

**EI-213**

**PHYLLIS ROGERS SPINNEY**

**BIRTH DATE: OCTOBER 23, 1905**

**INTERVIEW DATE: SEPTEMBER 17, 1992**

**RUNNING TIME: 45:40**

**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, Ph.D.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: BILLERICA, MASSACHUSETTS**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 3/1998**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: IRV SILBERG**

**ENGLAND, 1920**

**AGE 15**

**SHIP: "THE OLYMPIC"**

**PORT: SOUTHAMPTON**

**RESIDENCES:**

- **ENGLAND: SOUTHAMPTON**
- **US: GREATER BOSTON, MA**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today, on September 17, 1992, and I'm here with Phyllis Rogers Spinney.

SPINNEY: That's right.

LEVINE: And Mrs. Spinney came from England where she was fifteen years old, and that was 19 . . .

VOICE: '20.

SPINNEY: '20.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I'm very happy to be here, even though you expected someone else. [Both laugh]

SPINNEY: That's all right, dear, that's fine.

LEVINE: And I just want to say, uh, that I'm very interested to hear about your life in England and then coming to this country.

SPINNEY: Yes.

LEVINE: So why don't we start by you telling me your birth date?

SPINNEY: Uh, October the, uh, 23rd, 1905.

LEVINE: Okay. And you were born in what town?

SPINNEY: Southampton, England.

LEVINE: And you lived there until you left for America?

SPINNEY: Yes, I did.

LEVINE: Now, uh, who was in your family when you were in Southampton?

SPINNEY: There was my mother and father, my two sisters, and myself and my brother. They was --- I don't know if you want me to tell their names.

LEVINE: Yes. I'd like to know your mother's maiden name as well, if you don't mind.

SPINNEY: My mother's maiden name was Hannah Rond [ph], uh, Hannah Day --- Hannah Day.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

SPINNEY: Was, uh, George Allen James Rogers.

LEVINE: And your, uh, two brothers and sisters?

SPINNEY: One brother, George Allen Rogers, and one sister, Gladys Rogers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SPINNEY: And Daisy Rogers.

LEVINE: Oh. You had two sisters and one brother.

SPINNEY: That's right.

LEVINE: I see. And were you the oldest or the youngest?

SPINNEY: No. I was the, uh, third, uh, child, and the brother was younger, my brother was younger.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Who were you closest to in your family, would you say, when you were growing up?

SPINNEY: My mother.

LEVINE: Can you tell me about your mother?

SPINNEY: Oh, she was the perfect person. I ---she was a saint.

LEVINE: Can you remember any experiences with your mother that you remember when you think about your time growing up?

SPINNEY: She used to sing to us when things were so bad. She was a wonderful person. She scrubbed floors; she took in washing --- just to keep us going.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SPINNEY: My dad went, my dad worked as the lamplighter.

LEVINE: Oh!

SPINNEY: The old lamplighter. And he worked in the theater besides. My mother's aunt made costumes for the Barrymores when they were in the theater there.

LEVINE: My goodness. Did you see any of those costumes?

SPINNEY: Well, I probably did. I went to the theater. My father used to take me up there, you know. I saw them all, you know?

LEVINE: So your father ---- was he an usher, or what did he do when he worked in the theater?

SPINNEY: No, it was work. It was --- he was changing the scenery and stuff like that, you know.

LEVINE: I see.

SPINNEY: And, uh, he was a cabinetmaker besides.

LEVINE: I see. So he could get you tickets to see the plays.

SPINNEY: Oh, yes, yes. That's right.

LEVINE: Do you remember any plays that you saw when you were little that you remember?

SPINNEY: Uh, no. Uh, what really, uh, got me, I ----reminded me, was the fairy tales they used to have when I was chil--- children, you know. I suppose I would remember stuff more like that than any other thing, you know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Who told you the fairy tales, and where did you hear this?

SPINNEY: Oh, I read those in books. I was a great reader. I loved to read.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Can you remember any parts of any fairy tales that were kind of your favorites when you were young?

SPINNEY: Oh, Cinderella was my favorite, always my favorite.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

SPINNEY: I left school when I was thirteen years old, and I went to work in the British American Tobacco Factory.

LEVINE: Oh. And what did you do there?

