

**EI-198**

**EDITH INGEBORG PLOWSTRUP CUNNINGHAM**

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**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

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**DENMARK, 1928**

**AGE 5**

**PORT: COPENHAGEN**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **DENMARK: ODENSE**
- **THE US: LANSINGBURG, NY**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, July 30, 1992. I'm here in upstate New York, in Lansingburg, with Mrs. Edith Cunningham, who came from Denmark in November of 1928, when she was five years old. Also present in the Cunningham house is Mr. Cunningham. I want to just thank you for doing this. And can we start off by you giving me your maiden name, please.

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CUNNINGHAM: Surely. Plowstrup.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

CUNNINGHAM: Plowstrup. P-L-O-W-S-T-R-U-P.

SIGRIST: And what is your date of birth, please?

CUNNINGHAM: 1/23, or, uh, I'm sorry. 1/28/23.

SIGRIST: Okay. So that's January 28, 1923.

CUNNINGHAM: Right.

SIGRIST: Where were you born?

CUNNINGHAM: In Odense. That's spelled O-D-E-N-S-E.

SIGRIST: Whereabouts in Denmark is that?

CUNNINGHAM: Um, well, it's on the, in Jutland, Jutland, J-U-T-L-A-N-D.

SIGRIST: Is that sort of up . . .

CUNNINGHAM: No. It is, actually it's across, straight, from Copenhagen, the capital of.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe this town a little bit for me, what it looked

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like?

CUNNINGHAM: Hmm. Cobblestone streets. Hans Christian Andersen lived a few blocks from us, or his home place was there. And I can tell you what the street where we lived looked like.

SIGRIST: Sure.

CUNNINGHAM: That was cobblestone, had a boulevard down the middle. And I can remember seeing wagons drawn by horses with sugar beets, of all things, on it. On our street there was, in our, where we lived, there was a bake shop on the corner, and on the other side of the house was a candy store. And I can remember they had those eggs that you can look inside, the candy eggs, whatever they were made of. And, um, my father had a shop within walking distance. He was a shoemaker. We used to walk there. I can remember going down some street, Lord knows where, to get milk in a bucket. Weird. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Can you describe the inside of your father's shop for me?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. It had a counter, of course, and all kinds of shoe repair tools. And I can remember the stool he sat on. There was another man who worked for him. Just an ordinary shop, dark, as I remember, though.

SIGRIST: Was this a big town, a small town?

CUNNINGHAM: It's certainly not a small town. Not as big as Copenhagen, but a good

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size.

SIGRIST: Would you call it cosmopolitan, though, as opposed to . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, no, no. Certainly not then.

SIGRIST: What was the major industry, do you think, in this town?

CUNNINGHAM: There was some ship building, I know. Other than that, I wouldn't know.

SIGRIST: Were you on the coast?

CUNNINGHAM: I'm not positive if we were, or if we had to travel to get to the coast. I know my father worked in the shipyard when we were waiting for the papers to come through to come over here.

SIGRIST: I see. Can you describe the house that you lived in for me?

CUNNINGHAM: From the inside, we lived on the second floor. And I can remember the kitchen. I can remember all the rooms.

SIGRIST: Can you just kind of walk me through it and just sort of verbalize what you see?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, you came into the living room. It was a pretty good size. It had two windows in it. Then you would go into a dining area, and then you'd go into the bedrooms. The kitchen was on this side, the

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bedroom was on the left side.

SIGRIST: How was it heated?

CUNNINGHAM: That I can't remember. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't know. I know we had candles on the Christmas tree. So we probably didn't have electrical lights for the trees. I don't know.

SIGRIST: You said you were on the second floor. Can you describe what the outside of the building looked like?

CUNNINGHAM: It was just a plain, straight up and down, no porches or anything like that.

SIGRIST: Free-standing or attached?

CUNNINGHAM: No, it was attached. The bake shop on the corner, and the candy store here, but it was all attached.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

CUNNINGHAM: That I can't be certain of either.

SIGRIST: So on the first floor was there some sort of business also?

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CUNNINGHAM: Under us? No, I don't think so. I think that was an apartment. I can remember the backyard. I can remember the outhouses.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the outhouses?

CUNNINGHAM: It just came to me. I can remember they were lined up along the one side. There were maybe four or five of them, you know, one building, one thing, and then maybe stalls, I guess you could call them. I can remember a lilac bush in the corner of the yard. Strange. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: And as you start thinking . . . Um, what was your father's name?

CUNNINGHAM: Andrew. Andrew Peter.

SIGRIST: And was he from this town?

CUNNINGHAM: Originally, you mean? No, he was not. He was from another town. I don't remember the name of it.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like, if you had to verbalize it?

CUNNINGHAM: Handsome, very handsome. Dark hair. By dark I mean dark brown. He had brown eyes. He was a good-looking man.

SIGRIST: What was his temperament like?

CUNNINGHAM: Back then he was like very buoyant, then later on he became ill.

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SIGRIST: When you were a child in this town in Denmark did you ever go visit him in his shop?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. I remember walking there with his lunch. Mother and I, Mother and my sister and brother and I would walk to the shop with his lunch. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What would you take him for food for lunch?

CUNNINGHAM: That I don't know either.

SIGRIST: Something that your mother prepared.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

CUNNINGHAM: Ingeborg. I-N-G-E-B-O-R-G. It's my middle name.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

CUNNINGHAM: Holt. H-O-L-T.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, in the Danish church here in Lansingburg.

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SIGRIST: So they were here?

CUNNINGHAM: When they met, yeah. They both were born, naturally, born in Denmark, came separately here, met here and were married here and my older sister was born here, and then they went back to Denmark.

SIGRIST: What year did your father come, do you know?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, gee, let me see. The first time, oh, I'd say 1910, something like that.

