

KECK-147
ELIZABETH (BETTY) NIMMO
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ENGLAND, 1920
AGE 16

APPEL: This Willa appel and I'm speaking with Elizabeth Nimmo.

NIMMO: Betty.

APPEL: With Betty Nimmo.

NIMMO: It's easier.

APPEL: On Tuesday, February 11, 1986. We're beginning the interview at 10:00 and we're going to interview Betty about her experiences of immigrating from England in 1920 at age sixteen. Betty, why don't we begin by you telling me a little bit about where you grew up, your native town or city in England.

NIMMO: Well, I was born in South Shields which is a seaport village and then we moved up into, near Newcastle. My dad was working in Newcastle, he was what they call, in england, a draper, which is a clerk in this country. And he worked there so it was closer to his work. And we went to school as all kids did and we never had a car, they

were not known in those days, but we walked and we did things as a family. We used to go to the Marine Parks, hear the band concerts, then we just walked all over the place. We used to go to the beach but my dad was a marvelous swimmer but not one of we kids ever learned to swim, I still don't know how to swim. And, we did what families usually do, we had our visitors and my mother had a couple of sisters there and they would come and visit. And my dad was a Wesleyan and he went to his chapel, we went to the Church of England. And then we, the flu epidemic came along in-

APPEL: In--

NIMMO: In 1918.

APPEL: After World War One.

NIMMO: Well, he was in bed when the Armistice was signed. The 11th hour of the 11th month, the 11th day, 1918. And my brother was in one room, my dad in the other, it was a toss-up which was going to go first. My dad was forty-one, my brother was about eight or nine. And the last thing my dad did was nail the Union Jack onto a wooden clothes prop so he could put it out the window to celebrate Armistice Day. I remember him doing that. And he died a couple of days after that. My brother was in the hospital for awhile and he died just two years ago.

APPEL: So, when your father died, that left your mother--

NIMMO: With four children to raise.

APPEL: And you were the oldest?

NIMMO: I was the oldest and I had gone to work in the Post Office as

Telegraph messenger. No bicycle. Felling-on-Tyne was a hilly town and I walked.

APPEL: Can you spell the name of the town?

NIMMO: Felling, F-E-L-L-I-N-G-, Felling-on-Tyne, and then there was Gateshead and then Newcastle. We were in that area, Durham County was what it was. So, I applied for the job, got the job and like I say, we walked. And I had to deliver quite a few very unhappy telegrams because we had access to the telephone, the switchboard. We didn't run it but we were in the room, waiting for telegrams to come in. And Mr. and Mrs. Bagley were Postmaster and Postmistress and when my mother decided to come to this country, "Leave Betty with us." My mother says, "Oh no, we all go together."

APPEL: Why did she decide to come to the United States?

NIMMO: My mother had a brother living in this country and before, just after my mother and father were married, well before they were married, he decided to come to Nova Scotia, Canada, leaving his wife and one, one or two children. So my dad and mother took them in until he got settled. So, he came to Nova Scotia and then he'd come on down to the States. So he thought, well my mother would do better if she came to this country to raise we four kids. So we makeshift and I, I was quite old enough to realize the seriousness of raising money, because my mother had to have a passport, I had to have a passport, the others were all under age.

APPEL: You were sixteen.

NIMMO: Sixteen.

APPEL: How did you raise the money?

NIMMO: Well, she sold what few possessions we had and then my uncle, I guess, took a loan out. I think I'd say it's rather vague, now, I mean for me to remember just the details of it all. But I remember selling all that we had.

APPEL: Did he feel that your family would be better off in the United states because he was here or for economic reasons?

NIMMO: For economic reasons, and she had two sisters in England but then they were not too wealthy either, and he thought he could do much more for us if we came to this country rather than him trying to keep in touch with us in England 'cause it was the only brother my mother had. And they were rather close growing up. So, we came to a little coal mining town in Nancy Glo, Pennsylvania.

