

Interviewee: Perry Letsinger
Interviewer: Paula Bruno
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P. Bruno: Today is December 8, 1977 and I'm interviewing with Mr. Perry Letsinger of Metuchen, New Jersey. Okay, we're ready to start. Let's start with a little bit about your ancestors, about your parents, what they did, where you were from. You told me you were from the South right?

P. Letsinger: I was from a small town of about 4000 approximately named Scotland Neck, North Carolina. My father and I we worked together until 1929, and anticipated a change in my life so I came to Perth Amboy.

P. Bruno: Just to go back a minute, where did you work with your father?

P. Letsinger: We worked as farmers. I worked with him and we shared the profits.

P. Bruno: So you lived on a farm?

P. Letsinger: Yes.

P. Bruno: Why did you choose to move to Perth Amboy?

P. Letsinger: Well it was kind of inconvenient; as a matter of fact farming was kind of an indirect life. You might make profits and you might not. Sometimes you did well and sometimes you have farm failures. The last year before I left I spent a few dollars so I pulled back and quit this job and in Perth Amboy was friend of mine who lives in Metuchen now. So that's what I did.

P. Bruno: When did you first come to Perth Amboy?

P. Letsinger: In February 1930.

P. Bruno: And what did you do?

P. Letsinger: The first thing I did, after a couple of days, I went down to the *Press* to see if there were any jobs. I went down there on a Monday morning and met a Polish fellow. He said to me, "There was a job I saw in the paper, helping in a store." So I went down to be the first one to get there and I met a Polish fellow who came out of the store and said, "Do you want to work?" I said, "Yes I want to work." "There's a place called Camp Raritan. I would have gotten a job there but I had my leg broken and I couldn't qualify physically."

P. Bruno: How did you break your leg?

P. Letsinger: He did, the Polish fellow.

P. Bruno: He broke your leg?

P. Letsinger: No, he broke HIS leg!

P. Bruno: Oh he broke his leg.

P. Letsinger: So when we went for the physical examination he couldn't pass the test. So it was suggested to me that I go down to Camp Raritan so I did the following morning and I got the job.

P. Bruno: Great, so what did you do at Camp Raritan?

P. Letsinger: I worked in the Ammunition Department and I was a laborer for ten years and then from 1939 up to 1960 I worked as a foreman. And from 1960 to 1965 I worked as a Surveillance Inspector, then I retired after 30 years of service.

P. Bruno: That's a long time. When you worked at Camp Raritan were you still living in Perth Amboy or had you moved?

P. Letsinger: No we lived in Perth Amboy in 1929, for one year and then we left and came to Metuchen in 1930.

P. Bruno: You came to Metuchen in 1930?

P. Letsinger: Yes.

P. Bruno: What was the town like? What can you remember about Metuchen in 1930?

P. Letsinger: Metuchen then was fair. Metuchen was always built by a few people personally who owned acres and acres of it and they were reluctant to sell any of it. So it was just a small town, the same size as now in square miles, but it has grown people-wise. People moved in the town. After the people died who owned the property, after they died then their ancestors decided they would sell it.

P. Bruno: Can you remember any of the names of the people who owned?

P. Letsinger: Let's see, it seems to me that Applegate was one of them and the other name doesn't register now. But it was only a few people that owned practically the whole town.

P. Bruno: And so where did you finally find a place to live in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: I moved to Middlesex Avenue, 662, and I stayed there for eight years. After eight years I moved to 1 Samson Street in Metuchen where bought a home. Do you remember that?

P. Bruno: Yes I remember that being there. What were some of your first impressions of the town?

P. Letsinger: Well it was fair but it wasn't no particular place for blacks.

P. Bruno: Were you one of the first black families to move into town?

P. Letsinger: No, when I came here I know there was the Milligan's, the Cobb's, the Johnson's and the Butler's, those were the black families that I knew. May have been many more but those I knew.

P. Bruno: Even today Metuchen doesn't have a very large black population.

P. Letsinger: Well yes, there is quite a few now. Because the streets have been built up. You take on John Street that's a very progressive street now. People there are making thirty, forty or even fifty thousand dollars a year; and on Fence Street the same thing. Another area is the lower part of Durham Avenue, which is built up which takes in part of Durham Avenue; it's a part of Edison and a part of Metuchen.

