

Lancaster County Historical Society
African-American Veterans Oral History Project

Interviewer: Carole LeFever

Interviewee: Nelson Polite

Location: Home of Nelson Polite

Subject: American Legion Post 780

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Transcriber: Miles Shugar

[] indicates uncertainty of what was spoken

Polite: How 'bout the voice?

LeFever: Voice would be good.

P: Can you tell?

L: Mmhm. Okay, today we are uh, in North Street, and I've forgotten the address already.

P: 540 North Street.

L: 540 North Street at the home of Nelson Polite Junior.

P: Senior.

L: Senior! Oh, messin' up again already! You know what? I'm gonna stop. Okay, today is the 17th of...

P: October.

L: October, and uh—

P: We're in the home of Nelson Polite *Senior*, I live at 540 *North Street*, Lancaster Pennsylvania.

L: Okay. And I'm interviewing today, my name is Carole Lefever and we're going to focus on the beginning of American Legion Post 780, of which Nelson Polite was the charter member. So Mr. Polite—

P: Yesss...

L: --Can you tell me anything of, of your memory of the conversation or the thoughts or, or what set this in motion at this time?

P: Yeah, I uh...slightly remember, it's been a long time. 1946.

L: '46, yes.

P: And um, in those days um, things were segregated as far as clubs, even the American Legion. And um, I think um, maybe a couple of us were allowed to get in but uh, just a few. So we wanted our own post, American Legion post, in our own part of the town. So uh, a group of us veterans got together and, and met probably at the um, Crispus Attacks Center, of course that was—or the Elks, probably the Elks. That was close. And we found a place, I think its 444 um, South Duke Street. The number. And uh, we were able to um, get in the building and set up um, Post 780 and I understand that the local American Legion Post 73—Post uh 34, I guess it is, assisted us in getting the charter through.

L: Now you had said that some of you were able to get into the um, original Elk—or original American Legion. Do you remember any of the people who were, who were in both put it that way?

P: I believe uh, James Jones and maybe Arthur Brown.

L: And they were part of your charter membership too.

P: Yeah, but uh, they, you could feel the, the tension and they didn't want us there.

L: Mmhm.

P: So they certainly helped us to get our own post started and give us emphasis to, or the, or the drive to do our own thing. We uh, put our moneys in, and got our charter, and uh, and I want to give that charter to the um, Crispus Attucks Center, the original charter with all the names, and, and it's gonna be a nice piece for posterity.

L: Uh, you are one of the living charter members, the other two are Sidney Bridgett and Donald K. Wilson. And um, I do understand that Sidney Bridgett was historian. Can you tell me something about the structure of that original group, or what you remember about the beginning of it, uh, of which ya know, figuring out the structure would be part.

P: Well in any organization you gotta have what we call like a "president" who would be commander, and an Agitant, and um, Treasurer, Secretary, those type of things. And um, incidentally, as Sidney Bridgett and I were inducted into the military in World War II in 1943, and um we, a little tid-bit is that we, um, were in the same barracks and uh, I can never forget the experience that I had uh, of young men, we'd have bunk beds in those days and he slept above me—

L: Mmhm.

P:--And I was in the bottom bunk. And all night long, he would grit his teeth. Hahaha.

L: Hahaha.

P: That's a tid-bit, little tid-bit. But other than that, uh, we had a great time. And we got started in the military in World War II back in 1943. Um, the, we have of course our lessons and um, some of the older gentleman were, Arthur Brown was one of the lead persons to get it started. Um, we had set up um a nice club, and there was also a bar put in for the members to um, have libations if they wanted it. And of course, we used the um, the Elks whenever we had a ball or anything like that because the building we had was too small, so um hopefully you'll see uh, the uniform I wore and my wife was with me and um, I think it was Leon [Glover], he was also there.

L: Mmhm.

P: And then uh, my best buddy and uh, hopefully I can find those photographs that uh, to share with uh the community.

L: Well I do, I do believe we're going to be able to uh, get a, get a picture of you and your wife at the military ball. Was that the one in, uh, this was the uniform and let me...add that at this point now. Now this is a picture of you and your wife, uh, do you want to tell me something about where you were and the uniform you wear?

P: Well actually that was the, the night we [more or less] got engaged at the military ball which we had um, if I remember right it was at the, at the Elks right next door and um her name was Jean—Jean Wilson? And um—

L: So she was still Jean Wilson at this point.

P: Oh yeah.

L: You're engaged. When did you get married?

P: 1950.

L: Mmhm. So this then was in 1948 at the military ball.

P: Yes.

