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Oral History Interview on Bloomfield, CT, part two

Adelle Wright

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Oral history interview by Aleesha Young for the Cities, Suburbs, and Schools Project, June 05, 2005. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford Connecticut (http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cssp_ohistory/).

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Transcribed by: Aleesha Young

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Abstract: Adelle Wright reviews the transcript of a prior interview conducted on April 5, 2005. She recalls her activism with the Bloomfield Human Relations Commission against block-busting and housing discrimination during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Adelle Wright recalls the block busting issue and the real estate firms became involved in the 1960's. She reflects on the real estate testing project and how realtors end up discriminating against minority couples/people. The purpose of this testing was to sponsor an integrated community. Submitted as part of the OnTheLine web-book by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://ontheline.trincoll.edu>).

Wright was previously interviewed on April 05, 2005. This is a follow-up interview.

Speaker key:

AY: Aleesha Young

AW: Adelle Wright

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

AW: Can you turn page 10? (looking through the transcript) AW the third paragraph, I think the one, the behavior that we detest the most, was their showing white, and it works out, National Neighbors have done a study on this, an integrating community next to an all white community, loses 90 percent of its' markets, of its white market. And it refers to that later on the white buyers are all taken some where else.

AY: Ok I will make a note of that. So, We are still looking for document about the blockbusting lawsuit against realtors. Can you think of specific real estate firms that may have been involved with block-busting in the 1960's and 70's?

AW: No. I don't think we...We took an industry wide approach and focused on the signs 'cause the signs were so obvious and so disruptive to a neighborhood that was a little uncertain anyway and once you got signs going up and numbers staying and staying and staying, they speeded up the turnover.

AY: Are there any particular streets in Bloomfield that you think may have experience block-busting?

AW: I believe the residents of Alexander Road

AY: Right, we have looked into that street.

AW: They felt that they were subjected specifically to block-busting. It was more subtle, blockbusting. It was working on people's thinking, working on their pocketbooks. If I don't get out of here now I won't get money for my house. But, Alexander Road I do remember. They talked about the fact that they felt they were being block-busted.

AY: Other than Alexander Road, are there any other streets that come to mind?

AW: No, that the one that leaps to mind. As I say, we sort of, rather than to, we weren't suing anybody. We were trying to write some legislation that would protect us somewhat in this town. And that was industry wide. We weren't going after any particular. And of course see agencies that are existent then and that are existent now, the names may be totally different agencies. There's been so much melding, outsiders coming in and setting up [unclear] and chains of offices all around.

AY: Ok, I know we asked you about your neighbors in our previous interview, but can you think of any homeowners that were encouraged to move away from Bloomfield or to particular parts of Bloomfield?

AW: At the time we would get stories because we were rattling a cage and we did not have the staff or the facilities to track everything down and document it. But we did...Did I talk at all about testing, real estate testing?

AY: I don't think you went into detail about that, if I remember correctly from your last interview.

AW: Real estate testing is when you send out a minority couple and a majority couple, a white couple to the same place, not together. Set them up with the same docee. They are looking for a house in such a range and they have been cleared of a mortgage of so much. They are interested in schools. They would both be looking for the same thing. And what would happen is they would be treated slightly different. And again subtly because the realtors knew what the law of the land was, you're not supposed to discriminate. But there were ways of saying I think you would prefer this over that without being specific about streets or towns or anything. Just, I think you would prefer this or that assuming that they bought all the customers to Bloomfield offering in the first place. But that testing showed us that there were at least subtle differences going on in the treatment of the buyers. That was a method set up by this National Neighbors Organization at the time. They felt that it was a way to, it was a way to dig out, as I say, it was subtle because it was a law on the books. Realtors have been very carefully trained in their training courses not to make mistakes because the top agency didn't want suits. So we're all playing a little shadowboxing game here in away.

AY: Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding your experience with discrimination, blockbusting, or with the Bloomfield school systems in the 1960's and 70's?

