, yes. I remember Ms. Emanuel, she's in my church. I used to go down and sit with her and talk. Just sit with her and talk. Ms. Emanuel–I'd sit there and talk with her. In fact, her brother just died–Jim Wright [James Wright], yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yes, you had mentioned that you went to that funeral. That was her brother [brother-in-law]. And some of the other people that have done oral histories are Perry Letsinger.

C. Butler: **Mr. Letsinger. Yeah, he passed away.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And Walter Qualls. He was very controversial in Metuchen.

C. Butler: **I don't recall Mr. Qualls.**

P. Boeddinghaus: He was [Metuchen] Council.

C. Butler: **Councilman, yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You see this was started in the seventies. It was a more formal program about doing oral histories and that's some of the ones in the past that I'm speaking of. I listened to them and I got an idea that I could do it, talk to people and continue the program on an informal basis for posterity.

C. Butler: **I was hoping you can go see this movie.**

P. Boeddinghaus: *Rosebud*?

C. Butler: ***Rosewood*. Yeah, Rosewood, it's a little town in Florida. It's out now, *Rosewood*. You see my father, there was a lot of Masonry in there and my father was saved by a white mason in that town.**

P. Boeddinghaus: What was your father's profession when he worked? I know you said he was sickly.

C. Butler: **My father was generally working. His name was Marion, after my brother Marion. You know my brother Marion? He used to play harmonica and guitar. He graduated with Tony Yelencsics [former Edison mayor].**

P. Boeddinghaus: You see I'm really from New Brunswick and I came over this way in 1945 and I came in town to Metuchen High School. But then we knew Tony when he was a customer at the flower shop and Jack bought a couple of cars from him.

C. Butler: **Everybody knew Tony. Tony helped my son get his appointment to the Naval Academy.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, tell me about that.

C. Butler: **Well, I had a little problem with my son's guidance counselor.**

P. Boeddinghaus: That sounds familiar.

C. Butler: **Yeah. My son went to Monmouth Regional High School and he was on the National Honor Society. And his guidance counselor wanted him to take a general course. So I had to go down there and straighten him out, and I told him never to talk to my son again. Never. I'll guide my son. And my son, he knew what he wanted to be. He wanted to be an Air Force pilot. He wanted to fly. He wanted to go to the Naval Academy. So this congressman at the time in Monmouth County–he has since died–my son and I tried to see him but he was always too busy for us, always too busy. So I called Tony; so I went down one Saturday morning and brought my son SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Test] and everything and honor society certificate and everything. Tony was so impressed he got on the phone, he called Washington, DC [District of Columbia]. What's the fellow from Washington, DC from New Jersey back in the eighties?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Patten, Ed Patten [Edward J. Patten]?

C. Butler: **Yeah, talked to him on the phone. And Mr. Patten said, "Well you know Tony, it's too late to get him in the academy right now. But he should have been in." He said, "I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll send him to the Navy Preparatory School up in Newport, Rhode Island and if he does well in there–it's only ten**

months–he'll go into the next class at the academy, just go right in." So that's where my son went, he went to the Naval Academy Preparatory School. There was a general down in Fort Monmouth. You see my ex-wife married a soldier from Fort Monmouth and that's where they lived, in Fort Monmouth. She worked there, and there was a general. In fact, he talked to me. I went down to see him in his office–oh man, what a beautiful office!–and he wanted my son to go to West Point [New York]. He said he would vouch for my son, but my son didn't want to go to West Point. My son had won all honors in state football and wrestling and he wanted to go to the Naval Academy. So he went to the Naval Preparatory School and he graduated with honors–I got the graduation–he graduated with honors and he went right into the Naval Academy where he graduated in the Honor Nineteenth Company, which was the honor company, in the Class of [19]83. And he put five years in nuclear subs.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was he up in Connecticut then?

C. Butler: **No, in San Diego [California]. And then I went out to San Diego and I went out on a dependent's cruise–on the submarine that took the families out–460 feet underwater we went. We were out for eight hours and we had a nice time. And he worked for this admiral, and he got out of the subs and he went to a Naval Preparatory [Postgraduate] School in Monterey [California]. He got his master's in oceanography and meteorology. Then he got transferred to [the Office of] Navy Intelligence. He was up in Bosnia [and Herzegovina], he was in the Desert Storm with the Navy. And he got a commercial award too. I meant to bring that–I forgot it. Then he was in Budapest [Hungary]. Yeah, he was all over. Now he's transferred on the USS *Constellation* on the admiral's staff, it's a flagship aircraft carrier, CV-64.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And where's it out of?