APPEL: If we can go back a little and you tell me a little bit about how you actually got here? What, did you take a train to a port?

NIMMO: We took a train from New Felling to Liverpool, where we got the ship.

APPEL: The name of the ship?

NIMMO: It was the Cunard Line, Carmania. And, at the time, if we could have come in 1919, we could have come, perhaps, second class, as it was, we were lucky to get steerage.

APPEL: Because--

NIMMO: Because of the, well, people wanted to get out and they were migrating to all countries. And I remember the train ride, 'cause I was the oldest, I had to sort of

look after the little kids too, you know, and getting on the ship, I just had vague memories of getting on the ship and of course, we were in steerage. And my poor mother, she saw the rats. I do not remember them. I think if I had seen one, I'd have had a heart attack (she laughs). But we, uh, we came in January, which was the roughest weather to come across the ocean and like I say, I was sick from the first day I got on board.

APPEL: Do you remember anything about your accommodations in steerage?

NIMMO: Yes, they were very rough to what we had been used to. We had a comfortable little home and it was steerage. Little bunk beds like, you know, one on top of the other and there was a cabin right here and a cabin right here, we were rather crowded.

APPEL: Were you in two cabins or one cabin?

NIMMO: Oh no, no, just one cabin.

APPEL: For the whole family?

NIMMO: For the five of us. Well, my sister was little, see, she's about nine years younger than I am, then my brother, he had a ball. He attached himself to one of the stewards, he waited tables, he cleaned tables and he was on the go all the time, he never missed a meal. He just had a ball. My mother knew he was in safe hands 'cause you couldn't go anywhere, he was on the ship. And uh, he just enjoyed it. We didn't.

APPEL: Were all the, were you, your mother and your other sister,

sick?

NIMMO: Yes, well we three, Mother and I and my sister Peg, my youngest sister was just sympathetically sick, 'cause Mama was there and we, we managed to make it.

APPEL: How long was the trip?

NIMMO: Oh gosh, I don't remember now. I would judge about nine or ten days at that time because it was so rough, and I recall there were a group of British Navy men, officers of some kind and of course, I was a young girl of sixteen, but I didn't care whether there were anyone aboard that ship or not. But the night before we docked, we had entertainment and what did this young man do but recite the "Sinking of the Titanic" (she laughs) and we were rocking and, oh, it (she laughs), and I thought, "Oh dear." So the one officer came to me and he says, "Young lady, where have you been?" And I says, "Sick abed," and that was it which was the truth. So, but I wasn't too interested in boyfriends at that time, I mean, it was, wondering what we were going into, what was going to happen.

APPEL: Did you have any expectations of what america was going to be like?

NIMMO: Just what little we had in our history books and geography books.

APPEL: And how did you feel about leaving your hometown?

NIMMO: Well, my mother had made the decision and who was I to question. I mean, we were together, that was the man thing. And we went, we moved in with my uncle and aunt for a little while but my mother wanted her own place when we got to Pennsylvania, which we did.

APPEL: When you finally pulled into New York Harbor, do you have any recollection of that part of the experience?

NIMMO: Yes, because of course, naturally everyone said, "Oh we have to go topside to see the Statue of Liberty." Of course, it was mighty cold in January. In England, it's temperate, it's even because it is an island. We didn't have much snow, we didn't have real hot weather. But it was cold. And my uncle had a sister in, his sister-in-law, lived in New York City, husband and my uncle thought he could get us off the Island because he k\lived in New York. It doesn't work that way. He was our guardian, he was responsible for us all. So, they had to get in touch with him in Pennsylvania , he had to come out by train and meet us. Now, my mother had not seen him in about eighteen years. Of course, it had been quite an experience for her to meet him again and then like I say, we were in a courtroom and they had to raise, swear on that Bible--

APPEL: This is when you got to Ellis Island?

NIMMO: Got to Ellis Island.

APPEL: Uh, do you remember anything more about being on Ellis Island?

