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VERNON O. NICOLLS
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 11/1995
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

BARBADOS, 1915 **RESIDENCE: CHRIST CHURCH**
AGE 6 **US RESIDENCE: BROOKLYN, NY**
PASSAGE ON "THE VASARI"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mr. Vernon initially gave his year of arrival in the U.S. and his age at time of entry incorrectly. The name of the ship, as well as the correct date of entry (1915) and age at that time (6) were provided by Mr. Nicoll's daughter after obtaining a copy of the ship manifest page from the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral Historian, 11/7/1995.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, September 20, 1994. I'm using the portable equipment up in the Ellis Island Studio with Vernon Nicolls. Mr. Vernon came from Barbados in 1913 [sic, 1915]. He was four years old at the time [sic, age six]. Present also is student intern Seth Rodney from Long Island University. Mr. Nicolls, could we begin by you giving me your birth date.

NICOLLS: I was born on January 6, 1909 in Christ Church, Barbados.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about where Christ Church is?

NICOLLS: If you're acquainted with Barbados to any extent, you know that it is shaped like a pear, where the east and west coast, the west coast is a protected area, and the east coast gets the constant breeze and wind from the Atlantic ocean. Christ Church is one of the parishes on the sort of south beach, which is the bottom part of the pear, and it is also, Bridgetown is the capital of the province, and it is where most of the people live, because it is protected on the Caribbean, rather than being on the windward side where the ocean breezes constantly prevail. My mother and father left, as a matter of fact, my father left Barbados soon after I was born, and my mother left within six months. They came to the United States in an effort to find a better living. In the meantime, I stayed with my aunt, whose husband is one of the prominent doctors in Barbados at that time. My aunt brought me over when I was four years old [sic, age six] to be with my parents, which were living at that

time in Brooklyn. I met my parents for the first time in my recollection at that time, because when they left I had no idea of the parents, what motivated. And living in Brooklyn at that time, we came in, I believe it was the latter part of September or October. Because soon after I got here, as I say, coming from Barbados you have a constant temperature of roughly seventy, seventy five degrees. And during those first few months, we had an early snow that year, and for the first time in my life I saw snow and had to go out, taken by my mother, to feel this white stuff that was on the ground, which I had never seen before and never experienced touching this cold, damp substance which I got later in my life to enjoy skiing, which I do now, not having this opportunity to learn to ski until I was seventy-two years old. I still enjoy skiing very much, not as much as I do ice skating. But coming to Brooklyn, we stayed in Brooklyn until I was about ten years old. My parents bought a house in Asbury Park, where I was raised until after high school.

SIGRIST: Let's back up and go back to Barbados. What was your father's name?

NICOLLS: My father's name was Charles, middle name Oswald.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about what he did in Barbados.

NICOLLS: My father worked for the railroad company as an engineer in their office there. My mother, if you know anything about Barbados, the professionals, more or less, my uncle, as I said, was a doctor, and we had inside help, outside help and I can remember the coachman taking my cousin, who was my same age, to school in a carriage every day and picking us up after. Because, as you know, people of, in position, they had much more money to use and to spend as the average Barbadian. And having a coachman to take care of the horses and drive this family around, and outside help to take care of the grounds, which he had. Despite his practice, he raised, or grew grapes for the, at that time called Ice House, which was the prominent hotel and club in Bridgetown. The grapes got to be quite an expenditure because he had to cover the whole grape arbor, which was comprised of maybe about two acres, as I understand it now, from the birds used to come and pick the grapes before they got ripe. And being in this sort of environment, I was

exposed to a lot more, even at an early age, than the average child in Barbados.

SIGRIST: I'm curious, you say it was an exclusive club. Exclusive . . .

NICOLLS: To the public.

SIGRIST: To the public.

NICOLLS: Insofar as . . .

SIGRIST: Who were the members?

NICOLLS: People, the professional people of the island, and those that visited. They had the best of food, the best of accommodations. And, uh, even at that time I understand it was quite a prominent town on the island. All of the ships from abroad came into Bridgetown, because that's where the harbor was at that time.

SIGRIST: What memories do you have, if any, as a very young child, of the town itself?

NICOLLS: To me they were just tall buildings. Because where we lived, where the doctor had his grape arbor, as I understand now, an estate out in the suburbs, in the

country part. Bridgetown to me was just a city with a lot of buildings. At that age it meant nothing to me.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about the house, your aunt's house that you lived in?

