

EI-251

THERESA BRIDGET POWDERLY COTE

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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ENGLAND, 1922

AGE 3

PORT: LIVERPOOL

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Oral Historian's Note: Mrs. Cote is the sister of Mary Jane Baitz, Interview EI-250. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 2/2/1994.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, February 23rd, 1993.

I'm here in West New York, New Jersey with Theresa Cote who is the sister of Mary Jane Baitz. Mrs. Cote came from England in 1922. She was about three-and-a-half years old, and she's going to relate to us what she remembers, what little she remembers about the immigration experience and then what it was like to grow up in this country. Good afternoon, Mrs. Cote.

COTE: Hi.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

COTE: July the 18th, 1918.

SIGRIST: And what is your maiden name, please?

COTE: Theresa Bridget Powderley.

SIGRIST: And can you spell Powderley for us, please?

COTE: P-O-W-D-E-R-L-E-Y.

SIGRIST: Now, obviously you were very young when you came to this country. So tell me, you mentioned to me you have two memories of England. Can you tell me what those are, please?

COTE: Well, I remember a fireplace and a tub. And I remember somebody holding me up in the air, a man. I don't know who he was or what he was. I couldn't tell you. Then the other memory I have was a lady holding me, and we were in this big place where a lot of beds were. And somebody was laying in that bed propped up on pillows. I found out later that was my father, and the lady holding me was my older sister. So . . .

SIGRIST: Was your father ill at this time?

COTE: From what I understand, yes. It must have been just about before he died.

SIGRIST: I see. (referring to the microphone) I'll just fix the wire here. Here, hold your hands. There you go. Okay. And those are the two memories that you have, flashes, as you call them.

COTE: I remember that. I never understood it until I got much older when I questioned. One, my older sister and my mother. That's how I was given the information as to what that pertained to.

SIGRIST: You sort of put it together from what they told you.

COTE: Right, that this had to be what happened. Who the man was, I found out, was my father, but that's all I remember of that as far as England went.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you a question. When you were an adult or when you were older, did your mother ever tell you stories about perhaps when she was pregnant with you?

COTE: No, no.

SIGRIST: Did she ever tell you any stories about what you were like as a child?

COTE: A few.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of them?

COTE: Well, I wouldn't know whether you'd call it a story, but it was her reminiscing about my father. She told me, when my father was home sick that I would sit by him by the hour and that he told her that I would always be there for her. I can't say that I was, but I tried.

SIGRIST: And this is something that your mother would tell you that she remembered.

COTE: That I, you know, remember, yeah.

SIGRIST: Are there any other stories that your mother may have told you later on, perhaps, a time, maybe, when you misbehaved as a child, or maybe a funny story that she remembered of when you were a child?

COTE: No, there wasn't that, uh, there wasn't that kind of communication. And when I was starting to grow where I could remember certain things, the only thing I can remember her telling me was evidently when we were in Newark. My sisters used to take me to Bryan's Brook Park and they, you know, they'd take me on the swings.

I remember that. And then I was taken to a school. I never saw a black person in my life that I can remember. And I thought the kid was in the coal bin, and I told him to go home and get cleaned up because he was dirty. And my mother had to go, because they had to correct me for the fact that the child was a black person. I did not know that, not at that age. That's one of the things I remember being told. But otherwise than that, the next thing I remember was St. Joseph's.

SIGRIST: Before we get to St. Joseph's, because I know that's a very important part in your story, can you tell me a little bit about what your mother's personality was like, and perhaps a little bit about what your relationship with your mother was like, even as you were getting older.

COTE: Well, she wasn't around that much. But to me, she was a tall woman. She had white hair. Her hair was white as far back as I can remember. But she wasn't that communicative, too. She was stern, in her own way, but she was not, maybe in real later years she became a little more mellow, but I felt sorry for her. As I grew older I felt she was a very unhappy woman because

somewhere along the line her boat didn't come in. And she was not a happy woman.

SIGRIST: Tell me, do you have any flashes, as you call them, of perhaps the boat ride?

COTE: Only one. Water, sitting on somebody's lap, and then the bunk beds. I remember that in like a bulb. I remember that.

SIGRIST: A bulb.

COTE: It looked like a bulb. What kind of light it was, I couldn't tell you. That's what I, all I remember of the boat.

SIGRIST: This is very interesting, actually, these little bits of memory. And let me just say for the sake of the tape that we're talking about March 1922 when you were on the boat. What is the first memory that you have here in this country?

