

EI-895/RUSSELL

EI-895

FANNIE WOOD RUSSELL

BIRTH DATE: DECEMBER 2, 1890

INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 28, 1997

RUNNING TIME: 29:31

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: UNIVERSITY COMMONS NURSING HOME

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 4/1998

ENGLAND, CIRCA 1893

APPROXIMATELY 3 YEARS OLD

SHIP NAME NOT RECORDED

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Russell was in bed and using an oxygen machine to breath during the recording of this interview, causing her to pause and catch her breath frequently. Prior to the beginning of the interview, she said to me, "I haven't got much of a body anymore but my mind is still good." At the time of this recording, she was considered the oldest living resident of Worcester, Massachusetts.

Present also are Mrs. Russell's roommate Mary and Gina Zecco, a member of the social services staff of the nursing home. Mrs. Russell's oxygen machine and various announcements over a loudspeaker can be heard throughout the recording, as well as Mrs. Russell touching her microphone.

Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 4/15/1998.

SIGRIST: Good morning. I'm Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service at Ellis Island, and today is Wednesday, May 28th, 1997. And I'm in Worcester, Massachusetts at the University Commons Nursing Home, and I'm here with Fannie Russell. Fannie is one hundred and six and she's going to tell us about what she remembers about coming to the United States from England.

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RUSSELL: True.

SIGRIST: Present also is Gina Zecco, Z-E-C-C-O, who is the social services staff and also Ms. Russell's...

GINA ZECCO: Roommate Mary...

SIGRIST: Roommate Mary is, is ...

MARY: No, no.

SIGRIST: ...present in the room, too. (they laugh)

MARY: Forget me.

SIGRIST: So, anyway, Fannie, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

RUSSELL: December 2nd, 1890.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

RUSSELL: In Surrey. That's twelve miles out of London.

SIGRIST: What are some of your earliest memories?

RUSSELL: Well, I don't remember anything about over there except for a front door. I remember that the (she pauses to catch her breath), that the step from the house went right down onto the street at, uh, the aren't like they are now. There was no sidewalk. You came right down from your, and, uh, I don't remember much about it to be truthful. I was so young.

SIGRIST: How old do you think you were when you came to the United States?

RUSSELL: Well, let me see. I was born 1890. My brother was born in '90--, the end of '92 and then we came, that was , we came, we came in March, I think, of '93 or '4. We came in the, what was the spring and...

SIGRIST: Do, do you remember, do you remember leaving England at all?

RUSSELL: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: No. Well, can I talk a little bit about your

parents?

RUSSELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

RUSSELL: David Wood.

SIGRIST: And Wood is your maiden name?

RUSSELL: Yes. Wood is my maiden name.

SIGRIST: I'm going to pause the tape just for a moment. (break in tape) We are now resuming. I should also say for the sake of the tape that you may here an oxygen machine in the background. (addressing Gina Zecco) Thank you. We were talking about your father...

RUSSELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: His name was...

RUSSELL: David Wood.

SIGRIST: David Wood. What did he do for a living in Surrey?

RUSSELL: He was a bronze finisher.

SIGRIST: A bronze finisher?

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what that means?

RUSSELL: No!

SIGRIST: No? Okay. (they laugh)

RUSSELL: I've no idea. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about his growing up and his background?

RUSSELL: Huh?

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about your father's, when he was a child, when he was growing up, did he ever talk about his...

RUSSELL: No.

SIGRIST: ...his childhood?

RUSSELL: No, no. No.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

RUSSELL: Emily.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name, before...?

RUSSELL: Thorne. T-H-O-R-N-E. (Gina Zecco is writing and spelling out loud in the background)

SIGRIST: T-H-O-R-N-E. Emily Thorne.

RUSSELL: There it is.

SIGRIST: Did your mother have a job in England?

RUSSELL: Yes. She was a maid, upstairs maid, in Lord Eldon's family. She was the upstairs maid.

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SIGRIST: In, in which lord? What was the...

RUSSELL: Lord Eldon.

SIGRIST: Eldon.

RUSSELL: E-L-D-O-N.