NICOLLS: It was very spacious. I remember tall ceilings, high ceilings, shutters where we would have glass in the windows. There were shutters, because it was a constant breeze. And one thing that I can remember emphatically was every time we took a, I would call it a bath or a shower, and as I remember the shower or the bath was like a separate room, and it had two levels. The level you walk in from the other rooms, and you step down one step where the water was. And it was an area, I would say roughly eight by eight. We pulled the cord, and the water came in from a cistern that was on top of the roof. And being in the sun constantly, it was warm. He had, as one of his pets, a monkey. And we knew every time that we got soapy water from the cistern, we knew that the monkey had gotten out of his cage and was playing with the soap on top of the cistern. But this stands out because the whole, all the males, my uncle and two of my cousins, his two sons, all took a bath at the same

time. I imagine this was because of the scarcity of water, and to me this was just a natural thing to do. And the three of us all bathed at the same time, with the water coming out of the shower from the cistern, which was on the roof. And other things, like the coachman taking us to school int he carriage.

SIGRIST: What were the houses made out of?

NICOLLS: His house was, to me, now, I realize that it was, I don't know, cinderblock, but it was stone. And it was, I say it was all on one floor, a lot of windows, and the shutters were out, and the large area which was given over to the grape, the grape arbor. There was a small, separate area where they had vegetables growing. And, of course, the help, inside and out the help took care of the place outside, and we had, uh, you know, help inside the house.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the kitchen, for instance, if anything?

NICOLLS: The kitchen, I very seldom went into the kitchen.

SIGRIST: That was the realm of the help.

NICOLLS: That was the help. It came, it was very, it came to

me very emphatically when I came to this country, and my mother cried when she had to take her garbage and put it on the sidewalk to be picked up. Of course, in Barbados all this was done. You had no, no reason to have any, anything to do with the cleaning of the house, taking out the garbage or cooking of the food. This was something that the help did. So it was quite a shock when my mother came and she had, because she often mentions that she had to take the garbage out, put it on the sidewalk for the people. This was beneath her.

SIGRIST: What, what was there to do, for a small child, and you were a small child in Barbados . . .

NICOLLS: Yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things were you allowed to do in this milieu? How did you, how were you supposed to behave?

NICOLLS: Uh, we played, we had, some friends used to come in occasionally. And we played, as you know, cricket is the big game in Barbados. And we, in our little way, we played the game with the few friends that were allowed, I say, to come in, because we never participated in any of the games that the children on

the street or any of the other neighbors.

SIGRIST: Were there certain rules that you had to follow either set down by your uncle and aunt or just by society in terms of the way you behaved?

NICOLLS: As far as I can recall, I don't know who set the pattern, but we always sat in the same chairs at the table, and not knowing anything else, this was just natural for us to do. We knew the help was there to cook the food and serve us, and the coachman took us to school, anywhere that we had to go, the coachman took us in the carriage. As chauffeurs do today, he helped us in, opened the door for us to get out, and, uh, as I say, you didn't know anything else to do, because this just came natural, just a natural thing to do.

SIGRIST: Interesting. Tell me a little bit, you said your father worked for the railroad company in Barbados. Tell me a little bit about your father's personality after you got to know him. What was he like as a person?

NICOLLS: My father was a very, how must I put this, steeped in the ways of Barbados. It was a long time for him to

get used to the mannerisms, the association with your, your peers, so to speak, in the workplace. He had a hard time getting into the engineering field that he did, and he became a salesman for, I believe it was Frederick Loger's. They were one of the better department stores in Brooklyn at that time. And he sold just mirrors and paintings. That's all he dealt with. Because he was quite knowledgeable as far as paintings and things of that sort were concerned.

SIGRIST: You say he was steeped in the ways of Barbados. Can you give me an example of one thing that he couldn't get adjusted to because he did it a different way, or something...

NICOLLS: Well, in Barbados you didn't go to or make conversation with people on the street. You were either introduced by family or friends, or you met at a gathering with professionals you associated with. So it, he was termed by the Americans, to them, you were "stuck up," because you didn't mix well with the general public. And you had your own friends that you associated with. You didn't go into public places like restaurants with no, uh, you had no qualms about going into restaurants here, or picking up a

conversation with people, even though they were doing the same work that you were doing. So it became quite a problem for, especially my mother who had to shop, cook the food. And, uh, as I say, do her own housework.

SIGRIST: So life was much more rigid and formalized in Barbados than it was here.

NICOLLS: It was for many years, for many years, until we became acclimated to the customs of the people. We visited our few friends who were West Indian at the time, who lived in the area. Because they had rented an apartment in an area in Brooklyn where there were many West Indians and some that he had known in Barbados.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your mother, actually. What was your mother's name, and her maiden name?