SIGRIST: And is that approximately the same for your mother?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, I'd say so. Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you know a lot about their individual histories, why they came at that time?

CUNNINGHAM: I think probably for adventure. Get out of the, well, they were both in a farm situation, and my mother was into being a companion for other, in other families for the, usually for the wife, and help with the children, and so on. They call them "companions." And because of that, she had opportunities to travel. She came here, and she was in West Point for quite a while and was a companion to the wife of, I can't remember his name. I can't remember his name, it might come to me. And they eventually, in the army. They eventually had to go to Hawaii, so mother went with them, and spent a year there, and told me the stories about Oahu and how the island was just one road

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around the edge. That's all there was.

SIGRIST: What did a Danish woman think of Hawaii?

CUNNINGHAM: She said she was lonely, very lonely. And, of course, being in the barracks, they had to stay in the barracks, scary. She told me how the buildings were up on poles and away from the ground, so to speak, and they were told not to mingle with the natives, and so on.

SIGRIST: That's an interesting story in itself. Tell me a little bit about what your dad did when he first came here.

CUNNINGHAM: He was a shoemaker all the time. He was taught that as a child. He wanted to be a musician, but they weren't thought of much in those days.

SIGRIST: What instrument did he play?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, he played flute and violin. He taught me the harmonica. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: So when he came here did he come right to Lansingburg?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yeah. Everybody knew about this Danish colony here, see?

SIGRIST: And you said they met in the church.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

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SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the Danish church and its involvement in the community?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah. It was, I can remember the story Mother told about first coming here, the very first time. And she took a, it could have been a trolley up the, I think, Second Avenue, and she had to look for a church spire, you know, the tower, whatever you call it. And it was a new church then, and she did find it, but she had to walk quite a ways to get there. And the name of the minister was Jacobsen, J-A-C-O-B-S-E-N. And he took her in, and she lived at the parsonage for a while until she got established, and then she got a job here in Lansingburg, again as a companion, and worked for two different families that I can think of now, and stayed with the minister and his family.

SIGRIST: Did they have any respective families of their own here, your father or your mother?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, they both did, but that was in Newburg.

SIGRIST: Which is a distance from here.

CUNNINGHAM: Uh-huh, yeah. That was in Newburg. But they wanted to come up here, again, because of the Danish colony they'd heard so much about, and that's why they moved north.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit to me about what your mother and/or your father might have said about them getting accustomed to America that first time.

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Did they learn English, for instance?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. My mother, I can remember the book. It was a dictionary with both languages in it. You'd look the word up in English and then it would give the definition in Danish. Or she could look up the Danish word and get the definition in English. That's how she learned. And then she . . .

SIGRIST: How old were they when they married?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, my mother was thirty, and my father was twenty-nine.

SIGRIST: So they were not young people.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, no. No, no.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how long they stayed after they were married?  
How long were they here?

CUNNINGHAM: I think three years.

SIGRIST: When was your sister born?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, wait a minute. That's wrong, because they were married in '17, and my father just missed going in to the war. The war ended. And then my sister was born. She's four years older than I. But I'm not positive when they went back exactly.

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SIGRIST: What is your sister's name?

CUNNINGHAM: Marie, Conroy now.

SIGRIST: So you think they may have stayed a while after she was born?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I think so. I'm trying to remember pictures. I think she was, maybe she was two. I remember her sitting on the porch steps somewhere, yeah. And then they went back to Denmark and, as I say, they went back, he went back in the shoemaking business, and then, when my sister was four, I was born. Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever talk about her pregnancy with you, or any stories about, that you might remember about your . . .

CUNNINGHAM: No, they didn't, they were very shy about talking about. But I do remember, I have a picture somewhere of my mother visiting her family in Denmark. She was pregnant from me. But she placed herself in the last row, so all I can see is her face, but she told me that I was expected at that time. And then shortly, it must have been quite close, because shortly thereafter I was sitting on her lap in the same grouping.

SIGRIST: When they returned from America, did they immediately go back to the town that you were born in?

CUNNINGHAM: Back to Odense, yes. Yes, they did.

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SIGRIST: So that was, they considered that their home.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. I would say so. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about what it was like being a little girl growing up in this town. What did you do for fun?

CUNNINGHAM: I can remember looking in that bake shop window in the backyard because they had a huge window. You could sit there in the grass and see them baking. I can remember that a lot. I can remember Christmas. That was a big deal.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what kinds of things you did for Christmas, and what you remember about that holiday.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I can remember Mother putting the rice pudding out in the, it's Nisseman over there, not Santa Claus, you know.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that please?

CUNNINGHAM: N-I-S-S-E-M-A-N. And he's a little fellow, very small, and he supposedly comes and if you're very, very quiet he'll come and eat this pudding and leave the gifts out in the hall. And that's what we were: very, very quiet. You had Christmas Eve dinner. Here we have it on Christmas Day. We had it on Christmas Eve. And the tree was decorated, and with marzipan candy, and these candles I spoke of before. Dangerous, but they did it. I can remember running around the tree singing with my sister. You're bringing memories back to my

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head that are crazy. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Where did you get your tree?

CUNNINGHAM: That I don't know. Hmm.

SIGRIST: Do you know what kind of a tree it was?

CUNNINGHAM: No. I've thought of it, and no, I don't. Must have been an evergreen of some sort.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a present that sticks out in your mind that you received?

CUNNINGHAM: You mean while I was still in Denmark?

SIGRIST: While you were in Denmark. Or perhaps something your sister received that you would have liked.

CUNNINGHAM: No, I don't. Of course, it wasn't lavish as it is here. It was one or two gifts, probably clothing and one toy, or whatever.

SIGRIST: Your father being musical, was that a big part of the celebration somehow?

CUNNINGHAM: No, I don't remember that either. No. Singing, yes, we always sang. But as far as instruments were concerned, no. Although I still have his flute.