P. Bruno: How did the town's people back in those days accept black people?

P. Letsinger: Fair, as a matter of fact we mixed well, very well. They went to school normal and I didn't see that there wasn't any discriminating at all in the school system. So people just got along very well. We didn't have any complaints with the people.

P. Bruno: Do you feel you were ever discriminated against in this town because you were a black man?

P. Letsinger: No, not necessarily. There are isolated cases but isolated cases only. You would have that anyway because of the people; regardless of the time period you always find a few isolated case where people don't mix very well. You had that then and I think you have it now.

P. Bruno: That's true. So did you choose Metuchen because you knew of these other families?

P. Letsinger: No, I chose Metuchen because Metuchen was near Camp Raritan, the place I worked. It was only about a mile and a half south to go back and forth to Camp Raritan. And of course, Metuchen, I mean Edison didn't have any post office or schools or anything of the kind Everything was at Camp Raritan and Metuchen.

P. Bruno: I see. What about your schooling, your education?

P. Letsinger: Well I was limited. You see my parents were poor so I didn't complete high school, I went to eighth and partly ninth grade.

P. Bruno? And how did you come to be a deacon in the church?

P. Letsinger: I joined this church right after I got here, Second Baptist Church, 100 Durham Avenue, under the leadership of the late Reverend Nelson B. Tate, he's passed on now and I worked for a few months and they asked me for a little participation in the church. So I served as a Superintendent of the Sunday School for approximately 25 years. In the meantime they asked me if I would serve as a deacon, the people made the choice. They asked me and I consented and was what you call a walking deacon until after six months and then I was a deacon.

P. Bruno: Can you tell us a little bit about what a deacon is and what a walking deacon is?

P. Letsinger: A walking deacon is a person who's been picked from the church. He doesn't have the authority of a deacon. In other words he's on a trial test, a trial test.

P. Bruno: What were your duties?

P. Letsinger: Just to walk upright and be a person without any, what do you call it... a person of moral standards and to exemplify my life as a Christian from one end of the week to the other. And people were watching while I did that, seeing if you might be torn apart. In case I had a falling morally or any otherwise I would have been taken off. And I satisfied the people in six months and then they called from the council and ordained me as a deacon to that church.

P. Bruno: It must have been quite an honor then.

P. Letsinger: Yes, it was.

P. Bruno: So after you were ordained as a deacon, what were your functions in the church?

P. Letsinger: We were ordained for the purpose of taking care of the widows; looking after the widows and orphans and serve tables and also the Communion table. And not only to serve table at the church but people and parishioners who were sick or in the hospital or at home and shut-in or couldn't get out we'd take it to them.

P. Bruno: And these were the jobs for the deacon. How many deacons did the church have?

P. Letsinger: Then? We were three; we were three.

P. Bruno: You told me when you were here last time that you've given some talks in the church.

P. Letsinger: Yes, I've given many talks.

P. Bruno: Okay, I'd like to know about some of them.

P. Letsinger: I talked when I first came, the early part, organizing a fellowship community club and I wanted the full participation of the church environment. So talked on that and the sense of having that because it looked like the people weren't too close together in fellowship of the church. So we got a few people together and we organized and we functioned about 8 years.

P. Bruno: What were your goals?

P. Letsinger: My goal was to bring people together closer, to create more love for each other and have a stronger fellowship in the community. That was the goal.

P. Bruno: How did you do that?

P. Letsinger: Well we organized and we met bi-weekly and later monthly. We got together and had social events and things of that sort. And I think we broke down some barriers that was lying between the people. And I think we had success because we were closer together

P. Bruno: What kind of social functions, dances?

P. Letsinger: Yes, we had dances and we had dinners and different things.

P. Bruno: What else have you given talks on?

P. Letsinger: On the NAACP. I was the president of the NAACP for eight years in Metuchen. So I talked on the purpose of organizing both black and white and the NAACP chapter, which was already organized when I assumed the position. I had to follow up with the previous leader who had organized the NAACP in Metuchen. That was in the 30's.