NICOLLS: Uh, Margaret, uh, Isabelle Neblett, N-E-B-L-E-T-T. And . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about her background.

NICOLLS: Uh, my mother's background was much different than my father's. My father was English and Scotch, and my mother was Arowac Indian Negro and Irish. So, you

see, I come from a multi-cultural, multi-nation . . .

SIGRIST: I should say.

NICOLLS: . . . background, which got me into a lot of trouble later on (he laughs) as I started school.

SIGRIST: I wonder if it was difficult for your parents.

NICOLLS: It was, especially for my father, because he had to go out and work. And, as I say, he had a hard time finding his niche. But after he got to be known, many people recommended him because of his knowledge of the paintings and mirrors, and for many years he worked at Loger's in that particular area of the department store.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about your mom's personality.

NICOLLS: My mother was much more outgoing than my father, and she tried to, well, how must I put this, get into the ways of the Americans, because, as she said, "This is where we live, and this is where we have to make our home, make our living." So the more we can associate with or get the system of the American, the way of the American people, the better it will be for us.

SIGRIST: She wanted to Americanize.

NICOLLS: She, she was trying very hard, and I think she did, to a great extent, get my father also to see the ways of the country. And he, in turn, realized the fact of life, and he adapted very easily.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

NICOLLS: I really don't know how they met. I can only say that our, up till last year, early part of this year, 1994, was the first time I had been back from Barbados since I left in 1913 [sic, 1915]. And I visited the church that I was baptized in, the Cathedral where they were married in Bridgetown, and some of the people that knew the other side of the family, because we had no family in America, so to speak. And it wasn't until I was maybe twelve or fourteen years old that I met my uncle, my father's only brother, who had come to New York and married, in later years. And I found out later that he worked as a conductor on the first subway that ran in Manhattan. If I had known then what I know now, I would have questioned him more about our family. Because, as I grew up, people were not as interested or delved into their ancestry as

they do now. My daughter's trying to get information on the family tree.

SIGRIST: And your ancestry was complicated, too.

NICOLLS: It was because of the nationalities. I do know that my father's older brother was a captain on a ship that traveled all around the world. I often wonder, there is a Nicolls spelled N-I-C-O-L-L-S in Long Island, and there is a spot on Shelter Island which had a plaque from Nicolls of Barbados, and I wondered if it was my father's brother circling around the globe. I do know that my grandfather on my father's side was sent out by the crown to Antigua, because he operated the wireless station in Antigua. That's how he got to the West Indies.

SIGRIST: The Wyler, the Wyler Station, is that what you said?

NICOLLS: The wireless. They call it . . .

SIGRIST: The wireless, oh, the wireless station.

NICOLLS: It was the, uh, he was working, I guess you would call that, I would call that now public service because the crown, being a government agency. And, uh, that's how he got to Barbados and met his wife, which was my

mother.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever tell you later on any stories associated with your birth?

NICOLLS: No, because, as I say, when I was growing up, no one that I know even talked to their ancestors. And it wasn't until later in life when my daughters got interested, "What about this? What about that, your father and mother?" I had pictures of my grandmother on my mother's side and my father's side, and I have no pictures of my grandfather.

SIGRIST: But you didn't know them.

NICOLLS: I didn't, I knew my grandmother on my mother's side.

SIGRIST: In Barbados?

NICOLLS: In Barbados.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about your mother's mom?

NICOLLS: I remember she was a large, powerful woman, very energetic, very knowledgeable, and up to the time that I left I was very close to her. She had had diabetes, I understand, and one leg was cut off at the knee, and I used to walk around carrying a chair for her to put

her leg on. And during that I always admired a ring that she had on, that when she died she sent it to me here in this country. It was a very wide gold band with the words "souvenir" in letters embossed on top of the ring around the ring, with the U as a big horseshoe. And her, as I say, she was a large woman, and even now that ring would barely fit on my thumb. And I treasure it. I'll pass it on to my daughters after I go. But she was a very powerful woman insofar as she made her presence known wherever she went.

SIGRIST: Is there an example of that that sticks out in your mind, of your grandmother's power, or how she exerted her power?

NICOLLS: I think it's a lot on my mother, because she was very, because she was very determined in her ways. She was very articulate. And another thing that I brought up, because growing up she was the first PTA president in our school when she organized the parents in Asbury Park. Uh . . .

SIGRIST: So your mother had that kind of commanding personality.

NICOLLS: Yes. And they tell me that I'm stubborn just like she

is. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: When you were living with your aunt and uncle, was your grandmother living with you?

NICOLLS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was this a household of extended family as well?