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SIGRIST: That's wonderful that you have that. Was there any other family in the town? Any other relatives?

CUNNINGHAM: No. I don't remember any other relatives. I can remember friends of my parents but no, no relatives.

SIGRIST: Do you remember grandparents, for instance?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. We went to visit them, but they lived, as I say, in the country, in the farm area.

SIGRIST: Talk about a visit to your grandparents.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I can remember one that was really funny. My brother was born then. Of course, he was a baby, because he was two when we came here in '28. He was born in '26.

SIGRIST: And what was his name?

CUNNINGHAM: Paul. Paul Aage, A-A-G-E. He was named after my father's brother. But he was just a baby, and we were visiting my father's parents and at one point somewhere Paul was missing. We couldn't find him. I can remember the feeling, even, the feeling that the older people had looking for him, because there were marshes there. Well, anyway, they searched high and low, and finally they found Paul. He had hidden behind a door in the living room because he had filled his pants. ( she laughs ) Isn't that funny, though, when you think of it?

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He was ashamed, and that's where they found him. ( she pauses )  
That room, I just thought of something. There was a picture on the wall of my grandparents, and it was one of those that no matter, as a child now, no matter where you went in the room their eyes were on you. It was just as if, you know, their eyes were into the camera, but we didn't know that as kids. And you'd walk into the room, and no matter where you went in that room they were looking at you.

SIGRIST: Disconcerting for a child. You said that this set of grandparents, these were your dad's parents, were in the country. Talk about what that was. Talk about the house, and what it was like to be . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, the house was thatched. The roof was thatched. And I can remember the rooms, the ceilings were very low. And again that darkness. It must have been the lack of electricity you spoke of, you know, it just wasn't that bright. Outside it was nice. But that's about all I remember. And that marsh that I spoke of, it was like reeds in it. I can remember that. It's probably because it scared me.

SIGRIST: Did they keep animals?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't think so. I think that they were working for other farmers, you know. I think that's the way it was.

SIGRIST: Were they on a working farm? Was your grandfather growing vegetables?

CUNNINGHAM: Themselves? That I don't know either.

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SIGRIST: Can you describe them for me?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, my grandfather on my father's side had a long, pointed beard. A strange thing to remember that, too. And my grandmother on my father's side was a short, plump woman, and there isn't anybody like that in the family today. Nobody's plump. But my parents, grandparents on my mother's side were slim. Not quite as, I used the word "buoyant" before about my father. That's the way those grandparents were.

SIGRIST: These were your mother's parents.

CUNNINGHAM: My father's parents.

SIGRIST: Your father's parents were like he was.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. But my mother's parents were subdued, more quiet, very loving. I can remember that, too.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind when you think about your mother's parents? What one memory sticks out in your mind?

CUNNINGHAM: My grandmother looked like my mother. Now I look like my mother and my daughter looks like me. ( she laughs ) It's true.

SIGRIST: So, on through the ages.

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CUNNINGHAM: That's the Holt. The Holt family seems to have come through here, more so than the Plowstrup side, which went through my sister's side of the family. She's got the dark eyes.

SIGRIST: Did your mother's parents live out in the country also?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: So actually what you're getting sort of is the true old world kind of family atmosphere.

CUNNINGHAM: Very much so, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember with either set of grandparents foods that were particular to visiting them?

CUNNINGHAM: No. No, not really. Food didn't seem to make much difference to me back then. It was the usual Danish food. Ebelskiva and frikadeller and all the things that everybody -- don't ask me to spell those. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: I was going to ask you.

CUNNINGHAM: Ebelskiva is a pancake dough, but the way it's made, it's made in a half, if you took a ball and cut it in half, you poured the dough in there, then as it cooked you'd flip it over and you'd end up with a ball, actually. You'd break it open and put jelly in it. Very good, very tasty and so on. That's the one thing I can remember. And frikadeller . . .

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SIGRIST: Is this a treat of some sort?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: So this isn't something that Ma would produce all the time?

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. The big dessert was, what do you call it here, Apple Betty, I think they call it here. It's applesauce and the toasted crumbs and the whipped cream on top.

SIGRIST: What other foods did you eat that you could remember in Denmark? Did you eat a lot of meat, for instance?

CUNNINGHAM: Meat? Hmm, I don't remember meat. We'll come to that later. I was going to tell you about oranges that I don't remember having in Denmark, but we did have on the liner.

SIGRIST: Where did your, where did you get your food when you lived in Denmark? Was there a market somewhere nearby?

CUNNINGHAM: Small stores, yeah.

SIGRIST: Who did the shopping?

CUNNINGHAM: Mother.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go with her?

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CUNNINGHAM: Oh, probably, yeah. I probably did, because you didn't leave kids home. ( she chuckles )

SIGRIST: You had a sister who was older than you.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes.

SIGRIST: You were probably too young for school, yes?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. I didn't go to school until I came here.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your sister going to school?

CUNNINGHAM: I do remember about her. She went to a private school, and of course a private school and public schools, as you probably know, over there it refers to, for instance, well, I shouldn't go into Holland, but there our private school, actually, is what we refer to as public. So it may have been that way in Denmark.

SIGRIST: And English systems.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. Very much so. But I can remember going there one day with my mother. And for some reason we were in the gym, the gymnasium, and the apparatus was enormous, and a lot of it, hanging from the ceiling, ropes and things, you know, to climb on. It's a funny thing to remember. I wasn't in the classroom, but I was in that gymnasium.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember your sister bringing work home of some sort, or something along those lines.

CUNNINGHAM: No. Although she was born here, she did learn the Danish language, naturally, and then can remember much more of it than I can.

SIGRIST: Could she speak English when she was in Denmark?

CUNNINGHAM: I think so. The first word out of my brother's mouth, this is in Denmark, was, "No." Which is not a word in our language.