AW: Our purpose was to sponsor an integrating community; -ing integrating community not a community that was turned over overnight, the community has not been turned over overnight. But, the place that people can see, the most where they think we are is in the public schools and the public schools have moved from 40, 35% minority perhaps when I came to town to 90 plus [unclear] now and that does not lend itself to an integrating community. Some of the most able black students go to private school. Their parents take them out of Bloomfield public schools and take them to private schools and when the white families who are remaining can do so, they send their children somewhere else which continue to make them [referring to the black student population] the majority. And so in the overall I am very disappointed that we did not succeed in maintaining an integrating community. But, you don't know if you don't try and a lot of things were changing then. Now if you drive around in other communities fortunately you're seeing black populations scattering around various places. And, they have either asserted their rights been treated better in that industry. And you know in my view, a lot of this is economic and if people mix neighborhood like the one I just moved out of, middle class, upper middle class neighborhood, they get a chance to live next to each other, the kids get acquainted and they go to school together, they ride their bikes together and even though some of the kids may be sent off to private school there is still some exposure their. Expose at the same relative economic level can take so many of the fears out of people's minds. But we weren't given that gradual opportunity, things were happening too fast and that is sadness to me that we couldn't slow it down and have a little better deal. Now, when I say slowly it down, some of the black acquaintances of mine would say, "Oh, you don't want us to move into Bloomfield." And I would say I want you to have opportunities to go to all the Greater Hartford suburbs, and once you have the time to develop that option... And the white people at the same time would say "Oh, you're trying to push and bring the black people into town." So, you couldn't win for losing, but it was an attempt, lets see what happens down the road. There are still some of the best housing buys in this town. People are smart enough to know it. Because then you would [unclear] a private school, which people do now. If you can afford to live in Bloomfield, that's the real big obstacle. We have a number of exchange students in our church, obviously going to public school, and it's quite a difference experience for them because many of them probably come from countries that have very, very small minority populations. But I haven't talked to any of them to see how they do, but they stay, and more come back every year, so. We had town exchange students along the way and one of them was very interested in dating a black man, and this was her...white girl, very interested in dating a black man, so I don't know what television is feeding people overseas.

AY: Where was she from?

AW: She was from Denmark and the other girl was from Finland, one of her cousins had married a black man in England, so they had experienced this in the family. She was very cordial to all people, but she wasn't dead set to date a black man as one of her accomplishments while she was in the United States.

AY: Well, I actually have an article on the Women's Voters League, and it looks as though they were trying to develop plans on improving the image of Bloomfield in the local housing markets. I guess what I am asking is, what your familiarity with this is, and where you think we could obtain, this Women's League of Voters report, or if you could give some contact information as to who might be affiliated with them.

AW: Jim Ross, that's when he was here [looking at the news article]. He was our last good reporter. I'll read through, maybe I can find something if you give me a minute to read through. This is interesting [reading through the article], the committee has said local realtors have admitted that blacks looking for homes in other towns are channeled, and that was the term they used then, to Bloomfield by out of town brokers. It's always somebody else. In addition, the bulletin said [unclear], and personnel in large area companies are guilty of channeling. Now we had one time, they stopped the practice, but one time, Connecticut Generals, they call them Connecticut Generals in those days was doing some channeling. But they were channeling top officer types to elite towns, and Bloomfield has never been what you would call an elite town. We were always a middle class, working class town. I don't remember this at all [referring to the article]. I am trying to think of who might have been on the League of Women Voters. I was in the League when I lived in Newington, but not when I moved to Bloomfield. I am afraid I am not much help to you on this one.

AY: That's fine, but I have one more article that I would like to show you. I have a 1974 article here attorney's were... There's a case against realtors steering minority homebuyers into integrated neighborhoods, into places like Hartford and Bloomfield, while they steered whites away from those areas. Are you familiar with any of this?

AW: Jim Ross, the last I knew still works for the Hartford Courant. The last I knew, he was working out of Willimantic. He spent a lot of time on this, so he, if you could track him down, he might be helpful.