NIMMO: I just vaguely remember getting on, like what we used to call, a ferry boat, after we got off the line and we got into this huge hall and there seemed to be thousands of people milling around. All kinds of dress, bundles from little bitty to old people, and "You go over here and you go over there," and "Josephine Smith, you come over

here," so we trotted over to where we were supposed to go. And then I remember everything was lines, you stood in lines. First class passengers, whatever. Because I remember one meal that we did get down to on, there was a man with one arm. He was seated at our table and as you come in the door, they had a loaf of bread, they'd break a piece of bread off and give it to you and then you picked up a tray and you went around like a cafeteria type and I looked and he was trying to cut his meat.

APPEL: This is on board ship?

NIMMO: On board ship, no, this is on Ellis Island. We were, we had gotten off the ship, this was on Ellis Island and like I say, they, no difference, first class, steerage, we were all routed out the same route. So, he was having a time cutting his meat and I looked at my mother and I says, "Do you suppose I could go and help him?" She says, "I don't see why not." So, he thanked me, very nice young man, not young but a man and that's about the only thing I can remember outside of all the confusion.

APPEL: So, you actually were there for one meal?

NIMMO: Oh yes, we docked in the morning and we spent that whole day there and one night. Then the next morning, well, towards noon, my uncle arrived.

APPEL: Do you remember where you slept?

NIMMO: Yes, in cages. Did you see that TV program on Ellis Island? There were like wire cages?

APPEL: Why don't you describe--

NIMMO: To describe it?

APPEL: Why don't you describe to me what, you, what it looked like to you?

NIMMO: Well, I've never been in jail, so I don't know what it is, but it was like this mesh and I think we were two and three different levels and there was just a narrow passageway in between, like you had a corridor down and then these were off the corridor. And some of the people, why, brought a few vermin in with them and they were cleaning their clothing and that. And my poor mother, she was horrified because she was her own, very fastidious lady. And we were raised that way (she laughs) it doesn't cost anything to be clean. And I just vaguely remember but it was of course, it was the confusion of all the different tongues. languages, that we had never been accustomed to. and we just had to, well, just stay by ourselves.

APPEL: The family was kept together?

NIMMO: Yes, yes.

APPEL: Even your brother?

NIMMO: Oh yes, yes when, I guess, after we left the ship, well then, well he was with us because he would come back to sleep with us at night but he was up bright and early the next morning, doing help to serve breakfast to those that were able to eat. I mean, but, he thoroughly enjoyed it.

APPEL: And on Ellis Island, you were all, stayed together?

NIMMO: We were all together uh-huh, because I remember, you had to go through sort of a health inspection. Well, we had all had our

vaccinations when we were babies. I remember my sister being vaccinated while my mother was still in bed with her. How certain things stay in your memory, you know, but my mother, bless her heart, she couldn't remember ever being vaccinated. The nurse says, "Just push up your sleeve, honey," so she went through. Because at her age, I don't think she felt like having vaccinations or anything and she was wanting to get out of there as quickly as we could.

APPEL: What was the health examination like? Were you used to that?

NIMMO: No, it was just, very, oh, what can I say, casual? At the time, because there was so many people, they couldn't do much about you. They just asked yo a few questions and my mother answered to the best of her ability, what we had had, measles and things like that. No serious illness, we were all healthy kids. And, wanted to know what my father had died from, what it was and all. So that was about all they really asked, there was no physical examination or anything like that.

APPEL: They didn't look in your eyes or your, listen to your chest?

NIMMO: Well, there was a doctor there with a stethoscope. I remember that and he was pounding, hit you on the back a little bit and not what we call a through examination in this country. But we, we managed to pass it anyway.

APPEL: Were you apprehensive about passing it?

NIMMO: Not really, because we had been in touch with my aunt and my cousins. My cousin's name was Betty and mine was Betty. Well then we come to Pennsylvania, so I was nicknamed Smitty and I still get Smitty when I go back to Pennsylvania. We had to make a distinction of the two. So, that was the way it turned out.