SIGRIST: That's interesting.

CUNNINGHAM: So he may have picked that up from Marie, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Talk about religious life in Denmark, going to church, if you did that sort of thing.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. Oh, I don't doubt we did, Lutheran. I don't remember going to church, but I'm sure we did.

SIGRIST: Was one parent, perhaps, more religious than the other?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. My mother was more religious.

SIGRIST: How did she practice that religion, say, in the home?

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CUNNINGHAM: Oh, all the way. She was strict. Oh, yes, very strict. We had to abide by all the rules of the church.

SIGRIST: What does that mean, though, in terms of everyday life?

CUNNINGHAM: I'll say this. I said my mother was the most religious, but my father was more strict. We were taught, my sister and I were taught to do handwork. ( she gestures ) We could not waste a minute. But when it came Sunday, we couldn't touch it. You don't work on Sunday. Not even handwork. That's how strict my father was. But as far as the Ten Commandments and honor thy mother and thy father and all that, it was adhered to.

SIGRIST: Prayers said in the house?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah. Oh, I learned all my Danish prayers. I can still remember them.

SIGRIST: Could you recite one for us?

CUNNINGHAM: You wouldn't understand it.

SIGRIST: That's all right. And I won't ask you to spell it.

CUNNINGHAM: ( she laughs ) It's funny, I was just talking to Bob about this. If I can remember it. ( pause ) Oh, dear. It won't come to me. Maybe later.

SIGRIST: Maybe later. Okay.

CUNNINGHAM: I know it just as well.

SIGRIST: Let's, I'm trying to think if I've covered everything in Denmark. Oh, I asked you what you did for fun. For instance, is there a game, perhaps, that you might remember as a child that you played in the streets or in the home?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, not in the street, no. I don't remember playing in the streets at all. Yeah, we played Sauda Pedé. Now, I can't spell that for you either.

SIGRIST: Sauda?

CUNNINGHAM: Sauda. It means Black Peter, is what it means, and it's a cat. And these pictures are on cards, playing cards, and it's very much like Old Maid. Very much like it. I can remember the cards we had. And then we had a little, a twirly thing, you'd spin it with your fingers, and it like, in English it would be, "Put one, take one." And that sort of thing, and then you'd play with chips. I'll tell you another game we had. At Christmastime Mother made puliner, and I can't spell that either. It's sort of, it's a Danish cookie dough and you put pepper in it, black pepper. And then she'd make these little round balls and bake them. And we'd use those for chips when we played this "put one, take one" game. That's so I could take all my brother's cookies or my sister's or whatever, or she mine. And that was a game we played. You didn't buy anything. You didn't go to Toys-R-Us. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Were your parents very much oriented to their children, or was a lot of

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responsibility put on your older sister?

CUNNINGHAM: None, none. My parents took care of us. No, no. Not at all, never, never.

SIGRIST: One more question about Denmark

CUNNINGHAM: That's all right.

SIGRIST: And we'll get you to America. Do you remember any of your clothes?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, I do. I do remember some of my clothes. Mainly I can remember a dress I wore when we left Denmark. It was just like my sister's. Someone made it for us. It was garnet in color. Not maroon. It's not that dark. And it had cream colored inserts down the front with little garnet buttons on it. I can remember that so plain. They were beautiful dresses. And you had asked me about toys, and I mentioned I knew some of my mother's friends. There were two sisters, no doubt my mother's age, or thereabout. And they weren't married, but they took to my sister and I as little kids. And when we left they gave us each a doll. No, wait a minute. That came later in the mail. No, they were the ones that gave us little pocketbooks, little purses that were crocheted. They were round, and they matched our dresses, with little handles on it. And I left that pocketbook on the train on the way to Copenhagen and lost it. I can remember that too, gee. Many years ago.

SIGRIST: Who made the decision to go back to America?

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CUNNINGHAM: I imagine it was made together, yeah. They missed America.

SIGRIST: They really like it here?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah. They wanted to come back very much so.

SIGRIST: Well, and they had been back, what how many years at this point?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, they were ready to come back here in, oh, let me see, I'd say, hmm, '25, 1925. And then Mother discovered she was pregnant again. She hadn't expected it. She was getting up in the years, but she was pregnant from my brother. So they missed out on the group that were to go out then, so they had to wait for Paul to be born. And then when Paul was two that was when we came over here. He was born in '26, and we came in '28.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you remembered a little bit about your brother and his birth. Can you tell me what you remember?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I do. Well, of course mother, Paul was born, my mother had a midwife with her. And we sat, and that's why I can remember the two windows in the living room. I sat on my daddy's lap in that chair, ( she coughs ) in that one chair in the corner there, and the custom was to put something out on that window. Sugar, sugar cubes out on the window sill. Now, Paul was born in September, but it must have been chilly. The window was shut, unless it was to divert my attention. But I know that the window had been lifted, and the sugar had been put

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out there, and the window closed. Now, in the meanwhile, Mother's in the bedroom with the midwife, and I'm on my father's lap. I don't remember where Marie was. And we sat there waiting for the stork to come, and he was going to eat that sugar and leave this baby. And it happened. He came, I didn't see the stork, but the sugar disappeared. And the next thing you know you could hear my brother yell out something or other in there, "I'm here." ( she laughs ) Yeah, I can remember that clearly as if it were yesterday.

SIGRIST: As a young girl, what was it like having a younger child in the house?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't remember that either. There was no jealousy, none at all. Although mother, I shouldn't say this, but mother said that when I was born my sister was quite jealous. She sat at the head of the bed on the pillow where Mother was in bed, and she didn't want to go near the crib at all. Isn't that weird?

SIGRIST: Well, so your parents wanted to come back to America.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, they missed it.

SIGRIST: But they had to wait for Paul to be born.

CUNNINGHAM: Right.

