EI-641
ELSIE POUTTU
BIRTHDATE: AUGUST 7, 1905
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 21, 1995
AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 89
RUNNING TIME: 57:58
INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.
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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

FINLAND, 1916
AGE: 10

SHIP: FREDERICK THE EIGHTH
PORT: NORWAY
RESIDENCES:

- **FINLAND: WESANTO**
- **THE US: WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS**

LEVINE: Today is July 21st, 1995. I'm here in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Lutheran Home, with Elsie Marie Pouttu, who came from Finland when she was—we think she was ten, about to turn eleven, in 1916, in the summertime. Mrs. Pouttu came on the Frederick the Eighth, on that ship, and today Mrs. Pouttu is about to turn ninety. She looks wonderful, and is very delightful and very alert. I'm looking forward to anything you can remember, so let's start at the beginning, Mrs. Pouttu. Would you tell me your birth date?

POUTTU: August 7th, 1905.

LEVINE: And where in Finland were you born?

POUTTU: I was born—I don't know. I guess I was born in my grandmother's home. I'd have to look up my passport.

LEVINE: Well, do you remember where you lived up until you were in fourth grade, and you left Finland?

POUTTU: When I left Finland, I went to Belmont Street School. My teacher was Miss Powers. They had an ungraded school there, that all the foreigners who couldn't speak the English language went to that school first, to learn the language, and then they were put into a grade equal to their education.

LEVINE: I see. But before we talk about what happened in this country, I'd like to spend a little time talking about Finland, and what you remember? Do you have any idea of where in Finland you grew up, until you left?

POUTTU: Let me see now. My mother and father were in this country. My father was here, and he became ill, and he was taken to a Boston hospital. So then they let my mother know that my father was ill. He had been in this country for a long time, because many of the men came here and worked in the quarries and Lanesville and Gloucester.

LEVINE: Oh.

POUTTU: That's where they would have the—

LEVINE: Did you remember your father? When you first came to this country, did you remember him?

POUTTU: I remember him from Finland, but I knew he was my father. But we were always afraid of him, because we hadn't been fathered by anybody. Everybody was good to us, in Finland, just because we were going to America from that town. I guess I'm the only person—well, my two brothers and I were the only people that they knew that went to America. They kind of kept us like little heroes, or something, you know, because we were going to go to America.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well now, what was your father's name?

POUTTU: Otto, O-T-T-O, Otto.

LEVINE: And your mother's name?

POUTTU: Hilda.

LEVINE: And her maiden name?

POUTTU: Her maiden name was Oittinen, O-I-T-T-I-N-E-N.

LEVINE: And there were three children? There was you—

POUTTU: And my two brothers, right.

LEVINE: And your two brothers. And who was the oldest?

POUTTU: The older one is in California. He married the daughter of their Governor of California.

LEVINE: Really? What's his name?

POUTTU: Emil, E-M-I-L.

LEVINE: Emil, and how about your other brother? What was his name?

POUTTU: His name was O-T-T-O. Now let me see, the brother over here, he was right here in Holden. But what if he died now or not, I don't know, because I kind of lost track of him.

LEVINE: Well, when you were growing up, did you have grandparents? You lived with your grand—or, you were born at your grandparents' house, did you say?

POUTTU: Yes. My grandparents were very kind, lovely people. They were well thought of. He was a sort of a half minister, and he used to preach at the churches when the minister wasn't there. And he said, "I'll take them any time at all." And so he took my two brothers and me to live with them on his big farm.

LEVINE: What kind of a farm was it?

POUTTU: Oh, they had cows, and chickens, pigs, and sheep. And I guess they had everything that a farmer has. Chickens. I don't know whether they were hens or chickens.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandfather? Any things that you remember him doing, or ways he was with you?

POUTTU: Well, my grandmother and grandfather were very, very devoted to us children. Because really, let me see now, my uncle was a bachelor. My aunt was a bachelor. My mother was the only one married in her family, so we were the only children they had. So every time that my folks went somewhere, like when my father would come from America to visit, and they'd go without us children, because, well, we would do too much to make him enjoy the vacation, because we were so small. So my grandfather said, "You can always leave them here," my grandmother and grandfather. So my aunt came with us as a caretaker, so that my grandparents didn't have to take care of us.

LEVINE: How were you spoiled? How did your grandparents spoil you and your brothers?

