

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ELLIS ISLAND ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Ayleen Watts James
Interviewer: Nancy Dallette
Interview Number: 198
Interview Date: June 25, 1986

®RHA®FC®PN

MS. DALLETTE: My name is Nancy Dallette and I'm talking with Ayleen Watts James. Today is Wednesday, June 25, 1986. We are beginning this interview with Mrs. James and we're about to interview her about her immigration experience from Panama in 1923 at the age of seven. It is now 1:25, and this is interview number 198.

Can we start back at the beginning of your story. And, could you tell me where and when you were born.

MS. JAMES: I was born in Panama, on October 18, 1916.

MS. DALLETTE: Can you tell me about some of your earliest childhood memories in Panama?

MS. JAMES: Well, for me to explain my early childhood I must let you know that I had two mothers. My mother, and a lady who--a lady who became my second mother and godmother. Worked together, they were in their late teens when they arrived in Panama, and became bosom buddies. My second mother worked for Colonel [Gorkis] who, as you know, opened the Panama Canal. She was their seamstress. In those days, there weren't any stores, you know, or machines. Everyone made their outfits. My mother, later, married, had my brother, who is three years older. And, at the same time, my second mother had a son who died at childbirth, and she could never have any more children. So, I was left in her care. By the way, I was, I was named after Colonel [Gorkis]' daughter, Ayleen. That's why it's spelt that way, that's the way he spelt the name. So, my first memory that I could remember, traveling, was going to the island of Grenada, where my grandparents were. And I remember the, my first fear, and that was going to [Granias] Beach. Every morning, they didn't have showers, every morning my aunt and the rest of them got up and went for

what they called their sea bath. And my mother, my aunt, my whole family, were excellent swimmers. They swam for miles. And my aunt disappeared. And I was hysterical. That was the first memory I had of Grenada. Got back to Panama, and by this time, my mother was coming--my father was here, since 18--1918. And the way it was before that, I don't know, because he did not see me, you know, when I was born, until I arrived here. By this time, my mother and father started working on my mother and brother coming here. So, I was left with the second mother, and I did not meet my real mother until I arrived here. I had a hell of a lot of fun, I think, as a youngster. We had some relatives who worked on the one, so they lived in that area. And we would go over there for weekends and whatnot. I started school in the Zone with American school in the Zone, and it was plenty of land to play, run around, and so forth. My second mother, whom we called Mimi, would tell me stories about, you know, you have another mother. And one day we gonna go and see her. You have another mother. Didn't impress me any. All I was doing was playing. And her first time that she really whacked me up and down was when I ran around outside with barefoot, with bare feet, with the other children. Because she had heard you got worms and so forth through the feet. Which, of course, as soon as I was out of sight of the house, I took off my shoes like the other children, and a nail went in. Therefore, our visa was cancelled until we had treatment--I had treatment. So, then we prepared to come and meet this new family. I had a brother and a father and another mother. Which, I still wasn't too impressed on that.

MS. DALLETTE: How old were you at this time?

MS. JAMES: When I was in Panama?

MS. DALLETTE: Umm hmm.

MS. JAMES: Oh, I know I started going to school, walking with the children. They didn't seem to have too much regulations on that, 'cause the older children would just take me along to school with them. You know, so I must have been about five, I think. I'm not positive. And, so, we finally got on this ship. And, I must tell you, I can recall we were in what made me refer to as "the hole" of the ship. So we were not first and second class. I don't know, fourth, fifth, or sixth, or whatever they had! And in that one room, an aunt, my great aunt came over with us, another friend with her two sons, and Mimi and I came. What happened to my aunt and the other two, lady with her sons, I can't recall. You have to remember as a child, there are certain things that stand out and certain things that fade away. Next thing I know, getting off on this Ellis Island, and it was the most horrible experience. I was frightened stiff, and Mimi constantly cried and held onto me very tightly. It was jam packed with, mostly, Europeans. I must say, my mother was dressed up; she had been making this suit for a year, to land in. And I was dressed up with handmade lace and all. And most of these people were dirty, actually dirty, and had [mitts]. Those who didn't have a babushka on, their hair was dropping, you could see them walking. And Mimi would just keep on pulling me away from them. And she cried and she cried, it was just like cattle, thrown into this big place. I recall them having these big kettle in which they served soup or stew or whatever, and it was a crude sight. You know, they just dump it in bowls and people grabbing. They were hungry. And, of course, we didn't understand a word they were saying. And you have to understand that Mimi had not been in the company of a whole group of people from all over the world. And, so the whole thing was awful to her. And as a child, I felt it, I was terrified. Next thing I know, they were examining her eyes, and a doctor examined my body. I had a rash. And he held us over for me

to see another doctor. And he coined the word "allergy" for me. First time I heard that word, "allergy." And, which would follow me up to this day. I have loads of allergies. He had to be on the ball, because think how many years ago that was. He was ahead of his time.

MS. DALLETTE: Had you not been aware of having any kind of rash or an allergy before that? Did it--

MS. JAMES: No, it must have come about on the ship somewhere, because they wouldn't have boarded us with it, anyway. You know.