NICOLLS: She was, yeah, well, she was, my mother and aunt were the only children, so that was only brother and sister, two sisters. And on my father's side, they were only two children, so, of course, he wasn't there, but my mother and my aunt were very close because she visited us when we came, soon after I got to be, I think, twelve, thirteen years old, my father bought a house in Asbury Park, so we all moved the family to Asbury Park, out of the city. And that is where I more or less grew up, in Asbury Park.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters also that were living with your uncle and aunt?

NICOLLS: Uh, no. When I came to New York, when I came to Brooklyn, rather, my aunt, my younger brother was born then. He was born then. And after another brother and sister were born.

SIGRIST: But they're American-born.

NICOLLS: Yes, they're all American, I was the only one born in Barbados. And, uh, I still remember my two cousins. They were born while I was there, the first two boys. And, uh, they eventually went to England.

SIGRIST: They were born, this is . . .

NICOLLS: In Barbados.

SIGRIST: This is your uncle and aunt's children.

NICOLLS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you, what do you remember about them being born, or any of that experience.

NICOLLS: Nothing, nothing about them. All I remember is them being siblings, so to speak, of mine. We all lived in the same house. We played together and we went to school together. And it wasn't till I came to Brooklyn to my mother that it came to my mind that, you know, this was my mother. It never occurred to me that my aunt was not my mother. Nothing was said. We were all one big, happy family.

SIGRIST: So to the best of your knowledge you did not receive any kind of mail or anything from your parents.

NICOLLS: At that age, no.

SIGRIST: Or presents or something?

NICOLLS: No, no, no. But she told me my mother in America, but it didn't mean anteing to me. And, uh, I had everything I wanted, the good family life. We had,w e went to recitals and the concerts. We just sat and listened. There was just, it was just something that they did that we were a part of.

SIGRIST: What about church, religion?

NICOLLS: Oh, yes, Episcopal.

SIGRIST: Episcopal.

NICOLLS: And, as I say, it wasn't till this year that I went, the church I was baptized in. And also the Cathedral in Bridgetown where they were married. And, uh, you know, it's hard for Americans, we try to tell them, they think you're stuck up when they talk about the service you had and the coachman, and the cathedrals that you went to, not just ordinary, where the

ordinary people. But it was just a way of life. You didn't know anything else. And I, uh, came up that way and, well, that's just the way we were brought up.

SIGRIST: Tell me when you first became conscious that you were going to be going somewhere else. I mean, how was that, were you told, or were you not told?

NICOLLS: My aunt said that, another aunt, she's going to take you to America to your mother. And for a four-year-old, there was nothing different. We went on, got on the boat. And I can remember . . .

SIGRIST: Which aunt? You said a different aunt took you to a boat?

NICOLLS: Another aunt, yeah. Not the one I was living with.

SIGRIST: Not the one you were living with. Who was this other aunt that took you?

NICOLLS: It was my grandmother's sister.

SIGRIST: So your great-aunt.

NICOLLS: Actually it was my grandmother's sister, one of her sister's. So, uh, she was the one that brought me. And, uh, I didn't see her again for maybe, oh,

fifteen, twenty years. Because she moved in, she was living, I believe, in New York City, and we were in Brooklyn. And, uh, just a small circle of friends, that's where we associated.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you when you left.

NICOLLS: Nothing of what I took. All I can remember of on the boat was swinging on a swing on the boat, which is, I told my daughters I wouldn't do today. Because you look at the water, if I had fallen or the swing broke, there was no way in the world they could have found me. And this, I can always remember this, swinging on that swing, and looking on. And I remember it was a small boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

NICOLLS: I have no idea [oral historians's note: "the Vasari"]. The, Ellis Island was the first thing I remember after getting off the boat. As I told my daughters, coming in the entrance with the railings and the lighted ceiling, this is the, stands out very vividly in my mind, the first thoughts of on the ground. I don't remember getting off the boat or walking, a little park, or whatever it was, but I remember coming

in that entryway with the railings and that ceiling. That appealed to me, this open ceiling that they, and the rails, and then talking with the various people.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me anything that sticks out in your mind about your great-aunt and your relationship with her during this journey?

NICOLLS: There was nothing special. We slept in the same cabin. We ate in the same table. And, uh, of the boat, that's the only thing I remember of the boat except that swing. That swing was a, and there was one other child, I believe, on the boat, that we played occasionally. But that swing, I spent most of my time on that swing looking down at the water. Which, today, you wouldn't let your own child do that, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you may not, but, I mean, do you remember how you felt emotionally when you were leaving your uncle and aunt. Did you understand . . .