C. Butler: **Out of San Diego. He's a west coast sailor. I told him, "Why don't you go down to Norfolk, like I was?" He said, "No Dad, I'm a west coast sailor." He likes the weather. Yeah, he's a west coast sailor. So in September, the carrier is going to be in Hawaii and I'm going to fly to Hawaii and they're going to take the family back on the carrier from Hawaii to San Diego. So that's a nice cruise. Yeah, so I'm looking forward to it.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You have just the one child?

C. Butler: **No, I have another son. He was in the Army. He's down in Jacksonville, Florida. In fact when my son called me last week, he had stopped in Jacksonville–he was with his brother, they were out together. And I have a daughter Leslie. And I'm a grandfather. I have three grandchildren, two girls and a boy.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And are they in this area?

C. Butler: **No.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Can you get to see them?

C. Butler: **Oh I get to see them, oh yeah. I'm going down to Florida to see my son soon. He's in Jacksonville. And my son Chris is driving from Florida to San Diego. He did it before.**

P. Boeddinghaus: It's a long trip.

C. Butler: **Yes, he takes him time. He wants to make commander. In order to make commander, he has to have more sea duty. So, he's got to get the sea duty.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Okay. So, are you enjoying your retirement?

C. Butler: **Oh yes, I don't think I want to work–I mean, I wouldn't work here, really. I had opportunities to work though. I work like little things here and there. But to have a steady job? No never again, never again.**

P. Boeddinghaus: To have more freedom. Well the work that you did, and probably shift work, that was very confining.

C. Butler: **I worked nights for ten years, third shift for ten years, I think. I wouldn't want to do that again. Mondays and Tuesdays off, everybody having fun on the weekends and you're working with the prison inmates.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I really wish Jack would retire, but he's still plugging away.

C. Butler: **Oh yeah, well he has a job he likes. It's not strenuous really and you're out with flowers. It's something he likes to do. Do you remember–I know you do–the fellow from Metuchen, the black guy who used to love flowers? What was his name?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, Harry Jackson.

C. Butler: **Harry Jackson.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, I think of him often. He used to cut our lawn and weed and so forth. And that was very tragic, wasn't it?

C. Butler: **Yeah, the inmate that killed him was in Rahway Prison. Something happened and they shipped him down to Trenton. So he was in Rahway Prison. Harry Jackson.**

P. Boeddinghaus: He was such a nice man and so well liked.

C. Butler: **That was terrible. Walked into the bank and they shot him for nothing though.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Like our story is, too, he was working for us cutting the lawn and so forth and he would let the payment build up. Jack would say, "How much do I owe you?" [He said] "Well let it go, I want it to build up and be a big lump sum." Well then that happened and we hadn't paid him and Jack really felt terrible about it. And so he kind of like figured it out how much we owed him and he took it to his widow. And she said that happened in so many cases that people came forward and paid the back

salary for the work that he had done. And she had no idea. You know he didn't keep records or anything about it; it was on the honor system.

C. Butler: **The house in Metuchen on Main Street over by the [Metuchen] Post Office, he used to keep those flowers beautiful. I don't know who lived there.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Was it immediately next to the post office?

C. Butler: **No, I don't know where–it was on that street, on that side. I know I used to see him cutting grass and tending those flowers.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, that was very sad.

C. Butler: **And also, I remember the high school, I used to go–I went to high school with James Fielding. You know James Fielding**?

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, now Roger Johnson spoke of him also. The track?

C. Butler: **James Fielding at that time was the fastest high school runner in the United States, and we went to school together. I was out for track, I knew I was fast. One day we were racing–boy, this blur went by me and I said, "Wow. Boy, Jimmy can run." Such a nice guy. We would travel all over for track meets. I think his sister died first–Frances Fielding. Kidneys, you know. At the time they didn't have dialysis machines. They were twins; they had a chronic kidney disease. And James got a scholarship to Georgetown University and that's where he died. Our track coach, Mr. Pete Wilson. You know Pete Wilson?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

C. Butler: **He was our track coach. In fact, he was with Jimmy when he died at Georgetown University. He said it was so sad because they had a big bonfire and they were all cheering for a football game and here one of the best athletes was dying in the hospital and nobody cared.**