COTE: The first memory?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

COTE: If you want to call it a memory, was Ellis Island. I remember this great big hall and people, and I

remember somebody holding me and it just seemed like so many people. And I remember being frightened, like I wanted to get away someplace. That was the feeling I always remembered about that incident. And then I remember when we got to the house. I don't remember how we got there, or whether it's just, I just remember the room, and my sister Catherine coming to see us. And I used to love the mashed potatoes with, they used to make them at my sister's and put the hole in it and put butter in it for me. And the machine she's talking about, I remember. Because to me it was such a big thing the way it was crated, and whatever happened to it don't ask me, I don't know. I have no idea.

SIGRIST: For the sake of the tape, let me simply say that the machine Mrs. Cote is speaking of is the Singer sewing machine that her mother crated and brought with her from Liverpool. But you remember the machine?

COTE: Yeah, I remember that, yeah. But otherwise than that the next memory I have was the home, that registers and stays with me.

SIGRIST: And this is St. Joseph's Orphanage.

COTE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Is that what it would have been called?

COTE: It was St. Joseph's Orphanage. That's what it was called to my knowledge then.

SIGRIST: In Jersey City.

COTE: Right.

SIGRIST: Well, good. Let's talk about what you remember about the Home. First let's begin by describing for me, for instance, where you slept at night.

COTE: Well, I remember it was a big dormitory. It was many beds, and I remember being taken care of by one nun. Evidently I was one of the youngest children ever there, from what I understand. I was kept away from the older children because I was young. And I don't remember the nun's name that used to look after us, me, but they had a damn parrot, and that parrot used to call me. It had my name down because I guess I used to play with it a lot. I remember they told me, when I was sick I remember that, and they had me in the infirmary by myself. They used to bring the parrot in to keep me company.

SIGRIST: What were you sick with?

COTE: I have no idea. I have no idea what it was.

SIGRIST: May I ask you what is it about the nun that took care of you that sticks out in your mind? Why do you remember her?

COTE: Because she was nice to me. She was kind. She had a soft way. She wasn't, I don't know, she wasn't mean. She wasn't cruel or anything. But as I get older I remember Sister Ambrose!

SIGRIST: What do you remember about Sister Ambrose?

COTE: Oh, she was wicked. I don't imagine she was bad. She was just tough, and she treated everybody tough, that I remember.

SIGRIST: Is there a specific instance that sticks out in your mind that happened, something specific that Sister Ambrose went to town with?

COTE: Well, she was, to me she was like a force of vengeance. That's all I remember, really, about her. That you stayed out of her way. You never got in her way. Because if you were wrong, that was it.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you received your schooling at the orphanage?

COTE: We had our classrooms upstairs on the top floor. And the classrooms were broke down into stages, and I had Sister Bernard then and she was my, one of my first teachers. Her and I had a dispute over my first name, how it was spelled, the way I was taught. She put it T-H-E-R-E-S-A, and that I was named after The Little Flower. And I found out how that story came about, that when I was brought to the church to be baptized, the priest that baptized me changed my name. It was supposed to be Agnes, something, and he said, "Nobody names anybody after the church," which was St. Bridget's, and St. Theresa, The Little Flower, was being canonized at that time. That's how I got the name Theresa, from what I understand.

SIGRIST: I should also mention, for the sake of the tape, that you were born in Ireland. Is that correct?

COTE: No, I was born in England.

SIGRIST: You were born in Liverpool.

COTE: Right.

SIGRIST: Okay. I thought you were born in Ireland.

COTE: No, no.

SIGRIST: Tell me what else you remember about the schooling.
Do you remember for instance the sorts of things they
taught you?

COTE: Well, we were taught to read. We were taught
arithmetic. We were taught penmanship, how we should
have a good handwriting. We were taught the regular
schoolwork.

SIGRIST: Did you have to wear a uniform of some sort?

COTE: Well, at that particular time I don't recall it being
a uniform. It was dress. We didn't have . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe it for me?

COTE: I really couldn't because it was all the same, like.
It wasn't a, I wouldn't call it, I remember it was
just a dress, but with no, nothing fancy.

SIGRIST: Now, did you have to fulfill religious obligations?
Did you have to go to chapel or church, or . . .

COTE: Well, that, we were guided through that. We were

guided through that in our religious training. You know, I made my First Communion in St. Joseph's, but we went to St. Peter's Church to make it. That's where I made my First Communion.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

COTE: I must have been about seven at that time.

SIGRIST: When you were first put in at St. Joseph's your sister, Mary Jane, was with you.

COTE: Yeah, my sister Margaret.

SIGRIST: Margaret. Can you tell me a little bit about what you remember about being with her at the orphanage, or maybe you weren't allowed to see each other?

COTE: Not that much. We were kept separate, more or less, to my knowledge. I used to run and try to sneak to her, but I used to get pulled back and not allowed to go.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about, as a little girl, how you felt about being separated from your mother and perhaps not being able to see your sister frequently. I mean, was this lonely, or was it

something maybe you never thought about?