POUTTU: Well, they were just something—I can't remember what it is, but we needed their place, and my aunt was the maid. In the old country, if you wanted a job, unless you were college-educated, or you were high up in the world. She worked as a maid on a job, and they hired her by the year, you'd go work. My aunt used to be in charge of the dairy. They had about thirty or forty cows, and my aunt had charge of all the processing of the milk, putting it through separators and all kinds of machinery that milk has to go through, and supervised the nurses in how to take care of the cows. Because it was her uncle's farm, and so he gave her the best job that there was on the farm. And then he would still be taking care of us children. So we were there. We were like special creatures.

LEVINE: Just a second, please. We're going to interrupt this for a moment. [Tape off/on] We're resuming now, and Mrs. Pouttu's daughter, May Peterson, has come and joined us.

POUTTU: You got it right.

LEVINE: And Mrs. Pouttu is delighted to have her daughter with us. So let's just continue now with what you were talking about.

POUTTU: Right.

LEVINE: You were talking about your grandfather's farm, I think, and the fact that you were spoiled, you and your brothers. And I was asking you about any experiences you remembered with your grandfather, or with your aunt who used to take care of you when your parents went away. Is that right?

POUTTU: Right.

LEVINE: What was your grandmother like? Do you remember her?

POUTTU: Oh, she was like—they wanted to keep us over there. Father was waiting in America while my aunt was with us still. My aunt was going to go back to Finland after she deposited us with our parents. And—

LEVINE: So your father went first?

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: And then your mother followed your father? Is that the way it went?

POUTTU: And the reason they did that was because people from Finland were coming over here, and because they couldn't speak the language, they went to work in the quarries in Lanesville, or that's a part of Gloucester. And they all worked in the quarries.

LEVINE: And your father did, too?

POUTTU: My father did, too. Then he used to send so much money to my mother in Finland to pay for our support, even though it was their uncle, he wants payment. And my aunt said my father is sending money from America to pay for us, so we want you to take it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you mentioned before we put the tape on that the fact that you and your brothers were going to go to America made you very special in your town.

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: Can you recall the name of the town?

POUTTU: Where we were living? We were living in Wesanto, W-E-S-A-N-T-O.

LEVINE: Great, okay. And so, what did you do for fun? Do you remember what you played as a child? Was there--?

POUTTU: I'll tell you, there were some Finnish girls that were living in the same—we lived in a long building where there were several apartments. And these girls knew that we were coming from America, and everybody wanted us for friends. Because, I don't know whether they though we were different kind of monsters, or something. Because everybody wanted to be our friend, and you know, gosh, you couldn't keep them all for friends. But we lived in there anyway, and we went swimming with them. And we would—whatever they did, we did. We couldn't speak the language, but the girls would tell us, interpret the language in the Finnish language to us, what they were trying to tell us.

LEVINE: Well, now, you didn't speak the Finnish language?

POUTTU: I spoke the Finnish language. Let's see now. I guess I didn't speak English at all.

LEVINE: Oh, so this is, now what you're talking about was in this country?

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. But back in Finland, before you came—do you remember the house you lived in there?

POUTTU: Yes, I remember we had a house of our own. My father came to Finland and bought us a house right near a store, so we could do all our shopping there. And we lived in there, but then we moved to Wesanto to live with my mother's uncle. He said we could live there as long as we wanted to. Oh, they had about twenty servants. They had servers of all kinds. And of course, the servants—people thought that we were somebody very special, because we were going to America! And none of them had ever been there. But I never thought, you know, what being a celebrity among people meant, because I was just me, and I didn't know what they thought of me, and I didn't ask them [Laughs]. But anyway, we got good care because he was a wealthy man. He had about ten, twenty cows, and he had racing horses. And he lived the life of a celebrity, and he had servants—oh, he had a servant for every occasion. They even had a servant watch—to take care of us while we were in their house. And my aunt said that my father paid her to be with us or stay with us, and be our caretaker, so that he and my mother could live in America until they scraped up enough money to get all the three of us children over here.

LEVINE: Now how old were you when your mother came to America?

POUTTU: Oh gee, I don't know. I wasn't even in school. We had to go to school when you were six or eight years old. I don't really remember, but over there you have to know how to read and write before you go to school. Your parents have to teach you how to do those.

LEVINE: So where did you—who taught you?

POUTTU: My mother or my aunt, or whoever was taking care of us. And you know, in Finland they have a school, they call it some kind of a primary school, and they teach you how to read and write before you go to school. It's a sort of a kindergarten, but it's held at different people's home. And because my mother's uncle was wealthy, and he had maids and servants and all that kinds of help, we had the school right at his house, where we were living.

LEVINE: And how many children would be coming to his house to go to school?