NICOLLS: No, it didn't mean anything. It just meant I was going to another home and I was going to ride the boat. This was all (?). And I didn't see my cousin again until we met in England during the war. He was

married living in Bath.

SIGRIST: Of course, you were an adult at that point.

NICOLLS: Oh, he was married and had, had two children. I had was married but had no children when I went in the service.

SIGRIST: So the boat, you're let off, and you come to Ellis Island. Now, you mentioned meeting your parents. When did that happen?

NICOLLS: When my aunt took me to their house.

SIGRIST: So your aunt was with you through the whole process here.

NICOLLS: Through the whole process, and we went to Brooklyn, and we went to her house.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about how you viewed your parents when you first met them? What were you feeling at that time, if you remember?

NICOLLS: I don't remember any specific feeling or trepidation of being at another place. Everything just, they were very loving and glad to see me. My brother was there, this was my brother. And I imagine at that age, one

child was the same as another child. You had a child to play with, and a parent to take care of you, feed you or clothe you. And I do remember that first morning, my father coming into, in the bedroom, picking me up. He said, "I have something to show you." We went to the windows. Beautiful, everything was covered with snow. He said, "That is snow. If you open the window, touch it, hold it." I remember that vividly, that first experience. Lifted me up, carried me to the window. Everything was covered white, you know.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Tell me about, you say in the first year or so that you were in America. What was different for you? What was different than what had been in Barbados?

NICOLLS: The restriction of an apartment over a house with lots of room to play and run.

SIGRIST: Describe the apartment in Brooklyn.

NICOLLS: It was a typical, at that time they called them, 1913 [sic, 1915], cold water flats. It was an apartment on

the second floor. There were two-family row houses on the block. The second floor, walk right in off the hall to the kitchen. The kitchen led to the dining room. Then there's one bedroom, then a second bedroom, then a so-called parlor. Uh, I remember the dining room had what they call a Dutch, wainscoting was halfway around the wall. They call it a Dutch, and then they had a molding, a Dutch molding or something they called it, where you put the fancy plates and the cupboard. And I remember two things they had on there which I wish I had now, they'd be priceless, a, there weren't exactly pictures or statues, but there were about, on an eight by ten frame, the king and queen with, in all their regalia, uniform, busts, standing up on this thing, on this counter, beautiful pictures. Everybody admired them, because I even thought they looked nice. But I remember this up on that Dutch molding they called it, and the wainscoting on the ceiling. And I can remember my brother and I putting chairs together and sheets over them, playing, and we had a house where we were making these things. This I remember from that dining room in Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: Did you have electricity in that apartment, or gas?

NICOLLS: Uh, we had gas at that time. And the things that frightens me now is having a stove in the parlor, as it was, to help heat, you know, the rest of the house. And at Christmas time, lighted candles on the tree, which was, today it would be insane. But these lighted candles on a pine tree that could go up and this whole house. Nothing happened. Everything was careful. "No, don't touch," after we lit the candles. The stove was in the center of the room, and the Christmas tree was in one corner. Where every night we'd go in, we'd light the candles and admire them. But you couldn't touch them because the place would go up. I tremble now when I think of, God must have been looking out for us. But these candles and the stove, burning (?), all in this small room, nothing happened.

SIGRIST: Was this Christmas tree something new to you, or did you have them in Barbados?

NICOLLS: I do not remember Christmas trees in Barbados. I do not remember Christmas trees. As a matter of fact, I do not remember Christmas as such. But, as I say, we always had plenty of fruit and flowers and things, you

know, the help would bring it in. And visiting people would, where we had little parties with our group. But other than that, I do not remember Christmas as a holiday with a tree.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that struck you as being different on the outside world, outside of the apartment.

NICOLLS: Outside of the apartment was very difficult. When you went out your door, you were in a city. House and people, the wagons and things going down the street. I saw very few automobiles. I remember the one thing, the trash being picked up by this big wagon that was drawn by two horses, and the people would come down, sweep up the streets. The back of the whole wagon opened and they walked right in with the trash. I remember the street had two big willow trees on the opposite side of the street that took up most of the sidewalk. So that you had to around the trees. The sidewalk was, the trees were right against the street, and the sidewalk, and they had burst or broke up part of the sidewalk.

SIGRIST: What was the address? Do you remember, of this

apartment?