L: Okay. Uh, this is another side that I heard from Sidney Bridgett just yesterday. He credits you with saving his life by choosing him as a typist and helping him avoid being sent over with a uh, a company that wound up facing very heavy casualties. Um, and I forgot what was it, the Battle of the Bulge?

P: The Bulge. You were right, that's uh--

L: He does, he credits that with uh, with, with that important role in his lie.

P: When I went into service, the, the uh we all worked together in, in I think it was Indiantown Gap, and uh, um, he um, people said to me um, Sergeant said to me uh, or anybody, can anybody type? Well I had had the commercial course, it was in high school and I was able to type, and I was a pretty good typist. So I raised my hand and right away he pulled me aside and set me up on um, a test, he had a typewriter there and I had to sit down and um, prove to him that I could type.

L: Aha.

P: And I, I did whatever I did and so everybody in, in my, that unit, that, that group that went in for uh, we our, physicals, and colors, got our clothing, shoes, and um, all the other things that are necessary, they all left. Went someplace. And, and uh, I stayed behind. And um...

L: Because you could type.

P: Because I could type, I guess. And, and, and I found that, uh, I stayed around there for, for maybe a couple weeks in the barracks and everyone else had left. Finally, uh, orders came down for me to move to uh, to, to the, in those days we used the railroads, PRR and uh we left the, there and got on this train and it just run, run all day and all night and seemed like um we were in California to me. And here we ended up in uh, Western Pennsylvania! Haha.

L: Haha.

P: That's how slow we was movin'. It was a troop change.

L: Right.

P: And they were in no hurry.

L: Did they make a lot of stops along the way?

P: A lot of stops along the way. And, and uh I ended up in a place called uh, near Butler, Pennsylvania. It was Pittsburgh first, and then up, up to Butler, Pennsylvania. And that's up getting close to uh, the northern part of the state. Cold country.

L: Mmhm.

P: And uh, that's where I ended up in uh, place called Camp [Shinengo] that I think is gone today, probably uh, some kind of a shopping center now. And that's gone, and that's where I ended up.

L: Now is that were you met uh, Mr. Bridgett?

P: Yes.

L: Okay.

P: And uh, they, they put me in the, barracks with all these older soldiers who, who were on their way overseas. *Phone Rings* Excuse me.

L: Now the, the uh post was named after Sidney Bridgett's brother Howard.

P: I didn't finish my story.

L: Oh, hahaha. Please finish your story. Hahaha

P: Anyway, you can cut that out.

L: Gonna start that one all over. Okay.

P: And they put me up in these barracks, up in Pennsylvania, with all these older soldiers and they kept lookin' at me and it was an old barracks with just a couple of potbelly stoves, one in the, one in the middle and a couple at the ends. Cold country, and anyway um, they said, "Boy what are you doing up here? We're older and we're getting ready to go overseas. Did you have your basic training?" I said, "No, I had no basic training."

L: Ahh.

P: "You mean to tell me they're going to send you overseas with no basic training!?" Well of course I didn't know, I mean I'm under their control. So um, anyway, finally in a couple days someone come in and told me to move out of that barracks to another barracks. So what they did they, I was up there as what they call cadre, that's the a group that's, that, that runs the base.

L: Mmhm.

P: It runs the companies, and takes care of all the military records. And um...

L: An administrative-type position.

P: An administrative position, yeah. So that's where I was supposed, I suppose I was. They put me in the cadre, no training, just, just got in and I was—

L: 'Cause you could type.

P: I learned because of my commercial background in schools. Well, I st—I stayed there for, for um, maybe a year and a half, two years and, through that kind of work and they decided to send me overseas. Then the ward that I couldn't go overseas because I had no basic training. Hehe. So I went into the army backwards. Anyway, I, I would, they sent me to different camps all over Virginia, and Pennsylvania places, and I got my basic training and, and by the time I got everything wrapped up, special schools um, the war in Europe was over and, and uh, they shipped me to California and sent me over to the, to the, to the East and um, and they decided that anyone who had over, over a year, they didn't have to go overseas. So I didn't go on, I got discharged in California and get on that train again and—

L: Troop train?

P: No, that was a regular train.

L: Mmhm.

P: To save a hundred dollars or so, I rode coach rather than get a sleeper. And I tell you my, when I got into Chicago I was so beat as a young man I was beat, and dirty, that was quite a trip. But I saved a hundred dollars.

L: Hahaha. I guess so. Hahaha.

P: Haha. It was important to me long ago.

L: It was worth it then.

P: So that's, that's uh.

L: Mmhm.

P: That's why I didn't go overseas.