APPEL: What about other investigations or questioning at Ellis Island? Were you asked other types of questions?

NIMMO: Well, my mother had to go before this judge, or whoever he was supposed to be, and give the information. I had to watch the kids 'cause my mother was responsible for us all and they asked her what she intended to do when she came to this country. Well, my uncle had already gotten a job as custodian of a Methodist Church in this little Pennsylvania town so my mother had a job to start when she came to this country. And that was fine, that gave her the okay the, you know, but we still, she still had to swear on that Bible.

APPEL: Swear on a Bible--

NIMMO: That my, neither my mother or anyone of we four kids would ever become a burden on this country.

APPEL: And do you remember that you had any feelings about this whole experience?

NIMMO: Well, I really can't put anything into words of just how I felt because, sixteen years old, I was interested in church, dancing, young people and like I say, we were a family, we never had a great deal of money but we were together. Uh, I remember one thing about when my dad, just before he got sick. We had victory gardens. On the other side of the street there was vacant ground behind that and the people in the houses used to let us use their water, we in turn gave them part of our vegetables. And we were eating celery out of our garden quite a few weeks after my father had died. So it was quite something, but so I don't, can't really say that I was apprehensive about anything because I was kind of excited about coming to a new country and seeing my cousins. "Cause

there were two or three more by that time, and wondering how they would react to us because I was rather shy. I've gotten over that though, and they used to make fun of my accent, I used to blush very easily and I went to work for a Jewish department store owner in this little coal mining town. I had to learn the money, the money was different and but the English of course was the same only I did have an English accent, which some people thought was rather nice but others made fun of me. But I was the most homesick being on earth. If my mother had had the money, someone to send me to, I think she'd put me on the next ship and send me back again. I was ill.

APPEL: What did you miss?

NIMMO: I missed my friends, my church associations and the young people's activities. and like I say, we used to do a lot of walking because in England, you walk, and I was wondering what we were going to do and how it was going to be, because we had no idea.

APPEL: And when your uncle picked you up, how did you get to this small Pennsylvania town?

NIMMO: Well, we went to, it was like I say, bitter cold and they lived in New York City, his wife's sister and husband. So, we must go there and stay overnight. And of course, in England we have different words which mean different things and I said I was starving, not with hunger, with cold. And I remember, they outfitted us all in longjohns and I think we felt they were horrible (she laughs) but we stayed there, I think, overnight and then the next day, we took the train back to Pennsylvania.

APPEL: Do you remember what your first image and impression of America was, when you actually got out of Ellis Island?

NIMMO: Well, there was an awful lot of open country at that time, of course, you know, and because really, we'd heard so many stories about Indians, cowboys and Indians but the Indians were waiting to shoot you here as you went around a corner. I didn't see an Indian (she laughs) but we knew that the rest of the family were anxiously waiting to meet us. But when we got off the train, this Felling-on-Tyne was a little town, a city, right next to Newcastle. So, of course, taking coast to coast to Newcastle, the River Tyne, because during the First World War, there were bombings on the other side of the river from where we lived was Wall's End. This is the Hadrian Wall that was built. Well, that was the need of the wall and we had an aunt living there and the bombs were dropping over in Wall's End.

APPEL: Why there?

NIMMO: Because they were trying for Newcastle and the ship builders, the steel mine, the steel workers, it was industrial and that was one of the places my dad used to take, my brother and I were buddies, I should have been a boy because I was a tomboy and my dad, my mother took the two girls and my dad took the two boys. We used to go up to the quay side to where the ships would come in on the quays. We used to love it, I guess I've gotten quite a lot from him, because I learned to go (?) shopping and doing things like that. But we, like I say, we were a family together.

APPEL: And when you finally arrived in this town in Pennsylvania, did you uncles and your cousins come to meet you?

NIMMO: Yes, well, my uncle was with us, see, he went with us from New York to back home again. And I remember, in naive way, I guess, "Oh my goodness, where's the railroad station?" You got off the train, down into the snow, about yea deep. We don't have a station, it was just a little coal mining town.