COTE: Well, I used to think, I remember I would look for them, and when I asked where, they were they just told me that they had to go to work. That was all. And you didn't ask questions. You had to do what you were told.

SIGRIST: Now, did your mother work at the orphanage?

COTE: Yes, she was, at that time, at the orphanage.

SIGRIST: And what was, what were her duties at the orphanage?

COTE: Uh, she worked, at that time, that I remember talking about, she was in the kitchen working there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember visiting her?

COTE: Yeah. I used to sneak out and run in.

SIGRIST: But what was it, what sticks out in your mind about visiting your mother at the orphanage?

COTE: If they could catch me before I ran first, and my mother would have to turn around and send me back, because I really wasn't allowed to do that.

SIGRIST: At the orphanage would you say you were guarded very

closely?

COTE: I think we were all more or less in a very regimental guide. There were too many of us to, you know, they couldn't give each child an individual attention. That you learn very young. But I didn't find we were beaten. We got punished when there was something wrong, but I wasn't beaten, what you could say beaten, you know.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how maybe they bathed the children, or cared to their hair, that sort of thing?

COTE: I wouldn't say, they cut our hair. They kept it short. And I remember we got examined for little friends running around. That was done, I think nearly every day. I remember at that time if you had them they would put kerosene to kill the darn things if you had them.

SIGRIST: Lice in your hair.

COTE: Right. So that I remember.

SIGRIST: Uh, do you remember where they fed you at the orphanage?

COTE: Oh, yeah. We had a, it was down on the ground, like semi-basement. There was where we all ate. And this is, like the kitchen was off, the serving. Then the kitchen was beyond that.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about eating at the orphanage?

COTE: The lumpy, lumpy oatmeal. To this day I can't stand it. The one time I bit in I thought it was a potato and it wasn't. It was a turnip, a white turnip. To this day I won't eat white turnips.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how you went about eating? Did you have to process into this room?

COTE: Yeah. Well, you had to have an orderly, with as many kids as we were, you don't, you just did it automatically. But when you look at it, with this many children you had to have a regimentated way of guiding all these children down the stairs into the dining room, and we all had our own table that we were all stationed at, so that there wouldn't be any, and they had us filing in that way that we would fall into our places. It was regimentated.

SIGRIST: Was there a prayer said before?

COTE: Yes. We had the grace before meal and the grace after meal.

SIGRIST: Who would say grace?

COTE: The nun would, and most times we had to say it along with her. She would start it, and then we'd all say it together.

SIGRIST: Was this in English or in Latin?

COTE: English. It was not done in Latin.

SIGRIST: Did, did the nuns, did the nuns only tend to the girls, or were you mixed? Were there boys and girls all mixed up?

COTE: No, this was all girls there, mostly all girls. In fact there was no boys among us. It was all girls.

SIGRIST: Was there ever an occasion where a priest would come and visit you for any reason?

COTE: The only reason why I remember seeing a priest was at Mass where we used to be going to Mass. And the Mass was held right in the orphanage. That's where we went

to Mass.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of perhaps how Christmas was celebrated in the orphanage?

COTE: Uh, I remember once it was a great, big tree up in the playroom, and that was the first doll I ever had, that I remember. And I remember some man, he was a, to me he was a big man, heavysset, that came. And I believe, from what I understand, that was the man that, help Margaret, Hague, the Mayor, was it, Hague. I think he was the one that came there. He was the man that was there at that time.

SIGRIST: Would Christmas time at the orphanage be a sad time because so many of these kids had nobody?

COTE: It was more religious than it was, uh, Christmas was a holiday and if you were very good you got a little present. You got mostly candy, nuts or fruit. And if you got one toy you got a lot.

SIGRIST: Was this a time where, for instance, might your mother have visited you at this time, or did your mother come and visit you after she left the orphanage?

COTE: She did, only she wasn't allowed but certain days.

And if her holiday, her day off, didn't coincide with them, they wouldn't let you in. So it was strict on both sides as well.

SIGRIST: Tell me about some of the other children who were in this orphanage. For instance, were there other immigrant children?

COTE: Well, from what I understand, yes, there was. There was other children whose mother worked there. One, I still remember her name. Her name was Claire Kottsberg. Her mother worked, and her and I were the youngest kids there.

SIGRIST: What did you do for fun at this orphanage?

COTE: Well, we played ball, you know. But you lived life so regimentated that it was, you got taken out, you know. And, of course, we had the roof yard.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that for me?

COTE: Well, it was on top of the roof. You know where Washington Street is, where the bank is? St. Mary's Residence?

SIGRIST: It's right across the street.

COTE: Well, it's right on top there. The last I saw of it, it was still there. That, it looked like two-by-fours all around, and it had benches all around, the wooden slat you walked on.

SIGRIST: What did you do up there?