P. Boeddinghaus: What was his medical problem?

C. Butler: **Kidney.**

P. Boeddinghaus: The kidney also.

C. Butler: **Both of them had kidney problems.**

P. Boeddinghaus: See there are so many advances today with the dialysis and treatment and so forth.

C. Butler: **He was such a good guy. See right now, when they have death in school, they have counselors. We didn't have them. Right now–I'm sixty-six years old and I still have a friend I think about, Charlie Frohm [Charles Frohm]. He died–we were good friends. I always remember him being so frail and pale, always pale and frail. I was about seven or eight years old, and I used to like be around him so I could protect him. Charlie Frohm. He wore knickerbockers and argyles, rolled stockings, you know–if you walked and they rubbed together, they'd**

make noise. Little Charlie Frohm. One day the teacher said, "Charlie Frohm is dead." He died–you know his father was a cop.

P. Boeddinghaus: I was going to say the name is familiar, yes.

C. Butler: **He had a sister named Ruth. But I always remember that, Charlie Frohm. In those days, we didn't have people explain to you about death. I just heard, "You know Charlie Frohm, he's dead." You know you never–now they have these counselors to explain it to you.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Like grievance–

C. Butler: **Grieving is good. Like those four young girls that died in Brooklyn [New York] in a shooting. They talk to the students who didn't know about that. We didn't have that in school. I knew a young lady too, named Lois Therkelsen[4]. We played in the band together; we had a good time.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, I remember Lois. What instrument did you play?

C. Butler: **I played the drums, yeah. Titter drums.**

P. Boeddinghaus: She was a very pretty blonde girl who lived on Lake Avenue and her father was a plumber. Yeah, I remember. What was the problem there? I don't recall. She was younger than me.

C. Butler: **I think it was an aneurysm or something, who knows. She was such a happy-go-lucky girl, I remember in band, you know. It was shocking. But after you get into the military, then that becomes easier–not easier to handle–but you can handle it better.**

P. Boeddinghaus: So let's sum up.

C. Butler: **I can remember when Dr. King was killed, because Dr. King was killed on my birthday.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, in January. No wait–his birthday was in January. No, when was he killed?

C. Butler: **Dr. King was killed April the fourth. My birthday is April the fourth, the same day my sister died. My sister Atlein died on my birthday.**

P. Boeddinghaus: You're good about dates.

C. Butler: **And President [John F.] Kennedy, when he died I remember I was working at Freedman's up on the tracks and we were unloading a railroad car–some cans from DuPont–when the President was killed. When Senator [Robert] Kennedy was killed, I was on the parkway coming down from Passaic. It was a beautiful day out, a beautiful morning when he was killed. I remember when Malcolm X was killed; I was in New York over my sister's.**

[4] Lois Therkelsen graduated from Metuchen High School in 1948.

P. Boeddinghaus: That was on a Sunday, wasn't it?

C. Butler: A Sunday, yeah. With my sister Atlein on a Sunday–my sister Evelyn, really.

P. Boeddinghaus: I remember that, for some reason Jack went into New York City to a boat show or something.

C. Butler: A Sunday, that's right. I was right down about three or four blocks away. Yes.

P. Boeddinghaus: By the way, I saw that play in New Brunswick, *The Meeting*. And that was a fictional meeting between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. It was very interesting the way it was portrayed. It was very intense, a very intense play.

C. Butler: I lived in New York for a while, a very short time. But I came back to Metuchen. Metuchen [has] always been my home, yeah. Good and bad, I live here. [laughs] I remember same way as my–I was in uniform–it was a busload of sailors who were going from Maryland out to Norfolk. It was four blacks and myself, so five blacks on the bus and this was in 1950. We were going down to Norfolk to get our ship and we stopped at a Howard Johnson restaurant in Richmond, Virginia. We all got out to go eat and I see them whispering. They wouldn't serve us–they put us downstairs in the basement. It was so dirty down there, you know, rats. So we went out on the bus and they served us on the end of the bus. Yeah.