POUTTU: Oh, it depends on how many people were living there. Let me see, there were probably about ten or fifteen. Some of them came from different parts of Europe, and I remember living in Russia for a while, learning how to eat their dark Jewish bread [Laughs]. That's where I learned how to eat the Jewish bread.

LEVINE: Do you remember other foods that you ate in Finland?

POUTTU: Well, Finnish people—it's a cold country, and they eat very heavy food, substantial food. They don't eat sweets like—if you had sugar, it was a luxury.

LEVINE: What kinds of heavy foods do you recall from Finland?

POUTTU: Salted fish, and they'd put away salted meats of all kinds, salt pork, from which they made gravies to go with our potatoes, and that heavy food.

LEVINE: How about religion? Were you exposed to a particular religion when you were in Finland?

POUTTU: We were born Lutherans, and we were Lutherans, and everything that went on was Lutheran.

LEVINE: So, but was it a big part of your life? In other words, was your uncle, or your aunt, or your grandparents—were they big church-goers?

POUTTU: Oh yes, every Sunday in the wintertime, we'd go to church, and you know, they didn't want to take us children, because they wanted the servants to go to church, too. And of course, when we're piled full of children, there's no room for the servants. So my mother's uncle—we call him John—and he piled a sleigh—we had sleighs. I'm talking about winter, because I could lay my fingers on it. They piled sleighs full of people, and made sure that all the servants, they had a chance to go to church. And we all went to the service, and then we had dinner in the town where the church was. And that was a big deal, because children—they didn't ever take children to dinners. But because my aunt had been in America, so we went to dinner. And we were so special, because we got all the special things that everybody over there wanted to take part in, but they never took them.

LEVINE: When you went to dinner, did you go to someone's home?

POUTTU: No, there was a place in town where the church was. They always had dinners over there, so you could go and take your whole family there. I don't know whether you had to make a reservation in advance or what, but that was the highlight, because for us little shrimps to be taken out to dinner—that was something! My mother's uncle said, "Well, the children will have to do that in America, so they might as well learn to go out to eat here." So, and we were, so we got all the luxuries extended to us, because our folks were over here. And our folks didn't know what we were doing. They knew that—we used to call the aunt that was taking care of us, we used to call her the crabby aunt, because she was so strict with us! She was so afraid something would happen to us. Anything, even a little scratch on an arm or leg or feet or something, and my folks would worry in America:

what happened to the children? So then they began to get us over here. But during the war time, you couldn't come here. There were restrictions. So we had to wait 'til—oh, they went through all kinds of red tape to get us over here. And everybody helped us. You know, they thought we were somebody very special, because they didn't know anybody who had ever gone to America.

LEVINE: Can you describe yourself when you were a little girl, when you were ten or so, and you were about to come to this country? What kind of a little girl were you? I mean, were you shy? Were you aggressive, or assertive?

POUTTU: Well, we were very excited about it, because in the whole town, there was nobody that had gone to America that we knew. And then there was a family that came to live, and they'd been in Pennsylvania. And they came to live in the same town where we were. And I guess we met them in church or somewhere. But anyway, they came to visit us, because they knew that we were going to come to America. So when we come to America, they want us to go visit them, and get acquainted.

LEVINE: Do you remember what they told you? What you expected about America before you came?

POUTTU: No, because they knew that my aunt was the supervisor, and she was going to take care of us. And so, [unclear] was come to visit us. So we went to Pennsylvania to visit them. Of course, everything was so different! The sleighs that we rode in—we rode in a sleigh when we went to church. And there's a lot of snow over there, and it stays a long time, so they always packed us into sleighs. And the sleighs were all reindeer skins, and we'd snuggle into reindeer skins, and we thought that was swell, because we had never done anything like that before. And the boys would come back home and tell the other boys what we did, that we rode in a sleigh, and we went to church in a sleigh. And there were some animal skins in the sleigh, and we were all snuggled in in between them to make sure we were warm enough. And that was it. We were hoping always that the minister wouldn't talk such a long time, and we might have a chance to ride in a sleigh a little bit. We'd prefer [Laughs]—you know, kids are kids, no matter where they are!

LEVINE: Are there any other memories, fond memories, you have of Finland from when you were a little girl?

POUTTU: What did you say?

LEVINE: Do you have any other fond memories of Finland from when you were a little girl? Okay, we're going to stop here for a moment.