AY: If you read further, they list a few of the real estate firms. I know earlier you could not remember any real estate agencies specifically, but do you recognize any of these?

AW: I am surprise to see Barrows & Wallace there [referring to the newspaper article] because Barrows was one of our big supporters.

AY: Really, really.

AW: Maybe he came to be that, what's the date on this?, 1974. Actually Bob Barrows left Barrows & Wallace and set up his own agency, and maybe that's when he declared his independence on this subject, but I don't know. I don't think he's living anymore. Continuing to read the article] Find them \$1,000 and they have to catch them within 90 days or something. This was more town action than my particular; this was beyond my hands if they ever asked me to comment on it. It seems like they are lining up all the big politicians.

AY: Can you think of any potential oral interview candidates that may be helpful to our study of Bloomfield, like administrators, teachers, and other residents? You already mentioned that you

were not familiar with any particular real estate industries, but do any developers or lenders come to mind?

AW: Something might pop into my head, but I can't spit it out right at this moment. Bob Barrows is the one name in the real estate industry. It used to be Barrows and Wallace, that was the company they formed, and then he formed his own, Bob Barrows Realty or something. If he's still living he might be an interesting person to be in touch with. You could find out through the Hartford Realtors Board, or Board of Realtors, whatever they call it. He was one of the realtors who understood what this was all about, and I think has some sensitivities about integrating housing, that most of the people lacked. That's probably the only one I can remember right now.

I was thinking as I was preparing, you know when I was in the middle of this I couldn't think about anything else, now its 30 years later. May take the time to read this again [referring to the transcript], and I might think of something else, a correction, or addition. Are you and Meredith doing this together?

AY: No, she was one of the interviewers when we first interviewed you, and now I am helping Jack Dougherty do some research on block-busting?

AW: I was thinking today, the town of Bloomfield has continuously given good financial support to the school system even as the population in the system was changing and even as the feeling of the politicians that were mixed. The town and the voters on occasion kept supporting the public schools. This year were we had a vote, a referendum on refurbishing schools for many millions of dollars and it failed, but I suspect it will be put forward again next year and it will be passed, especially if they do more publicity and get more people out to vote. To this point the schools have been supported very well by the public.

This is *agricultural* community on this first page [referring to transcript].

AY: I can make a note of that.

AW: We were never mono-cultural because we had a good mix of Northern Europeans and a substantial number of Italians, so we had a mix, it just so happened to be white skin. 30 years is a generation, a generous generation, so that is a lot of time. You realize that this real estate business was going on when we has a 30 or 40% black population in the schools at this point. So, that didn't loom as the overriding factor that it does now. There are a few Christian liberals in this world who would like to see racial interaction and harmony and would put their money into it even, but when the numbers get overwhelming, which is what happened as a result of the real estate turning over, then that puts a whole different view on it. They couldn't, the real estate agents could not make choices for people because obviously it was the peoples business, but they could help control the decision they would come out with by limiting the choices they were presented.

That reminds me of somebody, he is definitely still living, Jack Brightman, page 10 [referring to the transcript], he was on the commission very helpful to me because his strength, he now lives in Simsbury.

AY: Now, what was his name, am I spelling it correctly, how do you spell his last name?

AW: Jack Brightman, he was on the Human Relations Commission, Broitman. He raised a family in Bloomfield, was later divorced and moved out of town, but he was on the Human Relations Commission for quite a long time. He's a really smart guy and he might, his memory might be better on some of these issues than mine. I think he might well be interested in oral history. He lives on Nod Road in Simsbury.

AY: I think I am familiar with that area, I actually have a map. Is that near Avon Mountain, across from a hotel?

AW: Yes, by route 44, Albany Avenue. [Looking at the map.] You know where the old fashioned restaurant is...

AY: Yes, and I believe there is hotel across the street also.

AW: Yes, that is the corner of Nod Rd. I believe he lives over there. He's very well educated, very thoughtful person to talk to.

AY: Well, that concludes all of my questions. Thanks again for all of your help. It is very much appreciated.