P. Bruno: At that time how many members were in the NAACP in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Then, approximately between forty and fifty.

P. Bruno: And were these both black and white people?

P. Letsinger: Yes, in the – black and white people.

P. Bruno: And you served on the NAACP for how many years?

P. Letsinger: Eight years.

P. Bruno: Can you tell us a little bit about what you accomplished in that time and you told me that you were active in the 60's also. Why don't you go into a little bit about what you did?

P. Letsinger: We went from town to town and selected membership, membership for the NAACP, the National Advancement of Colored People. And

we tried to cooperate for the purpose on a national level as near as we could. So we had public speakers come in and talk to us sometimes. I remember we had Mr. Roy Wilson, he was the secretary of the NAACP, and Mr. Walter White; that was in the 30's. He came to speak to us on a national level. And we had people from all levels come in to talk from time to time.

P. Bruno: What did they give their talks on?

P. Letsinger: They talked on equal opportunities. Same as today. Equal opportunities and prejudices because of the color of skin of a man and because of his age. And we talked on that then and that's the same goal that they're trying to do now. But digressing a bit, I was at the United Nations in New York. We went all the way through the building and we found one room that was incompleated. And we asked, I think I asked the guide why this room was left incomplete. He said, "All the nations put together, when all the nations are friends we will complete this."

P. Bruno: And this was in the 30's

P. Letsinger: Yes. So what I said, I hope there is a time when we don't need a NAACP, National Organization for the Advancement, I hope I live to see the day. Until then it is very imperative that we fight for justice when justice is left out because of the complexion of the skin or religion or national origin. Until that time, we will continue with the organization.

P. Bruno: So what did you do. In the 30's and in the 40's and when you were active, what did you do to try to bring people together and try to create more equality in this community?

P. Letsinger: We would meet from time to time, as I said before, on a local level.

P. Bruno: Did you get much support from the people in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Yes, we did. We did. I think in that day, those were the early days and people were not as alert then as they are now. Because we had people that to a certain extent would bring us to meet with the news. The only place you could get it was through the papers and half the people didn't read the papers. So we'd get literature from the national office constantly and bring us up to date with what was happening throughout the country; mob lynching, the Klu Klux Klan and such like that. And now we have the same thing now in 1976.

P. Bruno: Have you seen changes within the NAACP over all the years that you've been associated with it?

P. Letsinger: Change of their programs?

P. Bruno: Yes.

P. Letsinger: No, their programs haven't changed. They still maintain the same status as an organization but the public has to change.

P. Bruno: Have you seen changes in the public attitude?

P. Letsinger: I've seen changes. I said this, in the 60's or in the late 50's rather, we didn't have, as I said before, no black participation in Metuchen. So we marched, a peaceful march down to Borough Hall.

P. Bruno: This was in the late 50's?

P. Letsinger: Early 60's. And we got black policemen in Metuchen, we got two of the finest happened to be black. Two of them, which is not what we - we didn't anticipate whether it was a step forward in the right direction. We also had a teller in the bank. We accomplished that with the NAACP under my leadership. In the bank and people worked in the stores, all that participation came from a social march around the Borough Hall.

P. Bruno: So you have seen changes in this community regarding the acceptance of black people?

P. Letsinger: Yes, I have seen changes. As a matter of fact, I witnessed the changes.

P. Bruno: That's great. What about your other organizations? You mentioned that you joined the Masonic Lodge?

P. Letsinger: Yes, I joined the Masonic Lodge in the late 40's.

P. Bruno: Tell me something about that, what is the Masonic Lodge, I don't really know?

P. Letsinger: The Masonic Lodge is a secret organization.

P. Bruno: It's a secret. Oh, so you can't tell me.

P. Letsinger: Secret organization. I can't tell you details but it consists of morality, principles and what have you. It's an organization that binds you together in one meaning. And its purpose is to accept a man's morality and make him fit to make a contribution to not only the local community but to the world. I joined that organization and I was able to reach the very top from the early part of the organization to the last step, which is the Last Degree in Masonry

P. Bruno: What is Masonry?

P. Letsinger: Masonry is the Masonic Lodge, it's a Masonic organization. I don't know if I could give you the interpretation on the Masonic level because it is a secret organization.