SIGRIST: Why did they then wait two more years after his birth?

CUNNINGHAM: Probably for the, uh, what is the word I'm looking for? The quota.

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The quota, right. They had to wait their turn.

SIGRIST: And the Danish quota, I'm sure, was quite small, too, for the most part, so they may have had to wait.

CUNNINGHAM: Probably, yeah. Well, see, when they first decided to come back, that's when my father sold his shop and his business and that's why then they missed out for two years. That's why he had to go work in the shipyard, because he had no other work. The shop was gone now, to wait for Paul.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. Did that create hardship for the family?

CUNNINGHAM: No. I don't remember it was a hardship. I can remember it was hard on my father, the work was. I can remember that.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did he do, and how was it hard?

CUNNINGHAM: Well that, of course, I would only know from hearing it in later years. It was something about lifting these huge panels of steel. It was something about lifting, I can remember. But that's all I can remember.

SIGRIST: Was he a sturdy man to begin with?

CUNNINGHAM: He was, he was a man probably, I'd say probably 5'10", 11", something like that. I know he wasn't six feet. And he had been kind of sedentary all his life, sitting on a stool, fixing shoes. Which,

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incidentally, he could also make shoes. It wasn't just a matter of repairing. So maybe he, physically he was not able to handle his job, but he had to work. He had a family to support.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever work?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah. Well, all her life, she started working at the age of eight.

SIGRIST: But in this town in Denmark, she . . .

CUNNINGHAM: In Denmark, no. You mean, when I was little, no.

SIGRIST: She was a companion here.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, yeah. But no, she didn't work in Denmark, no.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, what did America mean to you in Denmark? What did you know about it?

CUNNINGHAM: Nothing. It didn't hit me at all. No, I hadn't gone to school yet. Where my granddaughter can tell you anything about any state in the union here and she's three, from puzzles and things that she learns. I knew nothing. They taught, they didn't teach anything like that then. There was nothing too inspirious.

SIGRIST: How did your parents explain what was going to happen? How did they approach, maybe they didn't.

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CUNNINGHAM: They didn't, actually. That's the whole thing. The parents were the head of the family, and you went along with it. You were a child and you went along with it. It wasn't, "Hey, what do you say? You want to go?" You know, it wasn't that type of thing. You just went, and did as your parents did, and there was no question.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed and took with you?

CUNNINGHAM: I can remember that our household items were packed in huge wooden crates, and mother packed everything. Featherbeds, and that's, instead of mattresses we had featherbeds. And if you're aware of what they are, they're like huge pillows, actually. And, well, anyway, the dishes were packed between layers of these featherbeds, I have some, because they were all china, good porcelain, good stuff. I remember we had two great big ones. Of course, they had to sell everything else they had.

SIGRIST: How did they do that?

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CUNNINGHAM: I don't know. I just thought of that when you asked me. I don't know, I don't really know how they did it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye, perhaps, to your grandparents?

CUNNINGHAM: No, but I would, I remember saying goodbye to a cousin, and they lived in Hadelslav, and that's H-A-D-L-E-S-L-A-V.

SIGRIST: It kind of makes you don't want to say any Danish words.  
( he laughs )

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, right, it does. But anyway, my mother's sister was married to the Postmaster General in Hadelslav, and they had a beautiful big brick house. And my cousin was probably twenty, at least, then. And we stayed there while we were waiting to go to Copenhagen to get on the ship. But I can remember going in to him that morning. He was in bed. And I can remember we went in there and woke him up. His name was Oscar. And he, very jolly, a very nice person. And I can remember, of all things, he took a banana and handed it to us, and it must have been a bowl of fruit or something. Strange. You are bringing out memories that I hadn't thought of in years.

SIGRIST: How long did you have to stay . . .

CUNNINGHAM: With my uncle, my aunt and uncle, just a few days. We probably left Odense earlier so that we could stop and say goodbye to them, you know.

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SIGRIST: How far is Copenhagen from where you are?

CUNNINGHAM: In mileage?

SIGRIST: Well, how did you get there, I guess is what I'm asking . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Oh. Well, we went on a boat. Denmark is like, you have Jutland, which comes up into the sea, and then you have a whole bunch of islands, and Copenhagen is on one of those islands to the east of Odense. Now, I said we went on a ship.

SIGRIST: Or a ferry of some sort?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. Well, it probably was. Or am I wrong on that deal? Was that when we went on the train, where I lost my little pocketbook? ( she laughs ) ( Mrs. Cunningham begins to tap on her microphone. )

SIGRIST: How long in terms of days was it from the time you left the town you lived in from the time you got to Copenhagen?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, a day. Oh, yeah. It's a very small country.

SIGRIST: And how long were you in Copenhagen?

CUNNINGHAM: Probably overnight, or maybe two days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of that experience?

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CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. I can remember being taken to an amusement park, and being in some kind of a large swing where you could sit alongside of each other. It had sides on it. It went way up in the air and scared me. Over water, for some reason. Yeah, I remember that part of it.

SIGRIST: When you were in Copenhagen, is that where you got the boat?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the boat?

CUNNINGHAM: It was Oscar the something, some number. I don't remember the number. The ninth?

SIGRIST: I think it was the second.

CUNNINGHAM: The second? Maybe so. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: I know there is an Oscar. I think there is an Oscar the Second. Anyway . . .

CUNNINGHAM: It was huge, beautiful. A beautiful ship.