L: Right, well. In, in talking about the group that you all formed when you came back, um. I had noted uh and we spoke yesterday with Sidney Bridgett about his brother and he gave me some information about his service, but um, how did you choose him to be the one to honor? Do you remember how your group uh chose him or was he the first casualty, is that—

P: He was the casualty.

L: --And so that was, that wasn't hard to figure out then.

P: No, that's why he was chosen. One thing about the post is that we, we can't forget is that, with this, with this bar that we had, uh, we were able to dispense, well we dispensed alcohol. And, and, the um, somebody turned us in. Dan Parker was the bartender, and the liquor control board came in and tried to arrest him, shut us down.

L: He didn't have a correct license?

P: He had no license.

L: Mhmm.

P: Of course it was only for members, but. But that's, that's why the post folded.

L: Oh.

P: After that, that incident they shut us down.

L: There was no opportunity to apply for a license?

P: I don't think we ever tried. I don't think that uh, we could afford it, and there was a license just next door. And one, just a couple doors below that, John Sturgis had a license.

L: Mmhm.

P: So there was just too many licenses in the area.

L: Right. Can you remember some of the things beyond the highlight to fight wonderful military ball some of the things that uh, you feel as a member you gained from it, or some of the things you did? Was it a place to come and heal for some of the soldiers after the war, what, what, how would you describe it while was in existence, this group?

P: Well we had a great comradery because we were, we were all veterans. And, we'd been away three of four years from family and many had went overseas and many of 'em didn't come back, and um, and my um, my brother in law, Leonard Wilson, he was in the Battle of Bulge and he was wounded pretty well, pretty bad, and um, his family, of course my wife, was his sister at that time, was very concerned about him, and he went into the Bulge and got into the hospitals, and come back and uh even though he was a, a veteran who served overseas and got wounded there was discrimination all the way back home, on trains, buses.

L: The trip home, you mean.

P: Yeah, the way he was treated. Caucasian veterans were greeted with uh, cheers and uh, military, the black military veterans and it was just the opposite. It was just unfortunate that in this country we went over and fought and fought and some died for our freedom. We still didn't have our freedom when we got back here.

L: Do you remember some of the discrimination in the hospital with some of his wounds?

P: I guess he got treated all right, but it was just the, just the attitudes.

L: You were segregated, soldiers were segregated in the hospitals too.

P: Yeah, well, I and, I don't know about that so much but—

L: Okay.

P: It was what it seemed one kind of treatment, and of course we didn't have the black military doctors like we have today. Um, segregation was quite rampant in those days. I remember, and I tell all the time, when I went down south at Fort Lee, Fort Lee Virginia, of course it was Camp Lee in those days, to uh, take my basic training, and everything was segregated, the units were all segregated, the officers were all Caucasian.

L: Mmhm.

P: And we couldn't get any higher than Master Sergeant. I finally got as high as Staff Sergeant. Anyway, um, whenever we had a break to come home on, on leave, [Millersville], somebody making money got a tractor trailer, got a bench down the middle, and a bench down the side, maybe one light in the middle, and they would, they would haul veterans from Virginia, up to York, or Philadelphia, and we would get off. It was a cheap ride—

L: So these were private people did this?

P: Yes, private people.

L: Okay.

P: And in this, this was, once we got off the, and then we got into Lancaster we'd get on a train, bus, once we got to York we'd get on a bus, it all depended on which way we went. And, and, but, we had like a weekend pass from Fort Lee, Virginia which is near Petersburg, Virginia, we would uh, Sunday night get on, get on a train in Lancaster and go into Philadelphia, transfer—

L: Mmhm.

P: And get on a train going south, get on a train to Washington D.C., and as soon as got into Washington D.C. and we got off the train, in those days you, you always had to wear your uniform every minute of the day, and um, we got off the train in Washington D.C., the black porter would uh run up and grab every black soldier and make sure that he went to a special coach, and the coach was up behind the caboose, I'm sorry, up behind the coal tender, those days the trains you'd use coal to fire up the bellows and things, and behind the coal tender is where our coach was which meant we were right up front. We went over that fireman on the engine would open the door, and, and throw coal into the

uh, the furnace, all that soot would come up over the top and into that front coach where we were.

L: No wonder you were tired and dirty when you got home then! Haha.

P: Haha. And, and, our first uh, that, that, that, coach was always, it was not like the other coaches, you know. There again they had like a bench down the ends, the sides—

L: Spartan, very sparse.

P: A bench down the middle, just one little light in the top, and that's what we had to ride, in uniform, going south.

L: Mmhm.

P: But then we'd walk back to the end of the car and look through to the end cars where the white, or Caucasian soldiers were, they were sitting up in plush seats, like a—

L: Like a normal passenger train?