P. Bruno: I don't want you tell me any secrets. But is it religious in any way?

P. Letsinger: Yes, the Masonic organization, we get every degree that we have out of the Holy Bible. Every degree from the first degree to the last degree is organized under the Holy Bible. So it is a religious organization.

P. Bruno: I can remember just from listening to other tapes that the Masonic Lodge where it is today used to hold a lot of social functions in the past.

P. Letsinger: Yes, we do too. We have our annual and semi-annual sessions.

P. Bruno: Now is this just a man's organization?

P. Letsinger: No, when you say Masonry, it is a man's, men's. But when you say Eastern Star that's a branch of Masonry that consists of women.

P. Bruno: Is your wife an Eastern Star?

P. Letsinger: Yes, she is. And of course we have men now working as a patron for the Eastern Star for New Jersey and New York. There's a lot of running to do. And there are female Masonic organizations. They are the female Masonic organizations.

P. Bruno: The Eastern star?

P. Letsinger: Yes, the Eastern Star, because it goes on from when they were together.

P. Bruno: And they have different levels and their organization is based on the Bible?

P. Letsinger: Right, the Bible also. Each one has their banner and their charter.

P. Bruno: Okay, how about any other organizations?

P. Letsinger: Civil rights organization. I worked on the Civil Rights Commission also, with Mr. Austin Franks, who was the president of the Civil Rights Commission. I worked with him and others folks.

P. Bruno: What did you accomplish when you were on the Civil Rights Commission?

P. Letsinger: It coordinated the same thing that the NAACP did, fighting for the same principles exactly. The only thing was the Civil Rights Commission was on the local level and the NAACP is on a national level but they functioned on a local level in Metuchen. So our goal was practically the same.

P. Bruno: What was a meeting like when you attended the meetings? What sorts of things were discussed?

P. Letsinger: It was discussed whether or not you had tension, whether a person was denied equal rights, whether there was tension, or there was someone trying to invade another person's responsibilities or another person's character, or trying doing things to keep a person from living in this area or living in that area, trying to break up discrimination. We did run into cases where the Houses a black person was denied the opportunity to live in over here in this area because of his skin

P. Bruno: In Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: In Metuchen. But a lot of those barriers have been broken down, a lot of them but as I say there are a few isolated cases left. Then sometimes we were segregated in the lunchrooms. I remember my brother and I we went to eat lunch. At that time the mayor was Philpot. The man in there didn't want to serve us because of the complexion or our skin. So we had a little confusion there and he put us out. We knew the Mayor, Mayor Philpot, so we called him and he intervened. He came right down and nothing happened but that was the attitude at that time.

P. Bruno: When was this.

P. Letsinger: In the 40's.

P. Bruno: This was a restaurant in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Right out of Metuchen, between Metuchen and Edison, near what is US 1 Highway now. I think you could say it was in Edison now rather than Metuchen.

P. Bruno: Can you remember any other incident that you were directly involved in?

P. Letsinger: In Metuchen?

P. Bruno: Yes.

P. Letsinger: Discriminatory? No I don't remember in Metuchen any discrimination that happened.

P. Bruno: How about any that your friends ran into?

P. Letsinger: I was so busy at that time I only lived in Metuchen. I was gone almost 50 percent of my time. I was out of state in New York and New Jersey, somewhere in New Jersey, so I couldn't keep up with everything but there wasn't any severe cases that I know of.

P. Bruno: Okay and let's get into another area. Besides all these organizations, you were a very active man. Who were some of your friends?

P. Letsinger: Well we had many actually. There was the Wernik family. The Wernik family was our good friends. I knew his grandfather.

P. Bruno: Are you speaking about the Wernik who is the Mayor of Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Yes. They have been our good friends. Then we had the Tate's – both of them are dead now. And you had the Johnson's and the Butler's and Todd's and Milligan's – all of them have died.

P. Bruno: And are these families still in Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Some of them. As I say the Tate's they mostly all died out with the exception of one of the Tate's who is in Metuchen. But the other Tates live in Poughkeepsie, not Poughkeepsie but that town right near Poughkeepsie. What's the name of it? It's near the parkway.