SIGRIST: Did she ever talk about her experiences as a maid?

RUSSELL: Not much, not much. No, no.

SIGRIST: Why did your family come to America?

RUSSELL: I don't know. My, my father wanted to come because right after the, right after the Chicago Fire, you know, that big fire they had in Chicago, burned half of Chicago. Well, right after that, reading about that, he wanted to come. I always thought they had a reason that they did not disclose to me, so.

SIGRIST: Did you have brothers and sisters in England?

RUSSELL: I was born in 1890, the end of 18' (to Gina Zecco, who

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is offering Mrs. Russell a cup of water), that's all right, '90, let me see. My brother was born a little over two years later.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

RUSSELL: William. William Wood.

SIGRIST: So, was it just the two children?

RUSSELL: In that country. Then, when he was about six weeks old or so, must have along in, along in March that we sailed from England.

SIGRIST: Do you know what ship that you sailed on...

RUSSELL: Oh, no, no.

SIGRIST: No, okay. You were a little girl, right?

RUSSELL: I was only a little girl.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being on the ship?

RUSSELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being on the ship?

RUSSELL: I remember the captain. He took me in his arms and carried me up on deck where I could see all the people. That's all that's clear with my mind about the ship.

SIGRIST: Did your mother or your father ever talk about their experiences on the ship?

RUSSELL: Not much, no. My mother told me there were rats in the ship and, of course, I know that that's true about any ship. Rats are everywhere.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the ship took...

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST:to get to America?

RUSSELL: Eleven days and eleven nights.

SIGRIST: And, and do you know what happened when the ship got

to New York, what...?

RUSSELL: (she pauses) Well,...

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

RUSSELL: No, no. I must have, but I wasn't very old, you know. I was only three or four years old.

SIGRIST: Did your family have to go to Ellis Island?

RUSSELL: They went through Ellis Island, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you, is there a story about what happened there?

RUSSELL: Well, no, just no, no, no story, no.

SIGRIST: Where did your family go once they got to the United States?

RUSSELL: We stayed in New York City first, at first. And they were going to go to Chicago but they fell in with a couple on the boat that were coming to Worcester Mass. who had a brother and sister in Worcester. So they persuaded them to come to Worcester. So that's

why we came to Worcester, because Tom and Liz Shedd were friends that we had acquired on the boat. They wanted us to come, so we came.

SIGRIST: Their last name was Shedd?

RUSSELL: Yeah. S-H-E-D-D.

SIGRIST: Do you, uh, do you remember being, growing up in Worcester?

RUSSELL: Yes. I never left Worcester. I grew up here, went to school here...

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you lived in in Worcester, for me?

RUSSELL: The first one I lived in in Worcester was in Davis Place, called Davis Court, and it had four rooms; two down and two up. And my father went to work. My mother stayed home with us two little children. That's all I remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember how you, you,

you illuminated the inside of the house?

RUSSELL: How we illuminated?

SIGRIST: How, how did you light the inside of the house?

RUSSELL: I think with candles. Then after that we had kerosene lamps but at first we had candles, I think. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: And do you remember how the house was heated?

RUSSELL: Yes. Had one black stove in the kitchen, an iron stove, and we used to put coal in there. My mother'd have a coal hod and she would put the coal in.

SIGRIST: (misunderstanding her) A coal hog? Do you remember going to school?

RUSSELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: How old were you when they put you in school?

RUSSELL: I was quite old because I had a lot of different

sicknesses, so I went to school just a few weeks in the city and then my brother was sick and they advised that he move out of the city into the country. So we moved down here on Coburn Avenue, do you know where that is?

SIGRIST: (Mrs. Russell's microphone comes unclipped) I don't, but Fannie, we're going to just stop the tape for one second. We're going to pause just...(break in tape) We've just resumed (microphone disturbance), Fannie, you were telling me (microphone disturbance), that's the microphone you have in your hand there. You were telling me that you were sick as a little girl.

RUSSELL: Yeah, I was.

SIGRIST: What, what, what sicknesses did you have?