P: Yeah, so it was, it was just the way they treated black soldiers, even though we were fighting for the country.

L: Now do you remember when you returned home, um, after the, after the end of your service? Was there any kind of ceremony, or, or what was your sense of returning home, I'm home, that's it, or was there something more to it?

P: No we all c-c, got discharged at different times.

L: Mmhm.

P: And uh, like, like myself, I was only by myself, it wasn't a whole unit getting discharged.

L: Okay.

P: You see photographs where troops are marching down New York City, lots of troops, nothing like that.

L: You just got home and were glad of it.

P: And was glad of it. I didn't want to, I was drafted at at, the, piece of, it was a telegram in those days. It said, greetings!

L: Haha.

P: Haha. You are wanted!

L: Ooh.

P: And you are hereby drafted uh, to uh, enter the service and you gotta report a certain day or time, and that was it.

L: That was it, no choice.

P: No choice.

L: Can you remember anything about that ending, you did say it was the situation of the license, or, or, maybe even let's step back, can you remember any stories or, um, incidents that will explain something about the character of, of, what that was when you all got together at 780.

P: Well it was a great reunion, it was something for us to do uh, and uh—

L: A social club pretty much then.

P: Yeah, yeah. And none of us didn't belong to the Elks, we didn't have a membership there, and none of us wanted to drink at the other bars, there was down the street, and so, so, uh, we'd sit around play cards, had meals, we had a kitchen. It was just great for veterans to be together and enjoy themselves—

L: Right.

P: —And plan for military events that we always had.

L: What were some examples of the military events beyond the ball and did you have a ball every year?

P: I believe we did, yes, and uh, we would uh, plan for the, the parades that they had around Memorial Day, and uh, we ya know, to parade in uh, in Lancaster and go out to the uh, Stevens [Greenen], which is the black cemetery—

L: Alright.

P:—on South Duke Street, and honor our veterans. I was also a member of the McCaskey High School Band. Ya know, and of course the old East Junior band, and I also played at the Strawberry Street School.

L: What did you play?

P: I played trumpet, and uh, I had got lessons and uh, so I went all through all through school playing trumpet. So when I uh, got out of the military I still could play my trumpet and uh, I can't, I, I, can't remember how many of veterans that I played TAPS over at the Stevens [Greenen], [Greenen] cemetery.

L: See education is a good thing, you were able to not only avoid going overseas but to serve this important, uh, role in your community.

P: Well it wasn't uh, before I went overseas I had no control over that.

L: Mmhm.

P: But uh, that's just a thing. Before I left this house, my mother, first time I ever saw her cry, she gave me my last meal before I left, she said now, she said goodbye, and she said, just like I said, you'll never go overseas, just like that.

L: Mother's perceptions are pretty amazing.

P: I'll never forget that. That's just it. And I did nothing, you know, but uh, it's fate, and uh, if I'd have to go I would have went, but uh, I did not, I didn't love, I didn't enjoy being in the service.

L: Mmhm.

P: Of course well you know me because I was drafted and I made the most of it. I didn't try to, to desert, because I saw many, many soldiers desert and do all kinds of things to get out, but uh, I did none of that. I made the most of it and I was a good soldier.

L: I've heard that.

P: I, I, even though, even though I didn't have any basic training, really I had basic training as boy scout before I left. They taught me how to march, give commands, they taught me how to tie maybe twenty knots, and the army does the same knots, and all those kinds of things, they taught me how to live out in the open under, under a pup tent, and uh...

L: Wasn't there a connection between Sidney Bridgett and you through the boy scouts too?

P: Yep, yep, you know we were in the boy scouts together.

L: Aha.

P: And I got to be the scout master. But that's, that's, that was important to me, it put me ahead of everybody else in my unit because of being a boy scout I had those skills, and uh, I got to be a corporal pretty fast, a buck sergeant giving commands, and eventually a staff sergeant giving commands, and that's because I had the heads up on most of the people in my unit, and uh...

L: You knew your pupil. Haha. That's always I think been a strength of yours. Hahaha.

P: That's why it's always best to be prepared for anything, anything you do in life. You get the best education that you can get because you never know when you're going to use it, and, and, and, it's like, it's like that typewriter. Ya know, I, I, I was good at it, and uh, put to use, just like I say. Even today I can still type on my computer, every day.

L: That's the first time I used it since high school is when the computers came in and who'd have known? Haha.

P: Yep.

L: Well, are there any final memories you have, uh, the loss of the group, uh, the, the feeling after it was gone, what came next, what you did to deal with that, or, or, did you not have to deal with it, life just goes on sometimes?