POUTTU: We didn't have the kind of cookout they have over here. We used to grow turnips in the field. Everybody had a little garden. And you know, when you roast those over an open fire, and coals, they are the most delicious stuff to eat! And so we used to look forward to that. My aunt would let us go and pick the turnips out there. We wouldn't pick the very big, but just enough for one person to eat, about this big. And everybody wanted to pick their own, because you know, you felt that you were part of the big doings. And, oh, that's right. So many exciting things! Of course, we had lived a very restricted life, because my aunt was told not to let us play around, that they wanted to bring us to America. They didn't want them to run around the neighborhood and get wild over here. Because my father and mother had been in America for years, and they didn't want to have a bunch of wildcats come down there to disturb there life, so to bring us up quietly, you know.

LEVINE: How about singing and dancing? Do you remember any instances of that?

POUTTU: No. I always wished I knew how to dance, but I never did find out how. I'm still a stupid dancer [Laughs].

LEVINE: How about other people singing and dancing? Do you remember seeing them?

POUTTU: It depends on, you know, there were socialists, and Communists, and Congregationalists, and Lutherans. There were so many factions, that it depends on which one you belong to.

LEVINE: Well, how about in your uncle's home, when the servants would have a party? Do you remember seeing that?

POUTTU: When they had a party?

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

POUTTU: Oh, yes. We were all—if nothing else, we would hide, you know—in the place where we lived, they had a big, big room over there where all the servants slept. Everybody had their own bed, and they slept in them. And so when they were having a party, we children would sneak under the beds. We'd lie down on the floor under the bed, and we'd see what they do, you know. Of course, they played kissing games, and they danced and everything. And they had lights in the ceiling, and my older brother was given the chore, after the party was over, he would take a big coat, and he'd flush it like that, you know, rub it. The lamps were run by oil, and so he started down under the lamp on the ground, and we had to go to bed. But he could stay up, because he had to put the lights out. So they'd give him a coat to wave like that to put the lights out. So then after that, he'd come to

bed, too. And our beds were outside the home. They weren't in that room. That was just an activity room, like. [Coughs]

LEVINE: Do you remember getting ready to leave, to come to America?

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: What did you take with you?

POUTTU: We took all our clothes, whatever we had. We didn't have any clothes that were different. My aunt used to make them, and they used to have a tailor come to the—they had a big game room, and activity room, like. Probably like this whole building, all on one floor. And that's where everything was held. So we'd always be around there, and make an excuse to go right through there, you know. Any kind of excuse at all for going through there, because they wanted us children to be in bed, and we didn't want to be in bed. We wanted to see what they're doing in the activities room. So we'd always get a chance to go through there; we'd make some kind of excuse, and after a while we were escorted by my aunt out of that room. They said, "You've got no business over here." They used to play kissing games, and dance, and do all kinds of things. And my father and mother would write from America, and tell them not to let the children run loose, that they become wild, and you know, that you can't take care of them. Because my father hadn't had a care in the world; he was in America. And my mother was taking all the cares.

LEVINE: Did you have special clothing made by the tailor before you came to this country?

POUTTU: No, we had the same kind of clothes. I think we had better clothes, because they had a tailor that came to town, and they'd go to town and buy the material, and tell the tailor to make a dress for this little girl, or make a blouse for this little boy, and the tailor would make it. So we had special clothes that they were—we didn't know that they were special. I thought everybody had their clothes made, but they didn't. I found out now when I got over here that we were being handled, you know, in a special way, because my aunt was in charge of the dairy there, the cows and the milk, and putting the milk through the separators, and everything. And we had to stay out of the barn. They wouldn't let us go in there, because we'd just be in the way. So—

LEVINE: Do you remember saying goodbye to your uncle and your grandparents?

POUTTU: Yes. It was a very sad occasion. See, we had my mother's brother over there, and then we had my mother's uncle, and all his sons and their

children, and all that. Oh, there was a whole mess of his children over there.

LEVINE: And they all got together before you left?

POUTTU: Oh, yes. They had a party for us, and they were great for parties. Every Saturday night they'd have a dance or something. They had to give the servants something, because they didn't have automobiles, and they wanted to have some fun. So they'd have a dance, and they'd have one band. My old relative would play the accordion for them, and they would dance to that. And we children, we'd hide behind chairs, and we'd do all kinds of things so that we could see. And of course, when they discovered, we got a royal escort out of there, into our beds!

LEVINE: Okay, well do remember, when you left the town where you were, and to get to the port where the ship left from—do you remember that trip, leaving town, and getting to the port?

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: Was there anything that happened along the way that you remember?

POUTTU: No, except that everybody was crying. Even the servants were crying, because they thought they'd never see us again. And nothing so special about it, except that my aunt had been getting clothes for us, had a tailor come to town, make special clothes, so that we looked nice when we were presented to my parents.