NICOLLS: I will in a minute, because, 319 was another place we lived, but I remember it was Warwick Street. And about five years ago, I drove over from Englewood to find this block I lived on. I can remember three places we lived in Brooklyn before we moved. Friedman Street, Ashford Street and Warwick Street. Now, there was one street a block-and-a-half away that a trolley ran on that was called New Lots Road. In later years the subway ran and the elevator came down. But I can remember this street because of its proximity to New Lots, which was like the outskirts at that time. Now, my father used to take us down, and we used to play, on the other side of New Lots were fields and large reeds, which is part of Flatbush. And the people, that was the end of civilization, so to speak. And I can remember when they started to excavate those open lots and put up buildings. The first school I went to, 158, between Warwick and Ashford. That was the grammar school. And before we left, because I was still in the, I was in the eighth grade when I left.

SIGRIST: Before you went to Ashford.

NICOLLS: Before I went, because I used to walk these three blocks to 158. Two things stand out in my experience those early days. There were no stores in our particular area, and I'm sure you know at that time the men all wore these stiff collars. And I can remember, because my mother at that time had, my sister had been born, and she, at lunchtime when I went back to school, I would take this little package, which was my father's collars, and before I'd left, when I left school at three o'clock, whenever it was, I would stop off at the Chinese laundry and leave those collars. And the kids used to say, "Why are you," they used to bring their lunch in the morning. "Why do you bring your lunch after lunchtime?" And I wouldn't say anything, just put it in my desk, and that's it. That was one of the things I remember. Another thing was the walk to school. You would see the same people every day, and you'd have to walk to school. And another thing that was, stand out in my mind, was going into the store and getting milk. The grocer would put two bags together, put the milk in the bags, hold that, and carry the milk home in double paper bags. This I remember. And you'd go in and he'd have the ladle in the large milk can that they

had, you see now when you drive through the country that the milk, the dairy would use for pickup. I remember this distinctly. They put two bags together, and they put the milk in the bag, fold the top down, and you hold that milk. After a time, my father got a, what they call a milk pail, which would hold a quart of milk. And you take the milk, and you put it in. The other thing is the pushcarts at the market on Blake Avenue, which was two blocks away from us. You would go, and the whole block would be taken up with pushcarts, vegetables, fruit, everything. The other thing that the grocer had, or maybe it was the baker that had just the bread and milk, you go in and say how much bread you want, and he would take up the loaf, put it against his apron and just slice, and it would come so close to what you had ordered. These are the things I remember from the early days.

SIGRIST: All this talk about food makes me think, did your mother continue to prepare food in a traditional style of Barbados or did she, in her Americanization, did she try to change her eating habits?

NICOLLS: No. She bought, she could, she was able to buy the same food, and she cooked in the same manner that she

would in Barbados.

SIGRIST: What is that? Tell me what that is.

NICOLLS: For one thing, you had, uh, more rice and potatoes. Potatoes were very (?) potatoes. Rice and peas were a staple that if you go in the restaurant here you get the rice and the peas two separate units. But in Barbados you had it cooked together, and for some reason it mixed with the rice, and it was not all one in one glob. The other thing was okra and co-co, which was a staple in Barbados, made with cornmeal and okra, and fish. You always had codfish with co-co. And this was something that we had regularly, that I was accustomed to.

SIGRIST: How do you spell co-co?

NICOLLS: C-O, hyphen, C-O. And, uh, they have it, in the islands they also have, in one of the other islands, I forget which one it was, a modification, I imagine, if we call it, that they mixed other things in with the co-co. I'm trying to remember what they called it. Jug. I don't know if it was Trinidad or Grenada, but one of the other islands had this jug, which was a mixture of other ingredients in with the co-co. It

was made all in one thing. And fish, we had a lot of fish, which I like fish.

SIGRIST: So your mother was able to still purchase the same kinds of foods here. Does that mean that this was a large West Indian neighborhood, or . . .

NICOLLS: No, it was not. As a matter of fact, it seemed all my life, when I say all my life, even up to OCS, I was the only black in my class when I went to school, up in East New York. I only saw one other black person in the school. And I say black now because at that time it was, it wasn't even a thought. It wasn't even a thought whether you were sunburned or another race, black or Negro, whatever they, it was not, it wasn't even a thought. It would never arise in conversation or in speech. And I never got this black and white thing until I got to Asbury Park. Nobody, everybody thought my father was white. My mother didn't look like an Indian. So they just assumed I was Indian. The subject never came up. So, I'm the darkest one in my family. My brothers and sisters, they just, a funny incident happened when, two things brings this up. During the war, 1917, they were rationing sugar and other things. And we would go in the store, and I

would get my lot, and my brother would come right back and he would get his lot for another family. No questions were ever asked. When we went to get license at one time, the people just put down what they thought. When I was inducted in the service, the doctor that was examining me asked me, he said, "Are you colored or white? Are you colored or white?" "What do you mean?" (he laughs) "What was your mother and your father?" And I told him. He just passed me off. But this has always been a problem. When I say a problem, not for me, but to other people.