SPINNEY: Uh, I, uh, tore the leaves apart and, uh, that's all I can tell you about that. But cigarettes were made other ways, you know. I really don't know how they made them. But I worked there for two years until I was, well, fifteen years old, and then my mother told me I was coming here. Well, I never had any ideas, but my sister had married an American soldier when they came

over in the First World War. And so my mother was sending me over there to keep her company, because she was lonesome here.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the First World War?

SPINNEY: Oh, I sure do, I sure do, dear. We had it really tough. No --- not much food. And, uh, I saw all the troops come through that port. Southampton is a big port, and I saw Americans, and I saw Canadians, Gurkhas, German prisoners. And when the Americans come over, and I was coming out of school, I could hear them playing The Star Spangled Banner, and they camped at the, up on the road where I lived, and I used to march right along with them. I loved --- I loved the Americans. And, uh, one soldier pulled me down on his knee, and I had a rose that my father used to grow. My father grew beautiful roses. And he said, "Little girl, can I have that rose?" He took it and pressed it in his Bible. And I never thought that I would be in America at that time.

LEVINE: What was, the reason you liked Americans so much, did you hear much about Americans when you were a little girl?

SPINNEY: No, I didn't, dear. No, I did not, you know? Uh, I could, it was just their ways --- it was just their way of coming through. They were so friendly, you know? And I marched right along with them.

LEVINE: Do you remember, uh, what you did, did you play games? Did you, what did you do, like, did you have girlfriends? And what did you do as a little girl that you remember?

SPINNEY: Oh, I did everything. We were poor, and I used to have a cart that I had to go down and bring out coke for the fire. Then I had to go to a garden and weed that two or three miles away. And I was always busy. I was very

busy. I was a real tomboy, a real tomboy. But I never, ever realized that I would be coming to this country, and I wasn't very pleased at the time to go. I'd never left my mother, and I was kind of scared. I'd never been out of Southampton. And, so then they put me on the ship, the S.S. Olympic.

LEVINE: Do you remember, uh, what you had heard about America before you came?

SPINNEY: Oh, cowboys and Indians. I expected to see cowboys and Indians here. I was so surprised, you know --- to have it cities, see cities, big cities and that.

LEVINE: Do you remember, before you left, was there a farewell to you? Did you go by yourself?

SPINNEY: Yes, I went by myself. My mother and father took me and put me on the ship.

LEVINE: And what was that like?

SPINNEY: It was, oh, it was, I was excited with all the people on it, you know. But I was li---, I was really scared. But I was seasick for five days. And, uh, a storm come up and smashed the top of the ship in. They had it repaired then, and everybody was running up on deck and screaming. They thought they were going down. And I was so sick that it threw me from the bunk onto the floor, and I just laid there. I didn't care if I went down with the ship. Then they repaired the --- they got me up on deck and walked me up and down, and then they ---- we got into New York, it must have been about, about nine days, we were late getting into New York. When we got in there they quarantined for another week because we had an epidemic on board, and they wouldn't let me off.

EI-213/SPINNEY

LEVINE: Do you remember what disease that was?

SPINNEY: It was something like a children's disease. It wasn't anything really, I don't know, scarlet fever or something. And then they . . .

LEVINE: When they quarantined you, you had to stay on the ship, or . . .

SPINNEY: On the ship, yeah. I had to stay on there.

LEVINE: Were you in the steerage part? Were you down in the . . .

SPINNEY: No, I was second-class.

LEVINE: You were in a little cabin?

SPINNEY: Yes, but there was two more women in with me, you know.

LEVINE: Did you eat in the dining hall?

SPINNEY: Yes, we did. Yeah. It was really a beautiful ship. She was a sister to the Titanic, you know. She was just as big as the Titanic.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

SPINNEY: It was a beautiful ship.

LEVINE: Now, you mentioned you had seen the Titanic.

SPINNEY: Yes. I saw it when it went out.

LEVINE: Oh, well, tell me anything about that.

SPINNEY: Well, my mother and father took me down there, and they, uh, I saw all the people there, and a lot of Americans. At that time I didn't realize they were Americans, you know? And, of course, to me it looked so immense, you know? And, uh, then the ship left. It seemed like there were so many people there, you know? And then about two days afterwards my mother woke up and she said to my father, "I had the funniest dream." She said, "I saw a big ship going down, and everybody was singing on it, singing." And it came out later they were singing God To Be or something. I am just like my mother. I have seen things.