RUSSELL: We had all of them; whooping cough and chicken pox and, you know, all, in those days one person got them, everybody got them. (she pauses to catch her breath)

SIGRIST: Take your time. (pause) Is there, is there a

specific time that you remember being ill?

RUSSELL: Huh?

SIGRIST: Is there a specific story you can tell me about being sick?

RUSSELL: Oh, I had scarlet fever. I remember that. In those days, of course, after you have scarlet fever sometimes you peel a little bit and they used to think that the skin that you peel was contagious. But it wasn't true. But I remember as a little girl I had to wear cotton gloves.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kind of medicine they gave you?

RUSSELL: They used to... (she pauses to catch her breath)

SIGRIST: Take your time.

RUSSELL: In those days, (microphone disturbance) you take some kind of a tonic, you know, that you buy in a drug a drug store that the doctor would prescribe.

SIGRIST: What was your favorite room in the house that you

lived in?

RUSSELL: I guess the kitchen.

SIGRIST: Can you, can you....

RUSSELL: There was only, there was the kitchen and the parlor and two bedrooms upstairs.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what was in the kitchen?

RUSSELL: Just a table and a stove and the baby carriage to feed my younger in.

SIGRIST: The baby carriage was in the kitchen. Who did the cooking in your family?

RUSSELL: My mother.

SIGRIST: And what kind of food did she cook?

RUSSELL: She used to roast a beef, (she pauses) lots of potatoes, huh. I, I went to school up in that district for a few weeks but I had so many illnesses

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that I, when I was about seven we moved down to
Coburn Avenue here in, right near here.

GINA ZECCO: That's where my grandmother lives.

SIGRIST: Here in...

RUSSELL: What, what, whereabouts does she live?

SIGRIST: Yeah. Gina Zecco is speaking right now. Go ahead.
Say it full voice, though.

GINA ZECCO: My, my grandmother Eleanor Grillo lives on Coburn
Ave.

RUSSELL: Yes, I know her.

GINA ZECCO: Eleanor and Mike Grillo, do you know them?

RUSSELL: Yes, right near the corner.

GINA ZECCO: Right!

RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yes. I know them. When I first
broke my hip and was in the hospital, she had broken

her hip...

GINA ZECCO: Right.

RUSSELL: ...and she was in there and after a while she broke
the other hip.

GINA ZECCO: Yup. She's got three hip replacements, Fannie.

RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GINA ZECCO: Yup. And she's at home, though, doing well. God
bless her.

RUSSELL: Well,...

SIGRIST: You have a good memory, Fannie.

GINA ZECCO: You have a wonderful memory, Fannie.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) You have a good memory.

RUSSELL: Oh, yes.

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GINA ZECCO: It was in the past couple of years that this happened, but Fannie and my grandmother were in the hospital about the same time.

RUSSELL: Oh yes, we were together there.

SIGRIST: Fannie, do you remember what games you played as a little girl?

RUSSELL: Oh, no. Just hopscotch and jump rope and all those things. But when, when I was seven we moved down to Coburn Avenue. Now Coburn Avenue runs from Hamilton Street to Belmont.

SIGRIST: What, what, what streets are those?

GINA ZECCO: Hamilton Street to Belmont.

RUSSELL: They were...

SIGRIST: Hamilton to Belmont.

RUSSELL: They were long...

GINA ZECCO: There's a second half of it that comes out at Lake Ave.

RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah.

GINA ZECCO: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How was that house different than the house that you lived in before?

RUSSELL: There was more rooms to it and there was a nice yard, nice yard to play in.

SIGRIST: Was there a garden?

RUSSELL: Yeah, we always had a garden.

SIGRIST: Who did the planting?

RUSSELL: My father.

SIGRIST: And what did he plant?

RUSSELL: Well, potatoes and corn, tomatoes... (she pauses to catch her breath)

SIGRIST: Take your time.

RUSSELL: ...but that has nothing to do with Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: No, well, we got you through that part. I'm just trying to ask you some other questions about your early life in America.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

RUSSELL: Episcopalian.