SIGRIST: Well, you mentioned in Asbury Park was when this first surfaced.

NICOLLS: Because at that time, I forget what year it was, they started segregating schools in New Jersey. And there was a problem with what classes I should go to, and that was a year, and that lasted for several years in New Jersey before they knocked it down. And, uh, at the ocean, the beaches were segregated. And that was the first time we ran into any segregation, see. And, but other than that, when I went to OCS, when I was an adult, I was the only black in twenty-one hundred. And it didn't make any difference to me. It didn't

feel any different. I acted no different. People used to, you know, say, because you didn't speak Southern drawl with "dese" and "dose" and have nappy hair, you were not black. My brother, when he went, he was inducted, the doctors got on the side, and one said, "What is he? His parents come from Barbados. You know that mixed marriages are nothing down there." They were also puzzled as to what they should leave, put the label on. As far as I'm concerned, it never bothered me. I get along well, when I went to, in the service when I went to Europe, having spoken and learned Spanish, it was easy for me to pick up the Italian when we got to Sicily and Italy. It saved my life many times being able to converse with the people. The company commander used to send me two ahead in the forward position so I could converse with the Italians to get aid stations set up. By that time I was an officer coming back from OCS and Fort Knox, and I had the opportunity to do a lot for the company because I spoke Italian.

SIGRIST: Did you speak English in Barbados? But you spoke Spanish.

NICOLLS: Yes, very proper English.

SIGRIST: Yes, I'm sure.

NICOLLS: Very proper English. And . . .

SIGRIST: Where did you pick up Spanish that you . . .

NICOLLS: When I came, when I came to the States, I had many friends, and in school I started in school.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see. And then you just . . .

NICOLLS: And I just took it right in, and having an affinity I pick up the Italian very quickly, and I went ahead to arrange aid stations for the battalion. And I got along fine. As a matter of fact, if I wasn't married before I went in, I would have stayed there. I had offers of jobs and things in Italy, and I would have stayed. But I was married, so I said, "If I don't go back now, no sense in going back." (he laughs) My wife said, "Why didn't you send for me?" They do not realize the deprivation, the scarcity of food, how many Americans brought their wives over and didn't last and had to go back, because it's different, you know. A war-torn country that's trying to get back on its feet, it's very difficult.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit in our few remaining minutes, because I know you've got to get back to your family, about the experience when you first started school and what was easy for you and what was difficult for you.

NICOLLS: When I first started school I had no problems. As I say, that was in about 1914, 1915 and stuff, and I was going to public school in Brooklyn. Uh, nobody questioned me, nobody said anything. Because they just assumed I was Indian, Hispanic, whatever they figured. I didn't ask them, and they never asked.

SIGRIST: Was it enough of an ethnic mix of children in the neighborhood or in school where you would have fit right in in that kind of community.

NICOLLS: There were no other colored in the area, none.

SIGRIST: Well, what about other ethnic groups?

NICOLLS: Italian and Jewish, mostly.

SIGRIST: So that was the make-up of the neighborhood.

NICOLLS: That was the make-up of this area. That was the make-up of the area, and I, uh, I made a lot of friends with people, with the kids. I had no problems. It

was never a question asked or put forth that I would ask. When I went to high school it was in Asbury Park. It was a segregated grammar school down there, but the high school was no problem.

SIGRIST: Your parents could read and write.

NICOLLS: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: How did they feel about education? Was that something that you . . .

NICOLLS: Oh, education was very important. Because my father went to college in Barbados. My mother, my mother didn't go to college. But their finishing schools were comparable to a prep school here. Camavaire was one of the colleges in Barbados that he went to. There were two colleges, and he went to Camavaire, which I saw when I went last year.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to return to Barbados?

NICOLLS: Uh, my mother went back after we were grown, as a visitor.

SIGRIST: But to live, did they ever want to go back to live?

NICOLLS: No, no, no. Because, the reason they came here was to

so-called get a better life, because, as you know, Barbados is a very small country. There are just so many jobs, decent jobs, to take. So everyone else, that's why so many work on the boats to get away. So they corresponded with friends here, and they thought that New York was the best place. That's when he came. My mother came six months later, and my aunt kept me until I was about four years old, then I came over.

SIGRIST: Tell me what it felt like recently to go back there for the first time. You said it was a, when was it, recently?

NICOLLS: Yes, this June.

SIGRIST: This June, very recently.