[End of Side A/Start of Side B]

LEVINE: Now who traveled with you? Who did you travel to this country with?

POUTTU: With my aunt.

LEVINE: And your two brothers?

POUTTU: My two brothers, and me.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what port did you leave from, do you remember?

POUTTU: We had to go into Norway, because we couldn't go through the English Channel. The Russians would, they would bomb all the ships, so that we had to go up to Norway, first going through Sweden, and then go, I think, go from [unclear], way down to Christiana in Norway. And there we'd board the ship, Frederick the Eighth. I think it was a Norwegian ship, because the Russians had everything corralled so that they had to have [unclear]. And

my father wanted to hurry up and get us out of there before the Russians became too unruly.

LEVINE: So you left during the war, during the First World War?

POUTTU: Yeah, we came during the war. But then we got on the Frederick the Eighth, and they had to make all kinds of statements that we were not any kind of social workers or anything else, except that we just came here to meet my parents. So they let us go. But it was awfully hard to get passports over there, because Russia ruled Finland. They kicked the people out of their homes, and went over there, and said, "We're the bosses now." So we had to wait 'til they gave us a chance to, you know, come, whenever they wanted us to. But my folks said that they wanted us out of there before the war breaks out.

LEVINE: Did you see anything of soldiers or anything like that during the First World War?

POUTTU: See anything what?

LEVINE: Did you see soldiers, or did you see any kind of the early part of the war?

POUTTU: Oh, yes. Finland was full of Russian soldiers. And we used to live right in the center of the town, right in the center of Finland. And we liked living in the building like that. There was a place where you could buy candy all the time. And the Russian soldiers used to give us kids money if we kept quiet and didn't tell that they were around. So we'd take the pennies and run into the store and get some candy, and we thought that was great. And there were people in the town where we lived, and they came to find out we were there. They said, "We were going to go there, too." So they came there, and the Russian soldiers didn't know the difference, which was we were—whether we lived there or not. We couldn't speak Russian, and they couldn't speak Finnish. So they gave us money, and we bought candy, and we [unclear] to them then. But we thought that was great, because had lived in a country, and we never had any money, because there was no stores near where we lived, so there was no place to spend it. But now there was a store right in the same building where we lived! So whoa, we were down there all the time. As long as the soldiers were there, we'd have money [Laughs].

LEVINE: Okay, well now how about the Frederick the Eighth? Do you remember anything that happened during the time that you were taking this journey across the ocean to America?

POUTTU: No, I don't remember. We had a very uneventful trip. We didn't get seasick, or anything.

LEVINE: How about when the ship came into the New York Harbor? Do you remember what you saw, and what you thought about it?

POUTTU: We took—they took us right away. They called out names, and they took us to this great big hall right near the harbor. All the foreigners that came off were taken there. And we stayed there 'til somebody came to get us, take us away—our relatives.

LEVINE: Were you examined there?

POUTTU: What's that?

LEVINE: Were you examined? Did you get physical examinations?

POUTTU: Oh, yes. Oh, they were examining us for everything! But we were healthy kids; we went skiing and skating and swimming. And we lived the life of Riley.

LEVINE: Do you remember any impressions you had of Ellis Island?

POUTTU: Oh, Ellis Island, that's an awful thing. I got, acquired, some kind of a fever. When they examined me, they put me in a little wagon like you would put animals in, and they took me away, and they never told me where I was going. And so I said, "This is awful! I come to America, and they put me in a little wagon with animals, and take you away, and they don't tell you where you're going!" So they told us that I was being taken to a hospital, because I had acquired some kind of fever, and they wouldn't let us into the country until the fever was done away with. So I thought that was cruel, because my brother stayed with my aunt, but I had to go into this little pigpen.

LEVINE: What do you remember about the hospital?

POUTTU: Oh, I remember there was a rat running on the windowsill all the time. And I was trying to tell the nurses, you know, with my fingers like that. I couldn't say anything, because they were Russians, and they wouldn't understand me. So I'd take them near the window, but of course the rats wouldn't come near us.

LEVINE: Was this in America?

POUTTU: In America, at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Well now, they would be Americans there, right? Not Russians.

POUTTU: Well, whatever they were—I couldn't speak English, either.

LEVINE: You didn't speak their language, okay.