LEVINE: Really. Uh-huh. Was that true when you were a little girl, too?

SPINNEY: Well, that was, let's see. The ship, the Titanic went out, I think it was '12, 1912, I think it was. And, of course, I would have been, nine, ten, about seven years old, about seven years old. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, in what way did you see things? Did you have dreams like your mother?

SPINNEY: Not then, but I have had things in this country, like. Yes. I've wanted to go back to England, and I told my husband I want to go. That was fifty years I've been here, and the first time I went back. But I had a dream, just like my mother. I saw that plane going down in the water. I got so scared. I said to my husband, "No, I'm not going, I'm not going." It must have been two or three weeks later my son called me up, he said, "Mom, there's a, some people going from Billerica to Billericay, England. If you want to get on that trip, we'll see that you get on." I said to my husband, "I'm going." And I went. But a lot of things, like, with my family. My family are very close together, and we send one another the same Christmas cards, the same

birthday cards. I bought my mother a Bible once, and it was second hand. I couldn't find one that I wanted. I wanted with all pictures that she could make the family thing of. And I called her up the next morning, I said, "Gee, mom, I bought you something. It's second-hand. I don't know if you'd like it or not." She said, "Did you buy me a Bible?" We are like that, my family, very much like that.

LEVINE: Are you happy that you have that kind of a talent?

SPINNEY: Oh, yes. I think it's wonderful that God has given me that feeling.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, it's sometimes called a sixth sense.

SPINNEY: I think it is. It really is.

LEVINE: Well, uh, let's see. Do you remember what you packed when you left England, what you brought with you to America?

SPINNEY: Well, my mother bought me a suit, and, uh, she made a beautiful velvet dress. It was trimmed with brown fur. Do you mind if I .[Sound of glass]

LEVINE: Wait, I have to un . . . Okay.

SPINNEY: Thank you.

LEVINE: What color was the dress?

SPINNEY: It was a deep blue, and it had brown fur on it.

LEVINE: You remember the style and everything?

EI-213/SPINNEY

SPINNEY: I can see it in my mind. I wouldn't know which style it was, you know? But she made all our clothes for us.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Was it a long dress, or . . .

SPINNEY: No, no, around knee-length, you know? It was real good, real pretty.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you wear that when you arrived in America, or when you left?

SPINNEY: I wasn't supposed to wear it, but I wanted to look nice on the boat, and I put it on, you know? And, uh, I kept wearing it on the ship. And then we got into Ellis Island, and everybody said to me, "Run up --- up on deck and see the Statue of Liberty." So I ran up on deck, and then somebody said to me, "Did you bring your luggage with you?" I said, "No." "Well, you'd better run down and get your luggage." I ran down, and it was gone. All my clothes, and I had a lovely cross that my mother had given me. Somebody had stolen that, too. I landed on Ellis Island, I had that dress, just what I had on my back, and I was there for two weeks.

LEVINE: So you must have, you must not have been feeling very happy when you . . .

SPINNEY: No, no, I wasn't. I was scared. I was really scared.

LEVINE: And what about Ellis Island? Do you remember what you had heard about Ellis Island before you actually . . .

SPINNEY: No, I never knew anything about it at all. Well I, naturally I thought I was going to my sister's.

LEVINE: Oh.

SPINNEY: You see? I thought she would be there to greet me.

LEVINE: I see.

SPINNEY: But she lived in Boston. Of course, I didn't know that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So did you, do you remember anything about Ellis Island? How long were you there?

SPINNEY: How do I remember Ellis Island? It was a pretty lonely place for a girl of fifteen. And I might have got into the wrong room, but I was put in a room, or I went to a room. There were men, women and children, and they had these bunks, and everybody slept in the same room. I never had the clothes off my back all the time I was there. And every day I'd go down, I had pictures of that right there, the, uh, of the, uh, place whe-- and the, uh, oh, gee. I can remember so well. And, uh, every day we'd go down to that big room, and if your name wasn't called you know'd you were there for another day. So at the end of two weeks they finally called my name, so I had to pay money to, the tax or whatever it was. My mother told me, "Never let that off of you," and I used to carry it in my chest, so I had that anyway, and I slept with that, and I paid that, and I had a little money left over. They could have taken all my money. I didn't know how much I had to pay or anything, you know?