SIGRIST: You were Episcopalians. And do you remember going to church as a little girl?

RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah, but there was no Episcopal church near us so we went to a Congregational church, Lakeview Congregational Church.

SIGRIST: Lakeview Congregational Church in Worcester.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh huh. Can you tell me, when you were a little girl, how you celebrated Christmas?

RUSSELL: We didn't make much of it, 'cause we, we had no relatives that were, just the four of us. There were no, no relatives. (Mrs. Russell tries to readjust her position in her bed)

SIGRIST: Can I make you more comfortable somehow? Are you okay?

RUSSELL: No, I'm just lazy.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Okay. What, what job did your father get in Worcester?

RUSSELL: He was an iron worker.

SIGRIST: Was an iron worker. Do you know anything about his job, what he had to do specifically?

RUSSELL: (she pauses) No, I don't now. I know he worked on

the City Hall when it was built but I don't know which year that was.

SIGRIST: Were there, were there other British people in Worcester?

RUSSELL: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. But my mother and father didn't, were not the kind that associated much.

SIGRIST: Did you ever, when you were a little girl, did, did, did any children ever make fun of you because...

RUSSELL: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: ...you had come from England.

RUSSELL: Oh, yes. And when they read about the Revolutionary War, they would be so mad at me. Oh, yes. I felt just like a worm, so out of place. Oh, yes. The kids in those days, they didn't pull any punches.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to go back to England?

RUSSELL: No. (she pauses) Apparently not.

SIGRIST: Are you getting tired now?

RUSSELL: I would, I'm always sad.

SIGRIST: Um, let, let me, uh, we talked about church and we talked about school and you told that wonderful story about the kids making fun of you when you were studying the Revolutionary War in school, did you have any other relatives...

RUSSELL: No, no.

SIGRIST: ...in America?

RUSSELL: No and I knew nothing of those in England, so...

SIGRIST: Never grandparents or...

RUSSELL: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did your mother find a job in the United States?

RUSSELL: Oh, no, no, no! In those days, women all stayed home. Women never went out to work, in those days.

SIGRIST: Did you ever go back to England to see where you were born?

RUSSELL: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: Did you ever want to?

RUSSELL: Yes, but my husband was American and he had no desire to go to England, so we never went.

SIGRIST: What year did you get married?

RUSSELL: 1913.

SIGRIST: 1913. And what was the name of the man that you married?

RUSSELL: Russell.

SIGRIST: What was...

RUSSELL: Arthur Russell.

SIGRIST: Arthur?

RUSSELL: Arthur Russell.

SIGRIST: Arthur Russell. And how did you meet Mr. Russell?

RUSSELL: At a party in the evening, at a family party. This elderly woman, she used to have parties and invite all the young people in. That's how I met him.

SIGRIST: And what was it about him that you liked?

RUSSELL: I suppose because he showed me attention.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your wedding ceremony for me?

RUSSELL: Yes. I was married at home, that's all there is to it. I was married by the neighborhood minister, a Congregationalist.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were wearing?

RUSSELL: Yes. I didn't like white, so it was blue, pale blue dress.

SIGRIST: And where was Mr. Russell born?

RUSSELL: In Worcester.

SIGRIST: Oh, he was, he was born in America.

RUSSELL: I think, I think so. Oh, he was born in Worcester, or Grafton, one or the other. He was seven years older than I was, so, I think he was, he might have been born in Grafton. His, his folks were in Grafton a lot.

SIGRIST: Did you have any children?

RUSSELL: I had two children. (microphone disturbance)

SIGRIST: And what were their names?

RUSSELL: William and Pau--, Paul and William.

SIGRIST: Paul and William. Let me just, I'll ask you a couple more questions and then we'll be done. Did you become a United States citizen?

RUSSELL: Well, you see, the law was at that time that I got

married, if you married an alien, the marriage, uh, if an American married an alien, she immediately became his wife. Remember that law? Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yes, you're right.

RUSSELL: Remember that? I got married in 1913...

SIGRIST: And you became a citizen when you got married...