POUTTU: I didn't speak any language except mine. They didn't speak my language. Anyway, I was so scared that those rats would come into my bed, because they'd run on the windowsills, and the windowsills were real wide and long. And those big, big rats—they were about that long! And they'd run like heck, chasing each other. And me, I was shivering in my bed. I couldn't tell the nurses what was scaring me, and it was a horrible experience!

LEVINE: So do you know how long you stayed there?

POUTTU: 'Til the fever went away.

LEVINE: So it was a few nights, would you say?

POUTTU: Oh, yes! They examined me every day to see if it was gone down, and said, "No, come back to bed." So I'm back in bed again.

LEVINE: And then do you remember when you were reunited with your brothers and your aunt?

POUTTU: Yes, I remember. When I got back, they had an apartment, and we came to live there. And there were some people that spoke Finnish language, and they became my playmates. And so they took me everywhere they went.

LEVINE: Now where was the apartment? Do you remember where?

POUTTU: It was someplace on Orchard Street.

LEVINE: In a house?

POUTTU: Yeah. It was a big long house, and it seems that anybody new that came to that neighborhood, they had an apartment for them in there. And my aunt had the apartment. I don't know whether it was hers, or whose it was. A kid that age doesn't worry about bills [Laughs].

LEVINE: Now, did you see your mother and father right away?

POUTTU: Yes, they were down there. They came to Worcester.

LEVINE: Well now, what do you remember about the neighborhood where you were, when you first came?

POUTTU: Well, we were living in the country, so coming to a crowded city all of a sudden—you can imagine what a kid would do! I'd look at it, and of course we'd been in the city in Finland. My relatives all lived in Helsinki, the capital, and they were regular city apartments.

LEVINE: Do you remember things that were new and different that you saw when you were first in this country? Things that struck you as--?

POUTTU: I was—I excelled in everything: jumping rope, and playing hide and go seek, and running races. And they had kind of a—they'd give you a prize if you were a good runner. And so we were [unclear] kids from the country, and we'd had a lot of fresh air, sunshine, and business running, you know. So I remember that we were very good at all the games. And the girls used to wonder why I was so good at them. Well, they all spoke Finnish. They looked up at Finnish girls who were there. And of course, they brought us around from house to house—we were like curiosities. They all wanted to look what these people looked like. They'd stare at us, and they'd feed us, and they gave us all kinds of goodies, and if you went to visit their house, they'd try to have something special to eat.

LEVINE: Was this in Worcester, or was this in Orchard Street?

POUTTU: It was in Worcester.

LEVINE: Did you stay in Orchard Street for any length of time?

POUTTU: We stayed there until my folks bought their own house. They bought an eight-room house, and they were going to live in there.

LEVINE: I see. So then you started school?

POUTTU: Yes.

LEVINE: And what was that school like?

POUTTU: Well, it was as odd—you'll never know, unless you go to some country where you don't speak the language. And you're trying to put something across, and they don't understand. You know, we felt that they were very stupid. My brother had gone all through grammar school, and he knew how to read, write, and everything, and they thought he was stupid. I didn't like that! Because you know, he had a better education than the children over here had. He had gone through grammar school.

LEVINE: Were you put in a special class for children who didn't--?

POUTTU: Yes. They called it ungraded. And so we learned our language there. And before the year was over, I was at the top of the class, and my brother. My brother was two years older than I am. We have the same birthday, except that he was a little older than I was. But I don't really mind it, because we spoke Finnish at home. But my father and mother spoke English; they wanted us to learn the language. So they spoke English all the time to make us learn. So we learned our language, and before the end of the year, I was at the top of the fourth grade in school, and my brother wasn't quite so, because he was busy making money. You know, he and some other boys in the neighborhood would collect some old liquor bottles that the drunks had thrown around the neighborhood, and they sold those to the ragman, the peddler, who used to come and call, "Rags, rags, rags." And they'd get five cents for big bottles, and one cent for a little bottle.

LEVINE: Which brother was this?

POUTTU: My older brother.

LEVINE: And what was his name?

POUTTU: Emil.

LEVINE: Emil, uh-huh. And so was Emil in school, too?

POUTTU: Yes, he was in school, but his spare time, he used to always take his rag bag to school with him. The teachers would ask him, "What do you got that rag bag for?" He said, "I collect bottles and I sell them to the ragman. The ragman comes to the house. He knows the boys have bottles." And I don't know whether they filled them over again, or what.

LEVINE: Now was your father working in the quarry when you came over?

POUTTU: No, no, not when he was in Worcester. He was working in the quarries in Gloucester, before we came to this country, see. He had no hangovers, depending—nobody's depending on him at home. And my mother worked as a housekeeper for some people, and they taught her how to speak English. So, you know, they always [unclear] going to school, and—

LEVINE: And what did your father do when he came to Worcester?