APPEL: What was the name of the town?

NIMMO: Nanty Glo, N-A-N-T-Y - G-L-O, and that was where he had settled. I remember he had brought one of his neighbors, who had been in this country many, many years, to Ellis Island, with him. He was an American born, Mr. Roberts and he was ashamed to think that the United States had such a place as Ellis Island. He had never, he had heard about it but he had never seen it and it was a shock to him.

APPEL: What particularly shocked him?

NIMMO: Well, I think, he had not expected to see the masses of people and all nationalities but of course my uncle found us right away, but he just, well, American people just don't think about Ellis Island, they never had any experience with it. They really have to go through it in order to know what it was all about.

APPEL: Well, was he, I'm trying to get a sense of what disturbed him about it, was it that so many people were processed at the same time?

NIMMO: Yes, and how were they going to be handled. Would there be room for them all, coming in at one time? Where would they go? Uh, some were returned, some were not accepted and that disturbed him. He said, "They were human beings and they came to this country to better themselves and make a life for themselves and why are some turned away and others not?" Of course, we couldn't answer that question, but he never forgot his trip to Ellis Island because he lived across the street from where my uncle lived and he was Welsh, his family's ancestors were Welsh and they were miners of course, everybody was miners there.

APPEL: You moved to a mining town, coal mining?

NIMMO: Coal mining town. That's where my uncle lived and he was responsible for us, he was our guardian.

APPEL: What was the town like?

NIMMO: Typical, little, Pennsylvania, coal mine. Everyone knew everyone. There were a lot of Hungarian people there, a lot of Polish people there and it's the first time that we had ever had experienced with a different language. In England your English. And we, it was quite something and of course my uncle then, did not learn the language at all because there were just as many English, Americans as there were foreigners but the foreigners wanted to better themselves and they went to work and they were hard workers and the coal mines are one of the worst places to work. You say a prayer when your husband or your son goes to work in the morning, you say another one when he comes home at night.

APPEL: I would like to get to why you were homesick and what you missed and especially what the difference between this town was and your home in England and what made you feel so homesick.

NIMMO: Well, let me see. In England, of course, the houses are in blocks and we had neighbors upstairs and neighbors down and my dad had a green thumb and we always had a patch of flowers in the front. We enjoyed that. And we came to this little coal mining town and the houses were all dark painted. In England they were all brick houses, very nice houses, rented of course, no one owned their homes at the time. And we had good neighbors, they helped my mother out during the illness of my dad and my brother. Had a nurse lived next door to us and I think it was the cleanliness of our way of life in England and

then coming to a coal mining town where the slag heap, what they call the slag heap was burning all the time and the odor of the sulphur.

APPEL: We're going to break right now because it's the end of the tape. This is the end of the first side of the tape of the interview with Betty Nimmo.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

APPEL: This is the beginning of the second side of the interview with Betty Nimmo. I was asking you, Betty, about the difference between the town in Pennsylvania that you moved to and what you had left in England, and what made you so homesick.

NIMMO: Well, like I say, it was the cleanliness of our home in England. It was an entirely different place. We had not seen these little houses, separate houses as what they have in the mining towns or they have a row of mining houses that they rent through their mining company, the company owns it and they rent it. And then seeing all the miners come home, black from the mines, that was something, an experience because my uncle was a miner and the first time we saw him, why we thought, good heavens sake, you know. And, but it was mostly that I missed my friends. I'd been friends in school, a friend, Emily Greenwood, and we were very compatible. Her dad had a little grocery store, not a grocery store, like a candy shop in their home, how they used to have, like the mom and pop stores out here. And I used to spend quite a time there and when my dad was so ill, well, my mother asked if I could go stay with them because she had my dad's brother come, with his wife, and sort of help her with the two people being

ill and we knew that my dad wasn't going to make it. So that, but we had just gotten into, well, sixteen you were in the midst of your teens and you were going to dances. I love to dance, and in England they do the old fashioned waltz and there were lessons through the church, I mean through the St. Mary's Church of England is where we belonged. And we used yo go to the meetings and I just enjoyed my way of life there.