SIGRIST: What was it like, five years old, you're looking at this big . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Well, I don't think a five year old would take in the entire ship. I can remember the gangplank, and going there. And we went first class, I

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can remember that. And we had a stateroom. It certainly wasn't luxurious, like on the Love Boat. Nothing like that. It had berths, two berths. Small, a small porthole. And that's about where I stayed. What did it take, two weeks or something to get over here? But I was sick most of the time. I couldn't, evidently my equilibrium wasn't up to this. I can remember getting, vomiting a lot, and all this. And one time I did get, my sister and my father were able to go up on deck almost every day, but my mother had to stay down with Paul and I, where we were both sick. My mother was sick too, I think. But I remember one day we did get up on that huge stairway that led to the upper deck, and I got halfway up, and I got sick. And then I had to, of course, come back down. I saw the ocean when I got on, and I saw it when I got off, and that was it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the feeding facilities were?

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, yes, I do. It was a huge dining room. I can remember mealtime, but more than that I can remember tea time. It was in the middle of the afternoon. And I got there, for some reason or other. They served tea with lemon, and then they had the little Danish cookies, and, you know, light eating. But I said before I wanted to say something about oranges. That's the first time I had an orange. I can remember that. It was on board the ship. We called them "ebelsina," which is a strange word, and I can't spell that either. But I can remember the food, I also had eel on board ship. Wicked stuff, but I liked it. I can remember liking it. I don't remember how they fixed it, but I liked it. And again I remember bananas. Other than that, I can remember it was very, very clean, very nice. It was a beautiful ship.

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SIGRIST: And so you would say that your father and your sister Marie were the two most vivacious on the trip.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So Paul was sick also. So your mother's kind of got her hands full.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, she does, yeah.

SIGRIST: Especially if she's not feeling well herself.

CUNNINGHAM: Uh-huh. Oh, my father was down there too, with us. I don't mean to say that he abandoned us in that sense, but they were able, he was able to get Marie off my mother's hands I suppose and so on, you know.

SIGRIST: Did anyone from your town go, were they making this trip also?

CUNNINGHAM: No, we were all alone, just the five of us. But, no, just the five of us.

SIGRIST: So it takes about two weeks, you said.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah. It seems to me two weeks. That seems awful long now. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: What season did you leave in?

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CUNNINGHAM: Well, as I say, we arrived here in November, so early fall, or I guess that would be late fall. Same, early winter.

SIGRIST: Do you remember pulling into New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty? Describe that for me, please.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes. Oh, yes, I do, indeed, yeah. Well, the first thing, I know we were up on that upper deck, and there was, of course, a railing, one you could see through. And I can remember seeing that big crate that my mother and father had packed their belongings in being lifted somewhere below, I guess, and put on the dock. But prior to that I can remember seeing the Statue of Liberty, yes. I can. It was to my left as we pulled in, whatever that was. We pulled in to Hackensack, I think. That just came to me, too. Rather than in, right to, we didn't go right to Ellis Island. I think it was Ellis Island where we first were.

SIGRIST: Did you know what the Statue of Liberty was?

CUNNINGHAM: No, I had no idea. But I can remember seeing it. And no doubt my parents told me. I probably asked, "What is it?" And they told me. What they told me I don't remember. I don't believe they told me it came from France. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: So the boat docked. Then what happened?

CUNNINGHAM: Well, then we had, my mother's sister and her husband and my mother's brother and his wife lived, as I said before, in Newburg. And my Uncle Michael, my mother's brother, and his wife Ellen, and they

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had two children, Ralph and Margaret, and they came in a car. I hadn't been in a car before. And they came in a car from Newburg and met us there at, it must have, I don't know. Could they have gotten onto the island? No, they must have parked on the mainland there. But anyway they were there to . . . That's right, because when we came to the island, my mother and father were separated to be interviewed. They didn't interview them together. They had to go separately. I think my mother went up those stairs, like, that were ahead of us. She went into a room up on the second floor. And then when she came back my father went. And then somewhere along that line we got inoculated. I can remember a vaccination. I imagine we all did.

SIGRIST: Do you remember getting from the pier to Ellis Island?

CUNNINGHAM: No. But wherever we went from Ellis Island, I can remember, and I think I saw it the last time we were down at the statue, it was like an open pavilion, and I can remember seeing my aunt and uncle standing there, and our luggage and things were all piled, by our luggage, I meant anyone on the ship. It was all piled along, and somehow or other they knew where to send us to a certain area. And we stood there and waited for my aunt and uncle to come and pick us up.

SIGRIST: What were your impressions . . .

CUNNINGHAM: How in the world they'd get these big crates up to Newburg? I don't know.

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SIGRIST: They brought them up the Hudson, I suppose. Barge them up.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, maybe.

SIGRIST: As a small girl, what's your impression of Ellis Island? What did you think when you saw all this?

CUNNINGHAM: I don't believe I had much thought about it. I knew I was safe. I was with my parents, and so on. A lot of people, a lot of people. I don't remember them too well.

SIGRIST: Was there a specific reason why your parents, why you were brought to Ellis Island, or was it just general processing, do you think?

CUNNINGHAM: It was general processing, yeah. We had to go, even though my mother and father had been here before. Of course, they weren't citizens. And yeah, they went through there again. And each time my mother had her inoculation. She had seven on her arm before . . .  
( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Do you remember being examined?

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, I do.

SIGRIST: Or being in the main hall, or anything like that?

CUNNINGHAM: I can remember being in the main hall. Yeah, you asked about an

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examination, though. There was something there. I can't remember too well. But whether that had anything to do with my illness on the ship, it was determined I had rickets. Another memory that just came back from that time. But it wasn't anything to keep me out. Of course, the rest of us were perfectly healthy.

SIGRIST: How long were you on the island, do you think?

CUNNINGHAM: Just those few hours, whatever it took. And then we went to my uncle, my aunt and uncle.

SIGRIST: So tell me about the car ride.

CUNNINGHAM: I can remember that. It was a big car.

SIGRIST: Do you know what kind of car it was?

