

Arthur Levitsky (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by Vivian Jackson and Eric Johnson (2006)

My name is Arthur Levitsky. I was born in Boston, MA in 1923. I grew up in Roxbury and I lived in the same house for 57 years. My neighborhood was very poor, but it was cosmopolitan. We had all different kinds of stores that were available at that time. We didn't have Malls, but we had a cobbler, a bakery, and everything we needed. We were the only Jewish family in an all Irish neighborhood. One of Boston's Mayor's was born there — that was Mayor Collins.

When I was growing up the kids were great. The people in the neighborhood all had talent. Everyone loved each other. We'd had all kinds of extravaganzas like picnics, parties, bazaars. It was very jovial. I was one of five children. We lived with my mother and father and my grandparents. In those days most people lived together in the same house. My mother's name was Fanny Bloom, my father was Joseph Levitsky. I had one brother and three sisters. My brother, Edward, was the oldest. My sisters were Ruth, Edna, and Helen, and I also had an adopted sister Carol. I was the baby! We always had two dogs. They were cocker spaniels. Their names were Nellie & Jib. They were both brown and white ... like twins. They were very cute.

Did I like to play outside? Well, occasionally. But when I was growing up, I was over protected. I wasn't allowed to hang around on the corner, or at the drug store. I always had to come in by 9:00 PM. We had a strict curfew because we had to get up and go to school the next day. We got into mischief but it was mostly just fun. And my favorite thing was reading books. I loved school and I was good at it so I didn't have to study much. My father raised us to be interested in books and to study, so that's what we did. When I got home from school, I had to do my homework before I could do anything else. If I finished my homework, I could listen to the radio. There was no television then.

When I was young everyone played together. The kids were all ages, and in those days we'd go to the gym. It was either the YMCA or the Roxbury Boys Club. We had all kinds of activities. We had amateur shows. We made our own enjoyment because we didn't have fancy toys or anything. We had to make our own fun. So my main entertainment was playing the piano.

When I was your age I liked to go roller skating, ice skating, dancing, dating. And if we went out on a date, we'd get pizza or Chinese food. My favorite kind of food now is seafood; I love clams, scallops, shrimp.

Yes, I had chores to do when I was in high school. We'd have to go over to Harold St. and pick up the Jewish paper in my father's Ford. And we had to clean the cinders from the furnace in the cellar, clean the house, and do the shopping. Yes, I did the shopping!

No, I never got in trouble with my parents, but there were times when they said something was for my own good, and I didn't understand what that was. Being young, of course you think enjoyment is most important. When I got into trouble, my parents got rid of my friends. They told them never to come over again. I went to the Boston Public Schools, all the way through high school. I graduated from Roxbury Memorial High School. I went to college then I went to school to learn stenotype— machine short hand, then I became a court reporter. At first I had to go to school every night, then it got down to three-nights a week. I paid for it myself.

The biggest thing that happened in my early years was that we had the Depression. It was so bad that we had nothing. No one had anything. We were all lucky just to get along. When I got out of high school, it was a big change. It was hard to adapt. I had to let go of too much, and it was very confining. There was no time for anything but work. I'd come home, go to bed, get up, go back to work. It was very monotonous, but we all had to do what we could to bring in the food and take care of the family.

I couldn't go into the military because I had a deviated septum and a perforated ear drum. I got that from swimming. But I worked part time in a hardware store, then I worked part time in an antique shop, and eventually I went to work at Fort Devens. So I got a good job with the government. Then, when I was older, the Second World War really affected our lives. I wasn't able to go in the military. so I went to work in Washington DC as Secretary to the Lt. Commander of the Bureau of Aeronautics, and I liked that very much.

In 1949 I started my job working for the City of Boston. The best job I ever had was being the Assistant Secretary to the Boston School Committee. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. It was a real surprise because I was the first Jewish fellow that ever got appointed to the job. It was a new beginning, and I opened things up for other people after me. I never thought I would get the job since I was one of 35 who took the exam and I was the only man who showed up. So I passed the exam and got the job.

My mother was very seriously ill and I had to go to the hospital and take care of her. She lost one of her legs to diabetes, then she was about to lose the other leg and go blind, but God was good and took her, and that was it. It happened because they didn't have much in the way of medical breakthroughs when I was young. Today, she would have lived because there are so many more things they can do.

I never drove a car because I never could get my license. I failed every time I went up for the drivers test! But I did have a bicycle. The furthest I've traveled from my home was going to Europe four times. I went to London, Rome, Copenhagen, and Scotland. That's the most that I've traveled.

Summer is my favorite season, but I also enjoy the snow in winter time. I don't mind snow because I always loved ice skating, skiing, all winter sports. We use to go to New

Hampshire for the weekends.

My favorite music is gospel music. I collect gospel records— I love Mahalia Jackson! My favorite song would be What Are You Doing the Rest of My Life by Ann Murray. I love Ann Murray! I play the piano and I like to sing but I love to dance. See, this is a picture of me when I was young. I use to dance on stage. Tap dancing.

The biggest adventure I've ever had in my life. Well, getting married, of course, and when I became Assistant Secretary of the Boston School Committee. I wish I could have followed my show business career (dancing), but at that time, it was more important to find a job that paid a weekly salary. My mother and sister said there was no future in show business, and I was very sad that I wasn't permitted to go ahead and try it. The thing that gives me the most happiness now is the fact that I'm able to support myself. I have a beautiful wife who takes very good care of me and that's a wonderful thing. As you get older, you need people more and more. The most important advice I could give you is to be good to people, to share what you have, to live life together, and to get along.

My favorite story that I love to tell about my life is that when other people had given up on the world, I was just getting started. Most people retire at 65, but I was just getting married at 64 years old. I was having a new beginning. I didn't know how long I would last, and thank God, we've had 17 wonderful years together so far.