POUTTU: He got a job at a shop. I guess up on Union Street someplace. He couldn't get much of a—of course, he'd been in this country a long time before, and he could speak English. But, I don't know, I think he worked in the quarries and stayed with a family in Gloucester, which family became their very best friends.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember anything about Worcester when you first came here, how it was different then than it is now?

POUTTU: Well, I don't know. We always lived in a rented house 'til my father bought his own house, and then we moved in there. And we never went back to renting a house after that. He liked having our own. We had an eight room house. They rented the upstairs, three rooms, and lived in the five rooms downstairs. So I don't remember much about—[unclear] doesn't remember anything. I gather friends or family that my father had lived with before we came, and they spoke Finnish. And they used to take us everywhere.

LEVINE: Okay, just a second. [Tape off/on]

DAUGHTER, MAY PETERSON: She was a wonderful woman!

POUTTU: She can take a part. I never get around to talking about my experiences, so they'll think I'm bragging, you know.

PETERSON: We should have the right—you should give me the right questions to ask, so my brother will know what to ask her to get the information. I'm learning things that—[Laughs].

LEVINE: Oh, good, oh, that's great! Well let's continue then. We were talking about Worcester, and ways it was different. And who—there was a Finnish community here in Worcester?

POUTTU: Yes, there were [unclear] people, there were Socialist people, the I.W.W.'s. I don't know what that was. That was the very extreme red. And Baptists. I think every religion had their own church and their ministers and preachers, or what have you.

LEVINE: And your mother, was she a religious person?

POUTTU: I was brought up in a religious home, a Lutheran home. Everybody, all of my relatives in Finland, as far as I know, were Lutherans. I was baptized a Lutheran, and I guess I'm still a Lutheran.

LEVINE: [Laughs] But how about when you were in Worcester? Did your mother and your family practice the religion?

POUTTU: Yeah, well my mother joined the Congregational church. And so we all went that way, and now I belong to the Congregational Church of Paxton. Or Holden, Holden. And her husband and all their family, they're all Lutherans.

LEVINE: Now what was your first job?

POUTTU: I went to work for a manufacturing concern: Home Accessories Corporation, and that's a corporation that made home, useful fixtures, you know, like soap dishes, and anything they could use in the home, out of metal, wire, or something like that. And I used to sell those. My uncle used to buy the wire to put them into shape as the different dishes, and we kids used to around the neighborhood selling those. And the people would buy from us more than anybody else, because we were prodigies of American family, so you ordered something special.

LEVINE: How old were you when you started doing that?

POUTTU: Oh, I don't know. I don't remember how old. Old enough to tell them what this is, and what that is.

LEVINE: Did you do it after school, or did you do it after your finished school?

POUTTU: After school.

LEVINE: After school, uh-huh. So, I know you have a lot. How about your husband? How did you meet him?

POUTTU: I met him at the church. A minister of the Congregational church was his uncle, so we went to that.

LEVINE: Okay, we're pausing here for a second.

POUTTU: Just when I was ready to go, and my mother couldn't go to work and earn enough money, because it cost so much to go to college. So I didn't enroll. But—

LEVINE: What did you do instead?

POUTTU: I worked for George F. Booth, the owner of the *Telegram Gazette*. He had a manufacturing concern named the Home Accessories Corporation. And Howard Booth, George F. Booth's son, was the boss in there. So I used to take shorthand from him. I was a secretary.

LEVINE: What did you do for the rest of your career, after that?

POUTTU: After that, then I got married, and let me see. Did I work? I guess I always worked, but I don't remember just what I did.

PETERSON: Hayes, Edward G. Norman.

POUTTU: I can't hear you.

PETERSON: Edward G. Norman you worked for, Raymond Hayes. You worked for Superior Court.

POUTTU: Oh yeah. I used to work for Edward G. Norman. He used to the District Attorney. And who else did I work for?

PETERSON: Raymond Hayes, with the [unclear] Draft Board.

POUTTU: Yeah, we had a draft board. I was—he was the what do you call it? I don't remember what they call it, but I had been at the Draft Board for Ward Three, which was the largest ward in Worcester, Ward Three. And I used to work for him at the Draft Board. So that I was one of the first people that got into the Draft Board work, because Edward G. Norman was the head man, the Chairman, and he said, "I'll take the job if Mrs. Pouttu can be my secretary." So I went to be his secretary there. And that was a lot of fun, because he was a very much respected man, and he'd been a District Attorney and everything else. And so I—and there was somebody who saw me working for him, they'd say, "When you get an opening here, let me know, and I'll take her then." So they were waiting to take me, because I was good in my shorthand, and I wrote letters like heck.