P. Bruno: Freehold?

P. Letsinger: No, no, it's up to the North.

P. Bruno: I think I know what you mean but I can't think of it either. How about a little bit about your wife and children?

P. Letsinger: My wife, we were married and had our fiftieth anniversary in 1973.

P. Bruno: Oh, congratulations!

P. Letsinger: It was sponsored by our three children. The three kids, _____, Ester Marie and Mildred, they got together and said they were going to give us a wedding anniversary so they did. We were married 50 years on August 29th so in September they got the plans put together and they gave us one of the most elaborate anniversaries that I ever witnessed.

P. Bruno: Where was it held at?

P. Letsinger: It was held at the Presbyterian Social Center.

P. Bruno: That must have been great.

P. Letsinger: It was a mixture of black and white.

P. Bruno: All of your friends?

P. Letsinger: We just had - not all really - we had about thirty five people but the friends that we had built up for years and years, everybody said there wouldn't have been a building in Metuchen to hold them. So they just got a few of our close friends and our immediate family.

P. Bruno: Oh that's great.

P. Letsinger: My son, he graduated from Rutgers in 1949 and then he went into the service. The Korean War broke out and so Uncle Sam drafted him so he went in there as a technician in the medical group because he was taking a premed course at Rutgers. After he came back, because at that time money wasn't coming in too plentiful, so he was quite considerate and he said, "I think I'll go into the embalming field," following up on his medical studies. We wanted to make him a doctor being the only son but he had compassion on us, you know, we were getting older and he figured that would strain us too much so he went on his own and got in an embalming school in New York City. So he finished that in two years and he went to New York because in two years of embalming school you can finish but embalming school in New Jersey is for four years. So he stayed in that about two years and the money didn't come the way it should so he went in and he got an application at the City of New York to try for a job because he was a scientist. So he worked himself up and now he's a senior scientist, he works in radiation in New York City and he's the head of the department.

P. Bruno: That's great. What about your daughters?

P. Letsinger: Oldest daughter Esther, she's Esther Chambers now, she was a secretary at Raritan Arsenal for a number of years and then she got a bank job at International Stars in Dunellen. She was the first black person to work there in secretarial work. So she has been there about fourteen years. And Mildred, my other daughter, she was a secretarial clerk also with the government and Camp Kilmer for a while. She left there and she went to Rutgers and still is in Rutgers University. Both of our daughters they deal with the payroll department. So they are doing well. I had three children, we had three children and we never had a moment trouble with them.

P. Bruno: You seem to have a really strong family unit.

P. Letsinger: Yes very tight – all tied together. My son is living in Jamaica, Long Island and I could call if I had any trouble today and he busy as he is, he'd come over. We have that kind of tie.

P. Bruno: It's something that not many families have. I wonder if you can talk about it and how you were able to achieve it in your family.

P. Letsinger: We believed in the old system; the family that prayed together stayed together. So around the table we had prayer and asked God's blessings upon us and we built up in the school in the early part when our children were small, I didn't send them to school, I took them to school. My wife was there many years and I went around in the community and picked up other children and brought them to Sunday School and that's why they raised me so high, as a person needed to be in charge so they made me superintendent of the Sunday School. So that created a strong tie in my family unit and I think prayer did it because we believe in prayer. And I think

that God rewarded us according to our work – not then but now. May I inject this, I believe in the scriptures where David said in the Old Testament, he said he'd never seen the righteous forsaken.

P. Bruno: Beside prayer I would think that our wife and yourself have a good relationship that you were able to share with your children. And you said you are a very understanding man and probably your children are too.

P. Letsinger: Yes they are. You see, from the very beginning our family was close. When we married you hear so much about mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. We were able to avoid that. My mother and my wife's mother had close ties; they were real close to us. And as far as her mother was concerned, my mother in law, she was just so close to me she acted as if she was my own mother and vice versa. My mother had the same relationship to my wife. So we lived with an atmosphere of prayer. We had a tendency wherever you go, East, West, North and South, we still say them. So I still love it, it's how I got this far so I don't think I should change.