I never felt racial like that [until] I worked down the South. In Washington, DC, I couldn't eat right in the nation's capital–in uniform and they wouldn't serve me. When I was in California and I was talking to my son, he was with some of his buddies–officers, you know–and I was telling them, I said–they wanted to know, "Mr. Butler, what about your experience in the Navy?" And I was telling them, I said, "Let me tell you something, I loved this country, but it didn't love me. When that flag went up, I stand at attention. This was my country and I loved it." I said, "But it treated me like an unfaithful woman. It was unfaithful to me. And I loved it, I never stopped loving this country, but it didn't love me. Now all the love that I didn't get is given to my son." You know, he's [the country] trying to make it up to me by giving it to my son. My son went to the Naval Academy. My son is an officer and a gentleman. My son got his master's in oceanography and meteorology. My son travels around the world. Everything that I couldn't–they wouldn't give me is trying to make it up through my son. I said, "When I was coming up, when I was in the military, it was just like being married to an unfaithful woman. Somebody you love, love, love, love, love, but they don't love you." They said, "That's a very good way of putting it." They were very good men, these officers. They understood what I was talking about. You know, I never stopped hating this country because it treated me this way. I never stopped hating it. I mean I did everything that was required of me in the military. Everything that was required of me, I did. But my country was untrue to me.

P. Boeddinghaus: But do you think strides have been made within the past twenty years?

C. Butler: Oh yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Young kids today, you know, they try to blame it on the system. I won't say it–I almost said something. [laughs]

P. Boeddinghaus: It's on tape. [laughs]

C. Butler: **I know, but they are so full of crap because if you go to school, you get an education, nobody can stop you. Years ago, they could, no doubt about it. Education didn't mean anything. If they didn't want to hire you, they didn't hire you. Now you can do it. Because they're stretched out on drugs, they can't blame them on society. They're on drugs because they want to be on drugs. My son isn't on drugs. A lot of boys aren't on drugs because my son knew what he wanted to be, and he did it.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And you supported him morally.

C. Butler: **That's right. Wherever my son went, he took God with him. God is still in his life. God has never left my son's life. God never left me when I was in the service. I took Him in the service with me, and I brought Him home with me.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And that was through your parents that instilled that?

C. Butler: **My parents, through my parents, my mother, my father, my sisters and my brothers, and my church. My minister talked to me before I went into service, the old Baptist Church, Rev. Hagley [phonetic]. He talked to me and I never forgot. I've never left God out of my life. I might have forgotten Him at times, but He never forgot me, you see. That's what kids today are forgetting. They have nothing to lean on if things get tough; they have nothing to lean on. They don't have any mothers. They don't have any fathers. They don't have any religion. They're lost. Kids are lost. We lost a whole generation to drugs. Gone. Gone. You know, rap music. What is rap music? It's trash.**

P. Boeddinghaus: What do you think about the Ebonics?

C. Butler: **Ebonics? Let me tell you something, English is hard enough. [laughter] I don't know what the hell they're going to do about Ebonics. I don't have time–when these young kids get on TV and they start saying, "You know what I'm saying?" "Yeah, man." "You know what I'm saying?" Let me tell you something, that's terrible. I don't know who the hell is going to give a person a job talking like that. You got to talk with some sort of intelligence. I think that's just going to drop right out.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Think so.

C. Butler: **Yeah. How are they going to teach Ebonics? It's ridiculous.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Where does it come from? Where does it originate?

C. Butler: **I don't know. I was watching TV last night–a fight. They had a black fighter from England; he was English. He was a black from England, and they had a white fighter from another country in Europe. So the announcer, he says, "We have a–." Where was he from? C-o-a-t-i-a?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, Croatia.

C. Butler: **Yeah, he's fighter and the black guy is from England. He said, "We have a Croatian and now we have an Afro-American." I said to this jerk–I said it to myself, "This jerk, he's not Afro-American. He's not American. He's English. If he's African, he's Afro-English. He's not Afro-American." He never picked up his mistake. He kept saying it all night long. I said, "Look, he's English." To be an Afro-American, you got to be an American. Got to be an American. So people don't really think about what's going on in this country. I just live and let live, try to do what's right. Sometimes it's hard, you might tip a guy. I don't want to get into a fight. I used to fight professionally, and I always had a bad dream that I killed somebody with my fists. That has always haunted me. I got hit in Rahway once. Well, I got hit in Rahway a lot of times in fights and gangs. But this time, it was one-on-one, big guy, and I stopped him about a couple of years before I retired. I stopped him and asked him for some ID. He spit in my face and hit me in the mouth and broke my teeth.**

P. Boeddinghaus: This was in the prison?

C. Butler: **Right in the prison, he broke my teeth, couldn't feel my lips. And he looked at me like I was supposed to fall or something. So anyway, I hit him–I hit him and I knocked him down and he fell. He fell between the wall and the desk, and I lost it. My buddy, Randy Santo [phonetic], who lives right in Metuchen–**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, Santo [phonetic]?