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...in 1913.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What do you think, is there something about you that is truly British? Some aspect of your personality that you think of as being very British?

RUSSELL: (she pauses) Well, I don't know. I believe in the Ten Commandments. And I believe in the Church, the Episcopal Church and (she pauses) I believe you

should always tell the truth.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, I think, I think I've asked all my questions. Mrs. Russell, thank you very much for letting me sit down with you...

RUSSELL: And what are you going to do with all these?

SIGRIST: I'm, I'm going to put this, at Ellis Island we have a museum...

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...there now. And in the museum is a library.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And in the library are these tapes that I make with people about their life.

RUSSELL: Oh, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: And people come to listen to them.

RUSSELL: Oh, I see.

SIGRIST: So that's where this is going to go.

RUSSELL: Oh, I see.

GINA ZECCO: And it will be preserved forever, Fannie.

RUSSELL: Huh?

GINA ZECCO: They are going to preserve the tape forever.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Two hundred years from now people might listen to it.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

GINA ZECCO: And the rate you're going, Fannie, I think you'll still be with us. God bless you. (they all laugh)

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Fannie Wood Russell on Wednesday, May 28th, 1997 at University Commons Nursing Home in Worcester, Massachusetts, with Gina Zecco in attendance. Thank you again.

RUSSELL: Oh, you're welcome. (break in tape)

SIGRIST: Okay, we, we just finished the interview with Fannie Russell, but we're going to, to start up again because Mrs. Russell told us as we were closing that she remembers the nursery rhymes her father taught her. And so I would like to get them on tape if we can. So, take it away, Mrs. Russell. Go ahead.

RUSSELL: How would you like to go up in the swing?
Up in the air so blue.
Up in the air and over the wall.
Anyone's child can do.

Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all,
Over the countryside.

Then I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roofs so brown,
Then up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down.

MARY (Mrs. Russell's roommate): Isn't that wonderful.

GINA ZECCO: That's beautiful.

SIGRIST: That was great. Thank you very much. (break in tape)
Go ahead and start.

RUSSELL: (referring to the next poem she will recite) That's
a more modern...

SIGRIST: Well, go ahead and say it.

RUSSELL: So many gods, so many creeds, so many ways that wend
and wind,
When all is said, the world really needs is just the
art of being kind. (Paul, Gina and Mary applaud)

MARY (Mrs. Russell's roommate): I bet this will be your best
interview.

SIGRIST: (referring to Mrs. Russell) She's, she's wonderful.
This is Paul Sigrist signing off again with, with
Fannie Russell. Thank you very much. (break in
tape, microphone disturbance) All right, Fan--,
Fannie's now going to tell us about the San Francisco
earthquake of 1906.

RUSSELL: Yeah. My father had a big map that was hanging on
the wall and he explained to us where it was and what
caused earthquakes, earthquakes. I remember I was
about sixteen. That's all I remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when the Titanic sank in 1912?

RUSSELL: Oh, yes! Definitely, definitely.

SIGRIST: What do you remember, do you remember how you found out that happened?

RUSSELL: (she pauses) Yes, I got it from the newspapers. That was, wasn't that before radio?

SIGRIST: Yes.

RUSSELL: Yeah, yeah. I remember when we had only kerosene lamps. We had no radio, we had no telephones, we had no electric lights.

SIGRIST: So what did you do?

RUSSELL: We read books and played games. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: (referring to a conversation just prior to turning the tape recorder on again) Do you, you said that you faintly remembered celebrating the, the coming in of 1900. What, what is it that you faintly remember about that?

RUSSELL: In school, in school they made a lot of it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the Spanish-American War...

RUSSELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...in 1898. What do you remember of that?

RUSSELL: Well, the man that lived downstairs in our house had to go, so he went, the 3rd of May in '98. Everything that would come up that was important, my mother would say, "Now, you remember that date. You learn that date." So I did.

SIGRIST: Great. Okay, this time we really are going to sign off. This is Paul Sigrist (microphone disturbance) signing off with Fannie Russell on, uh, uh, May 28th, 1997. Thank you very much. You've been wonderful.