P. Bruno: Okay, I just want to ask you a little bit about Metuchen today and just a little bit about your feeling about life. You seem to me to be a very content man. Could you go into that a little bit?

P. Letsinger: Well I get my contentment I believe now because although my activities have subsided because of my age, I can't participate as well as I did, but now when I came to Metuchen they had the YCMA then and they have it now. In 1930 black men were not privileged to join in the YMCA but now I'm working on the Board of Directors. That's how much has changed.

P. Bruno: You were also instrumental in a lot of that change and that has probably given you great satisfaction.

P. Letsinger: Yes. Because of my religious background I guess they asked me. They were having a meeting without prayer and I believe that anything you attempt to do pertinent the good society that we are living in, in order to build up a true and honest structure, I think you should ask God to invoke his blessings on us. So they made me the Chaplain. We had prayer at the meeting and we do that for God. Because if it hadn't been for him I wouldn't have been able to have gotten up this far. I'm constantly counting my blessings. I like to let people know who I'm in contact with just how I stand and for what principles I believe in. But as I said before that I walked the streets of Metuchen for 47 years and I can walk on both sides of the street and look people straight out in the eye because I have nothing to hide. Not that I've been an angel, don't need to get that impression, but I am trying to walk near a certain step because if you make this a rule, you can still do a little good.

P. Bruno: That's great.

P. Letsinger: You see I would like for my last days to be my best days. As I said to the minister last night in our prayer service, I was at a funeral yesterday in Trenton and the minister said that that heathen was a lost soul and he had creased his own shoes while he was living. And that's my hope; that a person creases his own shoes while he's living because it makes it easier for the person who going to use them. He makes his own walk. But if a person is saying one thing and acting in another, he's not only a hypocrite to himself but he's also a hypocrite to people and to God.

P. Bruno: Those are fine principles to live by.

P. Letsinger: I'm not saying that there won't be obstacles. There will be obstacles but as a matter of fact the closer to God man tries to live there will be more obstacles. Remember Job in the Bible? Job was an old patriarch and he was a test tube, God tested him. Satan was the devil and he tested him. He tested him and he had sores on his head and the sores be all over him. The theme was he wanted Job to denounce God and he wouldn't do it. So by holding out he became the man that he was. God brought him back and he had ten children, seven sons and three daughters and all of his family was destroyed and all of his time he was the richest man because God destroyed him more than he ever did.

P. Bruno: Well I don't really have any more questions I want to ask. Do you have anything else that you want to add? I think we've covered everything on my question list.

P. Letsinger: Well all our three children had children, my grandchildren. Should I go into that?

P. Bruno: We have a little bit more time. We were trying to keep this to Metuchen. Maybe if you have any more recollections of Metuchen as a town we can talk about that.

P. Letsinger: Well Metuchen has grown because of the new people coming into town and making their homes. It's still considered a residential town. It was then when I came in and it still is.

P. Bruno: What do you think of the growth? Do you think it's a good thing?

P. Letsinger: I welcome it, I welcome it because we brought in black and whites and we get along fairly well together. Folks are aware of an organization where two or three people, the oldest ones, might disagree. But it's nothing bad to disagree. Normally we don't disagree but disagreeing is good, it's healthy to disagree. So we have I guess an expansion of the program that we had when we came to Metuchen, with more people involved. But we have the churches, the YMCA. We have the same amount of churches. We have Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic, Lutheran and two Baptist. There is about seven churches.

P. Bruno: What is the size of your congregation at the Baptist?

P. Letsinger: Now it is increased to 175.

P. Bruno: And when you came to Metuchen?

P. Letsinger: Roughly twenty-five.

P. Bruno: Twenty-five, wow.

P. Letsinger: Well, you see, a lot more people have moved into town. When I came I guess there were only about six or seven black families. And now there's a larger group so you see it looks like you had started with 25 and now we got 175 but all the churches have expanded also the same way. But I welcome this, I think this is progress and I welcome this. I think it's progress and wherever there is progress I welcome it.

P. Bruno: Well that's great. I think that we'll end it now and thank you very much. I think this will be a good tape.

P. Letsinger: Well thank you.

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