C. Butler: **Yeah, he's a lieutenant now. He grabbed me and said, "Charlie, Charlie, you're going to kill him, you're going to kill him." And I said, "Man." I'd lost it. But see you can defend yourself. If anybody hits you, you can defend yourself. But it's got to come to a point when you got to stop. So I'll walk away from somebody before I–you know, in town people holler or say things, I just walk away, throw up both hands. I'm not getting involved. That's the Charlie you know.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Because the boxing was more like a sport for you.

C. Butler: **Yeah.**

P. Boeddinghaus: And then there is the other side of using those tactics to defend yourself.

C. Butler: **Yes. I used to teach boxing at the Y, the YMCA. I used to take self-defense.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh yeah? They are doing great things at the Y with the expansion, aren't they?

C. Butler: **Yeah. I have a lot of fun at the Y. I go there in the morning. There's a nice crowd there. The people who work there are very friendly and very helpful.**

P. Boeddinghaus: I think they are doing great with carrying on the programs under all this duress of the construction.

C. Butler: **The construction hasn't interrupted our program at all.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Terrific planning to be able to continue through all that.

C. Butler. I enjoy my three days. I can go in there all day long as a member. I go there three days a week and I really, really enjoy it.

P. Boeddinghaus: They've made a lot of strides up there from what it used to be. Maybe you remember, they used to have a co-ed. Was it Saturdays nights at the Y in the thirties?

C. Butler: Yeah, long time ago. Yeah. Used to have the bowling alley

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes, the bowling alley. And that little pool, the small pool.

C. Butler: Little pool, yes. You know Gus Thompson from Metuchen? He used to be the mailman.

P. Boeddinghaus: Yes.

C. Butler: Gus Thompson. He helped raise me too. He's a good man. He's a deacon at my church. But when I was a kid, he started fighting [unclear; speaking softly].

P. Boeddinghaus: Well since your father was older and sickly, then you probably had other male role models.

C. Butler: Oh yeah, had a lot of them, my brother Marion, my older brother Marion.

P. Boeddinghaus: Oh, kind of finish off that story then. The kids were hidden in the well?

C. Butler: Yeah, hidden in the well. My brother knows this fellow's name, I've forgotten. They came by with a horse and buggy with hay in it and snuck them out. My brother–he knows the story of how they got to Jacksonville, and then from there to Newark.

P. Boeddinghaus: Was that like an Underground Railroad type of situation?

C. Butler: No, not really. At that time, they were killing all the blacks and this mason knew my father was a mason and he just went down and saved them. I told a couple of my buddies about that, before this even came out–*Rosewood*. I mean I was telling them five years ago about Rosewood and now they've made a movie out of it.

P. Boeddinghaus: I like movies. I'll have to look for that.

C. Butler: It's true, it's something that really happened. And they finally moved up here. Some of my family was [unclear] down southwards.

P. Boeddinghaus: Well what brought them to Metuchen? You said they moved to Newark.

C. Butler: Newark and then Metuchen.

P. Boeddinghaus: What brought out here, like to the country?

C. Butler: **From the country, I guess you're right. Let me ask my mother because her sister stayed in Newark–my aunt–and my mother moved out here. And then my mother and father bought property on Weston Street and we built a house and used to have big picnics. Everybody from Newark used to come up, used to roast pigs and everything. Everybody wanted to come down to the country–they called this the country.**

P. Boeddinghaus: It was a gathering place.

C. Butler: **Yeah, a gathering place for the family.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Did they have cars or did they come by train or bus?

C. Butler: **Oh yeah, they had cars. Cars. Weston Street [unclear; speaking softly]. We had a good time, a very good time.**

P. Boeddinghaus: Well I think the time is just about up. And I really appreciate you cooperating and chatting and I love to hear all these stories. You say I can keep this?

C. Butler: **Oh, you can keep that paper if you want it–I don't know if you want it. Can they do anything with it?**

P. Boeddinghaus: Yeah, well I'll give it to the archivist.

[END OF INTERVIEW]