APPEL: Wasn't there anything comparable in Pennsylvania?

NIMMO: Well, like I say, I went right to work. I went into this department store to learn. I was supposed to go onto their home as a working girl but I had to learn the money so he said, "Well, we will put you into the store." It was a department store, no food or anything, and then I ended up keeping the day books and we had a sale, I used to paint the signs for the sale. And I got the whole amount of fifteen dollars a month, every two weeks. And I remember, oh one thing I can't forget. I have a picture of it somewhere. I splurged my first two weeks pay on a hat, seven dollars and fifty cents and I had a picture taken with it and I remember that. But I mean it was just the idea of my cousin Betty being so much older than I was, until I got, again, my mother was the custodian of the church and we went to a Methodist Church and that's when I began to become a little better adjusted because I met people my own age and there was the men's, the young men's class and the young lady's class and we used to have contests. And then that's where I met my good husband, through the church group and roller skating. But I never did go roller skating, I was too clumsy. But we, I finally, my poor mother, I think, she was more worried about me than she was about herself because I was so terribly homesick and there's nothing like homesickness, there's nothing you can do about it, only fight it and fight it yourself.

APPEL: How long did that last?

NIMMO: Oh, I would say, maybe the first year was the hardest, until I got acquainted, and I just got to the point, they'd make fun of it. I says, "Well," I says, "English people know how to talk," because you know, there was Pennsylvania Dutch, see my husband's mother was Pennsylvania Dutch. And that's like German and they had different words for different items which was confusing. I remember my brother going to a little mom and pop type store and he wanted a penny's worth of sweets. He came home with a bag of sweet potatoes (she laughs), he didn't know the difference and my aunt says, "Well, why did you bring those?" Well, he says, "I asked for sweets," "Well," she says, "They are sweet potatoes." So, I mean, all these little incidents, you know, we had laughter in our home, you know, we made our own fun, and but I finally made up my mind, well, we were here, we were going to stay.

APPEL: Do you have any regrets, looking back?

NIMMO: Nope, I met my husband, one and only, and I think he felt the same way because he used to, his brother owned a barber shop in this little coal mining town and he used to, sort of like an apprentice, he was learning the trade and we had gone in there with my brother to get a haircut. He went home and told his mother he had seen a girl he was going to marry. I didn't know it, so it just developed. And we just, like I say, through the church again, that's the first thing we do, whenever we move, go looking for a church, and make your friends.

APPEL: Well, it sounds like you've had a very nice and fulfilled life.

NIMMO: I think so. It still is, I have many things to do yet. Of course, I miss my good husband but I've got a good family and I have made quite a few friends here in this complex, and I still get to

my church in Sam Mysidro every Sunday. My minister and his wife pick me up.

APPEL: That's very nice.

NIMMO: It is nice.

APPEL: That's very nice.

NIMMO: He says, "We need you Betty," because we are the most southern Congregational Church in the United States and we're just like a family down there. Everyone knows everyone, greets you as you do a member of your family and although I'm only one person, if I do miss church, which is very seldom, it leaves rather a big gap in the pew. I've had the offer to go to these churches around here, I says, "As long as my minister will pick me up, I will go to church." Now, tomorrow night we're going to a potluck. I have my potluck ready, he will come and pick me up.

APPEL: Well, thank you very much.

NIMMO: It's all over?

APPEL: This interview is over (they laugh), that's all. It was very, very interesting.

NIMMO: Well, good. My oldest grandson, "Gran Nimmo, you ought to write a book." I haven't got time, I don't. I'm so busy. I do a lot of knitting, I'm knitting now for a Nome, Alaska missionary group. Seventy-five pair of booties last year without all the stocking hats, ski bands, you name it.

APPEL: How do you do it?

NIMMO: I do it!

APPEL: This is the end of the interview with Betty Nimmo.