LEVINE: And so you met your husband through the church? And what was your husband's name?

POUTTU: Lauri Pouttu?

LEVINE: What was his first name? Lauri?

PETERSON: L-A-U-R-I.

LEVINE: Okay, L-A-U-R-I. And how many children did you have?

POUTTU: There's one [Laughs]. There's my prize package right here! Two.

LEVINE: And your children's names?

POUTTU: Her name is May Elaine Peterson.

LEVINE: And your other child?

POUTTU: Is Lawrence William Pouttu.

LEVINE: And how is this phase of your life, this phase where you're retired, and you're in what we call old age? How is this time of life for you?

POUTTU: This time of life is good. I like it, because I don't have to do any housework and stuff, you know, when I'm sick. I don't know why I'm sick and where I'm sick, but I fell down twice before they brought me here, and I guess that's it. And my doctor, my doctor is Dr. George Dunlop. That's my personal doctor. But we have a doctor here; I don't know who he is, but he looks at me once in a while. But he doesn't say anything.

PETERSON: Dr. Sedgewick.

POUTTU: Dr. Sedgewick.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on your life, what makes you feel proud? What makes you feel satisfied about your life?

POUTTU: Well, I had good parents; I can say that. They brought me up right. And then when I was turned over to my Aunt Ida—

LEVINE: Was that in Finland? In Finland?

POUTTU: Yes, and she brought us over here to America. And she was very strict. You see, we lived at a great big farm. It had ten, twenty, thirty cows—I don't know how many. We used to try to go down and see the cows and everything, but they'd be milked and all that. But the maids used to be afraid that we'd get in their way, and the cows might step on them, or kick us, or something or other. So we didn't got there too much, but it was a big, big farm, and they had children of their own. But their children went away to college, and we were left there with my Aunt Ida to take care of us, and keep us out of the way of the maids.

LEVINE: And what did you feel proud of? What did you feel that you have done in your lifetime that makes you feel satisfaction?

POUTTU: I can't think of anything spectacular, because I'm such an ordinary person. But anyway, I worked as a stenographer, and the lawyers were all waiting to get me, because I was pretty good at that shorthand. And so I worked off and on, and wrote letters by the hundreds. And now I'm lazy; I'm taking my retirement, just like this.

PETERSON: Do you remember twenty-five years with the Superior Court? Twenty-five years with Superior Court?

POUTTU: Oh yeah, I worked twenty-five years in Superior Court as a legal secretary, in the Clerk of Court's Office. And so that was a good job. And the lawyers

used to get kind of mad at me and say, “Why do we have to ask that little slip of a girl what to do and how to do it, the way to do it? Aren’t there some lawyers here?” And so the head, who hired me there, said, “Well, she knows more about the law than the young lawyers do. She’s teaching the young lawyers what to do, so how could you go wrong?” So I retired from the Superior Court, and because, well, I thought I’d worked long enough. I worked, you know, I had charge of the pensions, and all that kind of stuff. And I waited until I was able to get a good pension. And when I was sixty-five, the pension was just about the best. So I thought, “This is the time to retire now, because that’ll take care of me the rest of my life.”

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Is there anything you’d like to say before we close about coming to his country as a young ten year old, ten or eleven year old, and living out your life here? And what you think about your Finnish heritage, and being an American, is there anything you’d say?

POUTTU: I think it’s great to be an American, and my children have had a good education here, and they’ve been very well-behaved children. I haven’t had [unclear] troubles with them, with the boy or with my daughter. And to have brought up two children successfully, that’s my greatest accomplishment. And they’re my great joy in my old age, because they don’t [unclear] me and forget me just because I’m old. They take very good care of me. My son came in from Virginia on his vacation last year around Easter time, and he spent a whole week with me. And he lived at her house, and he didn’t have to go to a hotel. And no matter where I go or what I do, my children are very supportive in every way. And I think that to me is the greatest accomplishment.

LEVINE: Well, that’s a beautiful place to end this interview. I want to thank you so much! It’s very interesting talking with you. And I’ve been talking with Elsie Pouttu, who came from Finland in 1916, when you were probably ten, about to turn eleven years old. And today you’re eighty-nine, about to turn ninety, and it’s July 21st, 1995. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.

POUTTU: You’re a delightful person.

LEVINE: Thank you!

[End of Interview]