CUNNINGHAM: Knowing my Uncle Michael, it was probably a Buick. ( she laughs ) He went for the best. My uncle was a blacksmith, and he had a thriving business, which later turned into a gas station, which seemed the right track. I can remember. They lived in Newburg, right outside of Newburg. And, of course, as I say, my mother's maiden name was Holt, so this was Uncle Michael Holt. And he lived on Holt Corners, out in the country. There were four roads crossed. And even on the map, you can look on the road map. I don't know about today, but then you could, and it said Holt's Corners. And we stayed with them for a little while, and then we went over to Middlehope, which is near there, and stayed with my mother's sister. Jensen, her name was.

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Mette, M-E-T-T-E Jensen. And we stayed there while my father came up here to look for a place for us to live.

SIGRIST: Always with the intention of coming back to this area of Lansingburg.

CUNNINGHAM: Sure. Oh, yeah. Sure, they had the Danish church and, of course, Marie was born here in Lansingburg. And so we stayed with my aunt in Middlehope, I think, probably a couple of weeks. And finally my father had found a shop, and he had found a home for us, and he came back down, probably by train, and brought us all up here.

SIGRIST: So really the first time you're exposed to America as such is really when you get here, because you're really sort of family.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh yes, right. This was our home up here. Oh, yes. I remember that clearly.

SIGRIST: So tell me, as a little girl, say, covering maybe the first couple of years you were around here, what was the hardest thing to get used to? What was the thing that was most different?

CUNNINGHAM: Language. Language, because as soon as I got here, and I was already five, and I had to go to school, and it was only two blocks away, but I had to cross the main drag, Fifth Avenue. But I went to Powers School, and I had to learn the English language, literally. Because we always spoke Danish, but then as soon as we came here my parents spoke English in the home. They didn't speak Danish to us.

SIGRIST: That's interesting, considering they moved to a Danish community.

CUNNINGHAM: Uh-huh. But, see, they had been here before and knew the language, and no doubt thought about us enough to think, hey, let's teach them English from the beginning, make it easier. And, of course, Maria could already speak English. And, but anyway, in school, my big memory there was that the teachers were very, very kind, but they were so curious. They knew I was from Europe, and they had to ask all these questions like, "How do you say "potato" in Danish?" And I'd say, "Kitafla." And then one day I could remember the teacher saying, "Miss Smith wants to see you." And she's the principal. And that frightened me. What have I done, you know? But I went upstairs, I can remember, to her office, and it was the same thing. I stood in front of her and she asked me how do you say this in Danish, how do you say that in Danish. And that I can remember clearly. But it didn't take long. Kids learn fast. Oh, I can remember another thing that's strange. When the day came that we were going to be taught how to tell time on the clock, well, here it's half past one, at one thirty the kids will say half past one. In Danish it's halfway to two. So that was confusing to me. You didn't say, "Half past one." You said, "Halfway to two."

SIGRIST: Were there lots of other Danish kids in this school or . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Well, the dentist, my dentist now, was in school there. He's two, three years older than I am. So from the church we knew them. Which . . .

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SIGRIST: I was just wondering how exotic it was to actually have someone who had just come from Denmark as opposed to children of people who had come from Denmark in this school. I was just wondering how exotic of an animal you were.

CUNNINGHAM: Probably quite exotic, in view of the fact of, as I say, about how do you say this and how do you say that. And, yes, in that sense, I was made a celebrity for a few years. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Yeah, and that strikes me as being kind of odd. You would think the teachers teaching in the community like that . . .

CUNNINGHAM: They were as curious as the kids were.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of your teachers' names?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yeah. I can remember Miss Ott was kindergarten. I had Miss Mason in first grade. I had Miss MacMillan in second grade. I could go on and on and on. I loved them all. They were all nice. And I was always told I was so polite. That's the way we were taught. When we went into a store, that's in this country now, we went into a store. There was a German bake shop down here. And as you went in, as I went in with my mother into the store, you stand there obedient, holding on to my mother's hand and so on. And then when it came time to leave my mother would say goodbye, and then we would say it too, but we would curtsey, Marie and I. And of course we had to learn quickly you don't do that here, you get made fun of. ( she laughs ) But those were the things that we, that's the way we were brought up.

SIGRIST: Were you ever the victim of some kind of prejudice?

CUNNINGHAM: Never.

SIGRIST: Or mocking of some sort?

SIGRIST: Never, never. No. No, as far as my Danish heritage, I was always very proud of it. And I can remember lots of time when we had to fill out papers, you know, put down your birthplace. I couldn't wait to put down Denmark. I was very, very proud of that, yeah. Because we had a good reputation, as the Danes did. They were clean, honest, law-abiding, yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your parents once they came back. Of course, now they're coming back with three kids.

CUNNINGHAM: It was hard. It was hard. Our first home, again those, maybe that's why they made such an impression on me, these crates that I spoke of. They were part of our furniture in our first apartment. For quite a few years I slept in a deck chair, you know the deck chairs. And Mother pulled the one side up and put a small chair under that. That's where I slept. And I think to this day that's why I have curvature of the spine. It very easily could be that reason. No, we were poor, very poor. But the Danish community was great. They supported us all the way. I don't mean financially. I mean with care and, you know, they were there for us.

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SIGRIST: It was a nurturing place to live. Talk a little bit about some of the other hardships, perhaps, that you had to endure. For instance, food or . . .

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, we always had enough to eat. My mother always taught us that if you're going to try to make ends meet the last place you take from is the table. You eat first. Clothing was, my mother was a sewer. She could make anything out of nothing. And I grew up all my years in hand-me-downs and stuff like that. Other people's clothes.

SIGRIST: What's the most difficult memory that you have of those early years in this country? What sticks out in your mind as being a time of great sadness for you at that time?

CUNNINGHAM: Actually none. I look back on my childhood, I was very happy. I wasn't aware that people had a lot of other, maybe they didn't. I don't know.

SIGRIST: I was wondering if there was a family tragedy, for instance.