And they, uh, they said to me, you know, "You're going to Boston on the train," and, uh, so they, uh, said to me, "You'd better buy something to eat."

So I bought this box of sandwiches as I thought. And then they took us over to New York on the ferry, and they put me on an elevator. I'd never been on one before. And it started up, and I went backwards and landed in some man's lap. [Laughs] Then they said to this young fellow, "You're

going to Boston?" They said, "Yes." "Well, will you see that Ms. Rogers gets on the train to Boston?" So, he was English like myself, but I never knew him. He was a stranger to me.

But we got into Grand Central Station, and he said to me, "Would you like a cup of tea?" I said, "I'd love one." He said, "Do you want anything to eat?" So I looked, and I saw an orange there that I hadn't seen. I said, "I'd like one of them oranges." And the man says, "Lady, those are not oranges. Those are grapefruits." I didn't know the difference, you know? So then we had to wait there. That was around five or six o'clock at night. We had to wait till midnight to get the train for Boston. So he was very nice. He saw me on the train, he seated me on the --- in the seat, and he left me. He left me, and I was sitting all alone in that seat. I didn't . . .

LEVINE: What were you thinking? Can you remember what you thought at that time?

SPINNEY: Oh, I didn't know where I was going. I could have gone to Timbuktu. I wouldn't have known. But it did stop at Boston, so that was the, and my sister was there, and my, her husband there to meet me. But, oh, it was awful.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you remember about Ellis Island? Do you remember the food?

SPINNEY: I didn't like the food very much. And I can't remember ever going in and sitting down. I remember they woke us up early in the morning. It seemed like five o'clock, and then later on they waited around and they handed you an egg, a boiled egg, with a piece of bread. The Italian bread, that I learned of afterwards. But I can't remember many dinners there, I can't remember.

LEVINE: What did you do during the day when you were there for two weeks?

SPINNEY: Well, mostly we were in that big room waiting, waiting. And, oh, then we had, went to certain – certain doctors. One doctor to another, they examined you and everything, you know? But, uh, I never knew what to do.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of your thoughts or feelings while you were there?

SPINNEY: I was, um, yes. I made an acquaintance, a little girl there. She was Irish. She was there with her mother. And I got acquainted with her. Then all of a sudden the mother come up and said, "She can't play with you." I said, "Why?" I found out afterwards they were Irish. They did not like the English. And I had to come to this country to find out that the Irish didn't like the English. And when I landed in Charlestown, they put me in a school for six months because I wasn't quite, uh, I got there in January. See, it was the last of the month when I landed in Ellis Island, of December. And by the time I got to Boston it was in 1921. So they sent me to school from January to June because they went on vacation, and then I got through. And I was about fifteen-and-a-half, sixteen. Oh, yes, I want to tell you, at that time the Irish, them kids, they followed me like a pack of, because they were all Irish there.

LEVINE: In Charlestown.

SPINNEY: In Charlestown.

LEVINE: Yeah.

SPINNEY: And they called me a dirty rotten limey. And the mother come out of her house, she says, "You dirty, rotten limeys. They shouldn't let you in this country." And the funny part of it, half of my family were Irish. My father's people come from Ireland, but my mother come from English. So they don't

know these things. Why did they do that to people?

SPINNEY: Were there other English children that you met?

SPINNEY: No, no, never did, no.

LEVINE: Did you settle in Charlestown, then?

SPINNEY: I settled in Charlestown there until I got married. I was married in 1924. I landed in Charlestown in '21, and I was married in '24.

LEVINE: And you were living with your sister and her husband?

SPINNEY: I was living, no. I lived with my sister for two years, and then my mother and father came over, and my brother.

LEVINE: What was it like to see them?

SPINNEY: Oh, it was wonderful to see them again, you know? And we went --- I went and lived with them. And . . .

LEVINE: In Charlestown?

SPINNEY: Yes. Right on Main Street, where the elevated went right by the door. [Laughs] But then I met my husband a couple of years later.

LEVINE: How did you meet him?