P: No we, no we just moved on with life. What I did was uh, I um, I helped to form uh, Junior Herd Drummer Bugle Corps at the Elks and um, people like um Clarence Dorcy and or uh, Curtis, Albert Curtis, Harrison Jackson, uh, George Proctor, and I was one, I had the uh, there again I used my skill as a bugler, and I had all the bugles, trained them, how to play, play the bugles, and uh, we together established this Junior Herd Drummer Bugle Corps.

L: The Junior what was the word?

P: Junior Herd.

L: Junior Herd, who is Junior Herd?

P: The elks run in herds, follow me?

L: Oh, the herds, Junior Herds! I thought it was a person named Junior whose last name was Herd! Haha. Good I asked.

P: No, Junior. So rather than being the Elks themselves as the junior they called them the junior—

L: Okay, I got you.

P: —herds.

L: Elks in training.

P: Mmhm. So uh, yeah, that's going great. And uh, we, we established at least 75 of the 100 kids, and uh—

L: Wow, what ages?

P: Well I don't know, just uh, whoever wanted to come and follow the rules.

L: You were there, you were a part of it if you could follow the rules.

P: And we had a lot of support from the community and we would practice every night in the streets.

L: Where would you practice? What streets?

P: In the streets.

L: Just anywhere you'd gather up different times?

P: Up and down streets, up and down these streets. And people respected us. People would come out clapping, little kids would be clapping.

L: Oh that's wow, so this was pretty much in the 7th ward?

P: Yeah, pretty much right here.

L: What time of the day would you practice, after school, evening?

P: After schools. And uh, in the summertime, usually in the summertime, and, and we would uh, practice 'til dark and then the kids would go home and go to bed, they didn't hang around.

L: Run the streets.

P: And some of those youngsters, well I guess they're not youngsters anymore but members of that group, even today thank me for sticking with them and—

L: Giving them a focus.

P: Giving them a little boost, and uh, a lot of 'em did okay, ya know, they stayed out of trouble. We had a championship drummer bugle corps—

L: What year, what year was there a championship?

P: I don't remember.

L: Mmhm.

P: But uh, in the fifties.

L: Mmhm.

P: And uh, we, we traveled there again, we traveled as far as um, Chicago, on the train.

L: Again.

P: New York, [Lank City], Delaware, you know, all over.

L: The drum and bugle corps, my own grandmother who was a nurse in World War II who marched in a drum and a bugle corps. I think that was in white and black societies in off, something that happened as a result of the war and, and that military fervor if you will.

P: Yeah, that's why ya know, I got into that, because I had the training and uh—

L: Exactly.

P: And uh, we were good.

L: I think you must have been. Now I wanna ask you this, would you say it sounds like the Elks and uh, the Veterans Association were kinda supported each other. When the one, the VA, met its demise so to speak or ended the slack then was taken by the Elks club, you were there with your Drum and Bugle Corps. It was a real part of the

community then. Do you want to just describe that in ending because it was the next thing that came?

P: Well as I said before, the uh, the Drum Corps and a lot of the members from the veterans gave support when I was really active, the men that I mentioned were not veterans, but I was probably the only veteran, but they gave all kinds of support

L: It was a community thing.

P: Yeah, uh, and especially with the parents, we had real good support from parents. Because we had to raise money to get uniforms, to buy instruments.

L: It brought people together.

P: Yeah, so we um, ladies would sell all kinds of food, um, at the Elks.

L: Mmhm.

P: And um, we would uh, that's when we raised the funds to uh, support the um, Drum and Bugle Corps. But it was a blessing for the community in those days because uh, as I said before, it uh, it gave some discipline to some kids because they had to either shape up or ship out, we didn't have any foolishness. Ya know we got on that street and in order to win, you had to be together.

L: Mmhm.

P: And you know, we had nice uniforms, and we kept our shoes, we had white shoes, white boots, and we had to keep them polished and clean, and the uniform had to be pressed.

L: Discipline.

P: Yes, it was discipline. And we would, we would uh get in step, somebody would get out of step I could see it right away, haha, and some people had a rough time keeping in step. But uh, I remember Phyllis Campbell, she was one of the drum majorettes. And uh, Margie Hill, a drum majorette.

L: Now were any of the young ladies part of the musical corps, were they all in the role—so they did both.

P: Yep, it was mixed. We didn't discriminate. If you could play a horn, we, we, the guys did all the drumming, but some of the girls did bugles. I think Chet Stewart was in there, and um...

L: It sounds like another story, sounds like we need to get together again.

P: Yeah, it was great.

L: It was great. Thank you very much.

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