CUNNINGHAM: No, no family tragedy, no.

SIGRIST: Did your parents maintain contact with Denmark?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. Constantly, by mail.

SIGRIST: Were they instrumental in any way in bringing any relatives from there?

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CUNNINGHAM: No, I think it was the other way around, because my mother's brother and sister were that much older. Her one sister was ten years older and Uncle Michael was probably eight years older. And that's who she stayed with when she first came to this country. So they had been here, they were established, and pretty well-to-do that way, too. So then, no, there was, it was just, again, that community spirit where everybody helped everybody, the Danes, that is.

SIGRIST: Were your parents anxious for you to Americanize in any way? And this could be something as simple as cutting your hair off, you know, if it were long.

CUNNINGHAM: No. We just went along with the crowd. Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun here in Lansingburg as a kid?

CUNNINGHAM: I can remember mostly, as a small child, I can remember mostly playing with my brother. We had all kinds of games.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Was the church, did the church function as a social institution?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, yes. Yeah. And then there were Danish, there was the Danish society. There was, my father belonged to the Oddfellows, he belonged to the Masons, and he was an officer in each of those. And Mother, of course, in the church. Oh, there was plenty.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about church life at that point.

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CUNNINGHAM: Church life was great. We had Sunday school and a Halloween party. I can remember we went to them. We didn't have costumes. We wore what our parents could find for us. And I can remember going to the Sunday school Halloween party. Nobody knew us. We didn't even have a mask on. What, I don't know what we were made up as, but nobody knew us. And we had been there a while then. Then, of course, we went into the young people's group, and that was the light of my life, really. The best time.

SIGRIST: What about this country did your parents not like?

CUNNINGHAM: Nothing.

SIGRIST: There wasn't something that they found very hard? I realize it's different because they'd already been here.

CUNNINGHAM: No. I never heard them down, oh, never. No, no. The first thing I can remember as far as the country was the NRA. You wouldn't remember that, but that was Roosevelt's idea. National Recovery Act, I believe it stood for. And all business people had to have this huge sign in the window with the letters NRA, and citizens were more or less boycotting people who didn't have that sign in the window. But my father had to pay for that sign, and I can remember that kind of upset him, because here he was trying to make ends meet and getting nothing. Because now the bigger stores, the department stores, were starting to put in little departments where you could go in and get your shoes fixed quick and cheap. So that was cutting into

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my father's business. In that respect, but then that goes on all the time. That's enterprise.

SIGRIST: Well, and of course you arrived here just before the crash, too. Very difficult economic times.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, very tough. But as a child I wasn't aware of that. You don't miss what you never had.

SIGRIST: I have a couple of final questions for you.

CUNNINGHAM: Sure.

SIGRIST: One is how do you think your life would have been different if your parents hadn't come back?

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, I think of it. I think of that so many times. I talk about it so many times. I am so grateful. I have never wanted to go back, never.

SIGRIST: Kind of set up a scenario for me if you had stayed there. What do you think would have happened. If your parents hadn't returned . . .

CUNNINGHAM: I don't know. I don't know. It just frightens me, the things that, no, I'm thankful. Oh, God, I'm thankful. No. I can remember hearing stories of World War I. That uncle I spoke of who was in Hedelsta. He was in the army then, and he said that the stories were going that when they marched into Germany that if the children put their hands out for chocolate or what have you that the soldiers would cut their hands off.

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And these horrible stories, which weren't true. But they made a big impression on me as a little person. I think I carried that on through my life. This is home, this is safe, right here where we are. Of course, things are changing now, that you don't go out at night. But no, I've never. Now, some of my friends, for instance the one, the man you spoke with, has been back many times. Wasn't born there, but has been back many times, I think to find out what his parents were like. Even though he lived with his parents here, I think that's why.

SIGRIST: Have you ever been back?

CUNNINGHAM: Never. Never wanted to.

SIGRIST: Never had any desire to.

CUNNINGHAM: None.

SIGRIST: What about your sister or your brother?

CUNNINGHAM: No, no. Neither one of them. None of us. My mother never wanted to go back either. After we, after my brother was born, you know, we came here the last time.

SIGRIST: Of course, your mother had seen a bit of the world.

CUNNINGHAM: Sure she had. Yeah, that's true. But my father didn't either. Of course, my father died at an early age. He was fifty-one.

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SIGRIST: What did he die of?

CUNNINGHAM: A heart attack. Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And, as you said earlier, he was sick.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, yeah. Of course, in those days you didn't have any idea what was wrong, but evidently that was part of his problems.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

CUNNINGHAM: 1939, October.

SIGRIST: So it was still during the Depression.

CUNNINGHAM: As a matter of fact, he died on the 12th of October, Columbus Day. And just before his first chance to vote, he had gotten their final papers, Mother and he. And he didn't get a chance to use it. But Mother has many, mother lived to be eighty-two. So Mother had her chance to vote lots of times. Yeah, it is sad, because he was interested in it. He, I can remember him telling me. He says, "There's a war coming over there." He said, "I can feel it. There's a war coming." Of course, I was in high school then, I knew a little bit about it. And the war came. ( she laughs )

SIGRIST: Now, did you become a citizen . . .

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CUNNINGHAM: Automatically.

SIGRIST: Automatically.

CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, because they got their papers just before my sixteenth birthday.  
So I am a citizen. I'm glad to be.

SIGRIST: Well, this has been wonderful.

CUNNINGHAM: Thank you.

SIGRIST: We have, I think, thoroughly covered the immigration experience, and  
I want to thank you for having me to your house.

CUNNINGHAM: Oh, you're very welcome.

SIGRIST: And I thank Dr. Olsen for all his hard work. Please thank him for me  
when you talk to him.

CUNNINGHAM: I sure will.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service signing off with Edith  
Cunningham here in Landsingburg, New York.

END OF INTERVIEW