SPINNEY: Well, my sister, at that time she had a boarding house, and she had some people there, lodging there, and this man came, and it was one of the, uh, the man's brother, and they introduced him to me, and, uh, so we started

going together. We were going together for a whole year.

LEVINE: Was he born in America?

SPINNEY: Yes. He was born in Eastport, Maine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And was he of English descent?

SPINNEY: Yes, they were English descent and Scotch descent. They, they were all like, uh, well, his people were really Canadians, but they -- I imagine they came from England and Scotland. They claim Scotland. The Spinneys come from Scotland, they said.

LEVINE: I see. What was it about your husband that attracted you to him?

SPINNEY: Well, naturally . . . [Laughs] When you're that age, you get attracted to somebody.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. What did you like about him? Was there anything in particular that . . .

SPINNEY: Well, it was the first sweetheart I suppose I had. So, but I was very naive, very naive, when I look back at it.

LEVINE: So what did you do when you would go out together? Where would you go? What kinds of . . .

SPINNEY: We went --- we'd go into Boston to a movie or something like that. But, uh, his brother and his wife, uh, moved to my, uh, my sister changed her home and bought another boarding house, so his brother and his wife came there. So then my mother and father moved to Middleboro, Mass. Well, I didn't

want to go with them because I had my job in the, uh, Hood's[ph] rubber factory, in Watertown. So I took a room with my sister in her boarding house. So then, that's where, um, he used to go and visit his brother, and I'd see him there.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

SPINNEY: So, then I had a son born, uh, two years later.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what's your son's name?

SPINNEY: Uh, Ralph. Ralph Spinney.

LEVINE: And what was your husband's first name?

SPINNEY: Uh, George. [A telephone rings] I'm sorry, the damn thing. Getting you all mixed up.

LEVINE: No, that's okay. We're resuming after a phone call. Okay. Um, let's see, where were we? We were talking about when you met your husband. And then, uh, so you, you started out working in the tobacco plant, and then you were in the rubber plant. Were those, did you have any other jobs?

SPINNEY: Well, I had one during the war that I didn't stay there, because I didn't like the atmosphere. And, uh, I wanted to be up in my garden. I loved my garden. I didn't really have to work, you know? So I, uh . . .

LEVINE: This was during the Second World War? What kind of a place was it?

SPINNEY: Oh, that's the thing, a tobacco factory. That was the only one I had in England. The other one was the rubber factory, was in this . . .

LEVINE: In Watertown, I'm sorry.

SPINNEY: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, during, when you say during the war, do you mean when you were in England, or were you . . .

SPINNEY: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh.

SPINNEY: The First World War, dear.

LEVINE: The First World War. Uh-huh, uh-huh. What was the atmosphere like in that factory?

SPINNEY: Oh, very good, very good. Everybody was so good together, you know? Mostly all women, that I saw. But I was --- see, I wasn't there too long. Uh, I left when I, I went to work when I supposed, when I was fourteen, really. It was fourteen when I, think that was in Decem----, in October the 23rd. So from October 23rd until I fifteen, see, that was kind of two years, two years I was there. So . . .

LEVINE: Well, um, now, let's get back to your family. You had one son, and then did you have more children?

SPINNEY: Yes, I had one daughter. She was born two years later.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what's her name?

EI-213/SPINNEY

SPINNEY: Arlene. Arlene, uh, Arlene Spinney, and her name is Paddington right now.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So do you have, you have grandchildren?

SPINNEY: Yes. I have seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: And are you enjoying your old age?

SPINNEY: Oh, I'm enjoying it more now than I ever did.

LEVINE: Really!

SPINNEY: Because I am free, like I don't have to worry about my family, and my friend there, he is enjoying himself, too. He lives over there on the other side of the street, and he calls on me, takes me to dances, and we eat together, I cook for him, he cooks for me.

LEVINE: Isn't that wonderful? And apparently you've won trophies for your dancing.

SPINNEY: Well, they're not anything really much, you know. But, uh, we have won things like going out for dinner and different things like that, you know? And that thing there, I don't know what I'm going to do with it. I won that, that was the door prize at the Marriott. [Both laugh]

LEVINE: Well, did you always enjoy dancing, or is this something that you've, you've taken up lately?