COTE: Well, mostly we walked around there, and we used to look up and watch the people scrub their front steps. We didn't get up there that much that I recall.

SIGRIST: Was that a busy neighborhood at that time?

COTE: I wouldn't say it was, we didn't get up there that much to say it, but it was mostly what I recall residential down there. I remember the post office.

SIGRIST: Right next door, sort of.

COTE: Yeah. It was across the street, on York Street.

SIGRIST: Can you, do you remember a very sad time at the orphanage, you know, when something, just for an instance, perhaps when a child might have died or some kind of tragic thing that happened while you were there?

COTE: If there was it was kept away from us. We weren't, we

weren't exposed to that kind of stuff. For some reason we weren't, not there.

SIGRIST: How long were you at the orphanage?

COTE: Oh, I, I know that I was there when I was seven, and then I was taken out of there and I went to live with my older sister.

SIGRIST: This is Kathleen?

COTE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And when you went to live with Kathleen where was she living?

COTE: Uh, 30th Street, near Ninth Avenue, at the time.

SIGRIST: In New York City?

COTE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was she doing?

COTE: Well, she was married and my, she had a little girl, my niece, Frances. She had a house full of boarders, and she was the superintendent, her and her husband. And she had her husband's brothers there.

SIGRIST: Was her husband from another country?

COTE: No, he was from Ireland.

SIGRIST: He was from Ireland.

COTE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And were all the boarders Irish?

COTE: They were all his brothers.

SIGRIST: So. So obviously, so they must have been. What was it like to be, you know, a young lady in this household full of Irish men?

COTE: I wasn't, the only one I remember vividly was my sister's husband, Jim. He was kind to us. He used to, he followed me down the cellar one time, hiding in the coal bin. He wanted to know why I was there. I says, "I don't want to go on that bus ride again." See, my mother's sister would come, and when she had the day off she'd take us on the Fifth Avenue double decker bus. We'd go up to Grant's Tomb and back. Every time she came that was the same ride we got. And so I used to hide.

SIGRIST: You'd had enough of that, going back and forth.

COTE: Well, she wasn't nice to me anyway. She didn't like me. So I didn't much care for her.

SIGRIST: Well, why did she come to take you for a bus ride?

COTE: Well, that was our Aunt Maggie. She tried to rule the roost, everything her way, but she wasn't always right, and she, she wasn't kind at times. She was kind of rough.

SIGRIST: Did she, and this is the aunt that you, when you came to this country you eventually went right to her house, right? This is the aunt that lived in Newark?

COTE: No, she was the one that brought us over here, along with my older sister. She didn't live with us.

SIGRIST: No, but she, that's where you went when you first came here.

COTE: Yes.

SIGRIST: You went to, I see. In our few remaining minutes, let me ask a couple of questions. One is how did you like being in this country?

COTE: I didn't know about it until I realized, or know,

until I was about twelve years old, that I wasn't born here. And I got mad at the person that told me I wasn't. He says, "You were born in Liverpool, England." I said, "I was not!" I said, "I'm an American." He says, "You were born in Liverpool, England, Theresa." I said, "No, I can't be." So what do you do with an eleven year old kid when you tell her she wasn't born in this country.

SIGRIST: Well, what did that mean to you? When he said, "You weren't born here?"

COTE: I thought he was mean.

SIGRIST: How did that make you feel? I mean, did that make you feel different somehow, or . . .

COTE: Well, see, when I was at school, I was, when I was in the fourth or fifth grade when I was told that. He said to me, "Theresa, didn't anybody ever tell you you were born in Liverpool?" I said, "I hear them talking about it, but I don't know I was born there. I don't remember."

SIGRIST: Of course, you figure when you came here you were so sheltered for so long.

COTE: Well, I have no memory, really, of where the place was. To me this was my country. This was my home. So I had no conception, at that age. But I finally had to accept it, and realized that I wasn't born here. So . . .

SIGRIST: That's a very interesting story, actually, I think, because it really does show just how isolated you were, in a way, and maybe what little contact you had with, for instance, your mother, who would probably be the one to tell you these things.

COTE: Well, I was being, being the youngest I was the one that was, you know, the girls were older than me. My older sister was married. She had her life. Mary and Margaret had to go their way because of circumstances, and they were eight to ten years older than me. So that left me very much out of the picture as far as being able to, and it wasn't their fault any more than it was mine. It was circumstances that brought all this about. So . . .

SIGRIST: That's a very interesting story. Mrs. Cote, I want to thank you for filling us in on what you remember of your immigration experience and for giving us some

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wonderful details, actually, about what it was like to be in an orphanage. I've never had the pleasure of being able to talk to someone about that, and I appreciate the information that you gave us. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Theresa Cote in West New York, New Jersey on February 23, 1993.