NICOLLS: And, uh, my wife had gone, my wife and daughter had gone back about maybe ten years ago on a visit. Uh, in going back the biggest thing was to see the areas that I remembered. I didn't remember the church where I was Christened, but I was told of it. But I did remember the house I lived in for a short while before my aunt and I came to America. I can remember a church next door and a tamarind tree which at that

time was about maybe fifty, seventy-five feet behind the church. I used to go pick up the tamarinds, because tamarind is like a nut, so to speak, that you eat the seed inside and it's very, uh, sort of a licorice taste, but it's enticing. One of the surprises was that they had moved the church back to within ten or twelve feet of the tree. The tree is still there. And they did that because of the widening of the road and the sort of boulevard or parkway made extra wide, and they just moved the church back. And I can remember the wall, because it was only about five or six blocks from that wall leading into Bridgetown.

SIGRIST: Did you feel an emotional connection to what you were seeing, or did you just feel sort like a tourist?

NICOLLS: There was no emotional connection. Maybe, they tell me I keep my emotions bottled up or I don't show it much and, even in crises I don't panic. I never remember panic in my life.

SIGRIST: But did you feel something inside, or did you just feel like you were just visiting another lovely country?

NICOLLS: No. I just felt like I was visiting some place I had known before. I visited, I have an uncle, a cousin, rather, that is, uh, they don't call them deacons. In Barbados, he's like a Bishop in the church area. And, of course, he has entre to a lot of the Cathedrals that he took us into. But he, I got a very big charge out of taking a bus ride around Barbados to see the other parts of Barbados that I didn't see when I was a child. I can remember a place called Sam Lord's Castle. As a child, being taken out there with my cousins to see a ship that had washed up on the beach against the sea wall, and this was how Sam Lord made his millions. He was a pilot, and he put lanterns in the coconut trees so the ships would think it was a safe harbor, and it would wreck, and he and his cronies would steal the goods and sell them. It is now a big tourist attraction, a beautiful hotel and grounds, and we just visited there on these grounds. We also visited the, uh, of course, we flew in, and we saw the airport, which wasn't there when I left. And I was just enjoyed seeing the other part of Barbados that I hadn't seen before, and things that I had never seen.

SIGRIST: Did you go to the cemetery to look up relatives there?

NICOLLS: Uh, yes. I visited the cemetery and saw the gravestones of the people. But that was all in Bridgetown in conjunction with the cathedral, because they had their own burying ground. (he coughs) And, uh, the extensions that had put on the cathedral, which covered the graves. And instead of digging up the graves, they just took the headstones and laid them down, and they part of the floor. And the headstones are now part of the floor where they extended the cathedral. And many people that had known my uncle and aunt before, and my cousin, still lives in the old Homestead out in Crystal Waters. She runs a guest house now. But, uh, there was no emotional feeling, which many of the people thought I would engender.

SIGRIST: Oh, you were very young.

NICOLLS: Yes. And they couldn't understand why I hadn't been running back there before. But, uh, I had two children in college. To me, it was a, what must I say, a decision where my priorities lie. I would rather pay for their education than running back and

forth, because it didn't mean that much to me. And I was happy to say I could afford to put them in college.

SIGRIST: Speaking of your children, right before we end, can you name your wife for me.

NICOLLS: Edith, uh, I know she's sorry that she can't be here. Edith, and my . . .

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

NICOLLS: Edith Harris was her maiden name.

SIGRIST: And your children?

NICOLLS: And she's from Baltimore.

SIGRIST: Yes. What year did you get married?

NICOLLS: 1941.

SIGRIST: And name your children.

NICOLLS: Lynn is the oldest. She's married and has two children. And my younger daughter Kay, they're both here, she has no children. My young, my grandson now is in Marine, and my granddaughter is in Rutger's College, and I'm very proud of all of them, very proud

of all of them.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, Mr. Nicolls, this has been an incredible treat for us. We find people from Barbados so rarely.

NICOLLS: I'm only sorry, it's a pleasure to be here, but I'm only sorry that my family could not have been here at the same time, because they would appreciate it.

SIGRIST: Well, you'll get a copy of the tape soon, so . . .

NICOLLS: Oh, yes. But my daughter, who approached you first, is very, uh, what can I say, organized and oriented. She was the manager of the, uh, personnel division of human resources for Time Magazine in New York where she just left a month ago. But I'm very glad and appreciate your interest in us as Barbadians, and, uh, if I can be of any help any time . . .

SIGRIST: Sure. We'll get your address and phone number down.

NICOLLS: You call me, yeah.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Vernon Nicolls on Tuesday, September 20, 1994, using the portable equipment in the Ellis Island Recording Studio. Thank you very much.