EI-213/SPINNEY

SPINNEY: I always loved to dance, even when I was a little child. But this fellow brought it out on me, because he loves to dance, and I love to dance, and they call us Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. That's what they're kidding us about, you know? 'Cause but they say we're wonderful dancers.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, good.

SPINNEY: We have a wonderful time together. We're really enjoying ourselves, you know? And my family all approves of him.

LEVINE: Good.

SPINNEY: So.

LEVINE: And you have your garden.

SPINNEY: I have my garden. I've always had a garden, no matter where I was. Yeah.

LEVINE: You mentioned, going back to your mother, you mentioned that she used to sing.

SPINNEY: Yes.

LEVINE: Were you a musical family?

SPINNEY: No, not really. No, but she had such a beautiful voice. But when things got pretty bad, like, for the family, she would sing us, and Dad would go out making the lights, you know, fixin' the lights, and she'd sing to us.

LEVINE: Can you remember any of the songs that she sang?

EI-213/SPINNEY

SPINNEY: Let's see. There was one that always stuck in my mind. Uh, I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls. That was a song. I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls. It was a beautiful song.

LEVINE: Do you remember the words? Can you either sing it or say it?

SPINNEY: [Sings] "I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls. I'm --- at -- at my feet. Uh, now I can't remember it. I can't. But I remember that.

LEVINE: And what, how did your mother and father feel about coming to America after they had arrived?

SPINNEY: Oh, well, you see, my sister was here, too. They wanted to be with her. But, then they left the other girl home because she was in love with a boy and they wanted to get married. So they left her, they saw that she was married there, and then they came to America.

LEVINE: Were they happy they had come?

SPINNEY: Yes, very much. You know, we were, at least we were a family over here, you know? My brother . . .

LEVINE: Did your father work after he got here, or was he . . . ?

SPINNEY: Yes, he worked in a shoe factory in Middleboro, Mass.

LEVINE: And how about your mother? Did she work here?

SPINNEY: No, she didn't. But she opened up a little store.

LEVINE: Oh.

SPINNEY: Yeah, in Middle--, in Lakefield, I think was the name of the place. And they bought a little place up in the country, like. And she, she always wanted a little store, so she had a little store.

LEVINE: What did she sell in the store?

SPINNEY: Well, all kind of things, bread and all kind of things you had, you know, she had ice cream and different things. The neighbors would come in, and she'd talk. But they had beautiful gardens besides. Everybody . . .

LEVINE: She also liked to garden.

SPINNEY: And my father and, my father used to grow the most beautiful roses and chrysanthemums. Oh, they were both lovers of flowers. And I'm the same way. And Vernon is the same way. I think that's why we were attracted together.

LEVINE: Vernon is the man you dance with.

SPINNEY: Yeah. And he has a beautiful garden over there. In fact, it's bigger than mine. I think there's a competition between the two of us. [Both laugh]

LEVINE: So, um, what could you say you're proudest of in your lifetime, thinking back?

SPINNEY: What am I, what, dear?

LEVINE: What are you most proud of that you've done in your lifetime?

SPINNEY: I think having a family, working at it, making a home for them. We started

out very small. The first home we ever got my husband paid nine hundred dollars for it. It was just a shack. That was back in the Depression. We had lost everything in the Depression, and he borrowed nine hundred dollars and we bought this shack. It was nothing else but a little tent. And I worked on that, and I made a big garden, and I did everything. I could show you the pictures of when I first started out.

LEVINE: Oh, good. After we finish with the tape, I'd love to see them.

SPINNEY: Okay, dear.

LEVINE: So, uh, and what was your husband doing at that point?

SPINNEY: My husband was a machinist on the Boston Maine Railroad.

LEVINE: I see.

SPINNEY: And he was earning twenty-eight dollars a week. And then later on he became an assistant foreman, and then later on he became a foreman.

LEVINE: so he did quite well.

SPINNEY: He did quite well, yeah.

LEVINE: And then you stopped working.

SPINNEY: Oh, yes. I stopped working after I, uh, bore my son, you know?

LEVINE: So then you made this little house into a home?

SPINNEY: Yes. But, of course, in between, before that I had been in rented, we had

rented. I went from Charlestown to Chelsea, Chelsea to Somerville, Somerville to Everett, Everett to West Concord. And from West Concord we came to Billerica. And after we'd been in Billerica for thirty years, we moved to Eastport, Maine, and we were down there for about fifteen years. And then my husband got sick and, uh, so we come back to Billerica here. So I've been around.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

SPINNEY: Move us in --- years ago we didn't think nothing of moving, you know?  
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Why did you move when you moved? What were the reasons?

SPINNEY: Well, something was a little bit better, you know? And, uh, the reasons why we moved to, uh, Concord, West Concord, my husband's brother was the chef in the Concord Reformatory. And he was living on a house that was two, two apartments. So he said, "Why don't you come up here," and he said, "you can take the train into Boston," to my husband. So we bettered ourselves and went up there. So, uh, my husband used to commute to Boston. He was working in Boston at that time. But I've got to tell you something. I don't know if I should tell you or not. But the man that we rented the house from, he was a farmer, and he went to Stowe. He bought a farm up in Stowe. And his wife didn't want to go with him, but he made her go. And after they moved everything out, we moved into the house.

And, uh, this went on for a few years, and the man used to come down and, uh, he would, uh, collect the rent, you know? And this went on for a few years. And all of a sudden the hired man started coming down and collecting the rent. And I asked him, "Where is Mr. Stekovich [ph]?" And he says, "Oh, he's gone to Chicago." The next time he came down, "Oh, he's

gone back to Poland." And he always give me different answers, you know? So we didn't think anything of it. And he would sit with my husband on the porch, and they'd drink some tonic or something for a drink. He was a wonderful man. He seemed so nice, and he would work around the place moving things out, you know? Come to find out he had murdered the two of them, the mother, and buried them in the barn.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness.

SPINNEY: You know, and I started thinking, that man being around me, and I really was scared, you know? Ahh!

LEVINE: Mmm. That's quite a story.

SPINNEY: I didn't tell you. When I was thirty-four years old, I was operated on for a brain tumor. And I'm alive today. They expect me not to live, but I did.

LEVINE: Do you think that changed you in some way when you had that idea that you might not live, and then . . . ?

SPINNEY: Oh, I really didn't. I really believed so much in God, then, to let me live. Lik this. And so long. I said, "Please, let me see my grandchildren." I saw my grandchildren. I'm seeing my great-grandchildren now. [Laughs]

LEVINE: Good for you. Were you a religious family when you were back in England?

SPINNEY: Ah, not really. We, of course, we were. We went to church every, and I went to Sunday school. And my mother would never cook on a Sunday. That was their religion, you know?

LEVINE: What religion were you?

SPINNEY: Well, I was Episcopalian. But, uh, I have been into every church there is. I've been in Jewish churches. I've been into Catholic churches. I go to every one of them. They all believe in the same God, and to me it doesn't make any difference. It's only something that you were brought up as a child, what you were taught by your mother.

LEVINE: Do you think, do you think about death at this point in your life? Have you . . .

SPINNEY: Oh, I do. I do right now. But I, I'm in hopes I'll have a few more years. If I don't, I'm ready to go. I feel that God has been good to me, and probably any time He wants to take me now, that's ---oh. But if anything comes my way, I'm going to live it. You see that? Live one day at a time --- make it a masterpiece?

LEVINE: [Laughs] That's great. Uh-huh. Yeah. Okay. Well, thinking back over your whole life and coming here from England and really, did you become a citizen?

SPINNEY: Yes, I did, yeah.

LEVINE: Is there anything that you'd like to say before we close about your life, either in England or coming here, or . . .

SPINNEY: I've had a wonderful life, and I've seen so much. Television, going to the moon. I had seen so much, and I, I hope my children will be just as lucky as I am and live as long as I have. They have so far. My son is sixty-six. My daughter is sixty-three.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you very much.

EI-213/SPINNEY

SPINNEY: Oh, you're welcome, dear.

LEVINE: It was a pleasure talking with you.

SPINNEY: Okay, dear. I shouldn't – I shouldn't do this, but I get [Tears]. .

LEVINE: Oh, that's okay. It shows you have a lot of feelings.

SPINNEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I've been talking with Phyllis Spinney in her home in Billerica, Massachusetts. It's September 17, 1992, and I'm signing off.