MS. DALLETTE: Did you have to go through some sort of examination or something to board--

MS. JAMES: You have to be examined. We went to the Zone; that's where the papers went to. The Canal Zone. We lived in Panama City. But, we went to the Zone to get the visa. And, you know, I don't know, this has not too much to do with Ellis Island, but I recall going with Mimi to Colon, in Panama, that's when she was going for these papers, and there was a statue of Columbus there. And I was just oohing and ahing over this, I wanted to get up there, you know with the statue. And she was saying how ridiculous I could be. The statue was facing the ocean. Now, what forty years later, my brother and I went back, and we took a trip to Colon. And he said, "What the hell is this? I know I'm not crazy. Columbus was overlooking the ocean; now he's overlooking the other side!" But, after he did research, he found out they did change the statue around. Anyway, they held us over for the rash. Held me over with her. And the next thing I recall was the ship going into Brooklyn. I don't know if it was Brooklyn then, but the ship went into Brooklyn, that's where it docked. And that's the time that Mimi bawled. "So this is what they call America?! This is what they call America!" Because she'd heard there was gold on the streets, you know. Brooklyn dock was something to see, the debris, the garbage, where that boat landed. And we went in--

MS. DALLETTE: Is this after you were finished in Ellis Island?

MS. JAMES: Right.

MS. DALLETTE: Took the ferry?

MS. JAMES: Over to Brooklyn Pier. I don't know if it was the ferry, I know it was a boat. And, I saw two men, maybe was judges, I don't know who they were, and they looked at my mother, my real mother, who was there waiting for us and losing her mind what had happened to us. And, he said to her, "Is this your child?" And the other man said, "Don't be ridiculous, just look at her and look at that child. Why ask a question like that?" And from there, we went to an apartment on [Gates] Avenue, which was a horrible salute to America, again, railroad. From the back you saw clothes hanging up, and in the front, you saw the streetcar. And he was a child who was transported from running around to being in prison. And that situation was horrible. There was no bathroom, there was a toilet in the hall for upstairs and downstairs and whoever. So here my mother had to revert back to getting a galvanized tub and heating water, and you stand on line till she finished; everyone had a bath. But, my brother explained to me the reason for so many Europeans who were so dirty, filthy really, was that they didn't have access to water. A lot of them who were inland, they didn't have any showers or tubs. They had to go and get a pail of water someplace, who knows, once a week, or whenever. Whereas, in the islands we had water, in Panama with the American influence, they had installed showers in Panama City as well as in the Zone. And everyone took baths every afternoon. So that made me feel better, because I never gave that a thought, that these people didn't have access to all the conveniences that we had. On top of that, the Americans did have programs and, you

know, literature and whatnot, for health habits, that, if you were halfway educated, that you got into it. So that we had a lot of advantages coming here, you know. Anyway--

MS. DALLETTE: What about the night that you spent on Ellis Island?

MS. JAMES: You know, I don't remember sleeping there. That part faded. I don't remember that. And when I look back at it, it's only the events that were fearful to me, that were traumatic, that I remember. You know? And, but I have to say, I lived long enough to hear some of my mother's relatives and friends say, who had become near affluent, oh, they were going back and build a house, and they were going back and retire, and, Mimi would say, "I'm not going back a damn place. God bless America." You know. And, I remember saying to many friends, "I won't forget why my father sent for us." He saw the opportunities of education, and that meant a whole lot to him. So that Mimi said, "Now, where else, where else are they gonna give you a check when you stop working?" You know? So, we became stone Americans. And that's all I have to say, really.

MS. DALLETTE: Tell me about your father. He had come over and, well, you said--

MS. JAMES: Actually, yes, papa skipped the boat. He got a job on a ship, you know, and those days, immigration didn't bother you too much, I guess. He got off the ship. But I don't know what year it was that immigration started calling in these people and telling them they could apply for citizenship. I could tell you another joke about papa. He, when he applied for citizenship, of course, we were all underage. And all through the years, we used his citizenship papers, which made us a citizen. And, I had gone to school in the South and presented my paper. I had worked in Los Angeles County Hospital, and presented my paper. I had worked in the post office, and presented--everybody accepted my father's paper. I was a citizen. Later, I applied to go back to school in New York, and this woman looked at my paper, at my school record and everything else, and said, "There's no proof that you are Mr. Watson's daughter." Therefore, I had to go down with Mimi, by this time my mother had expired, and, and pop, to swear that I was his daughter. So pop said they took him into a room, and they said, "How come she spells her name 'Ayleen' on her school records and so forth, and on your paper, you got 'Eileen,' and how come you got her born," I forget where, "and on her paper it's different?" And papa answered the man this way. "Be bless"--we never used foul language, but when he said "Be bless," that was cursing; he said, "Be bless. I was so glad to become an American citizen, I didn't care whether they spell it 'Ey,' 'Ay' or 'Ni,'" and the man said, "Dismissed." And two weeks later, I got my own papers. Well, it was so funny. I'd been here and went to school and all this sort of thing, and this one woman--but of course it was a godsend in the long run, but it was just so funny, he said "I was so glad to be here. I didn't care what they said." Well, the clerks weren't particularly educated either. He said, "Ayleen," and they wrote the way they knew it, you know. So, it turned out to be a beautiful place to be.

MS. DALLETTE: How about Brooklyn? The first place you went was Gates Avenue? What was the neighborhood like there, at that time?

MS. JAMES: Mainly Jewish. And, there weren't many of our people there.

MS. DALLETTE: Do you know why your father had picked that particular area to settle in?

MS. JAMES: No, I guess what was available. You know, we were not conscious, at that early stage, of prejudice. In fact, I went to school,

um, until I went South. There was very few of us around. Very few. And we never spoke about our background, because the American blacks were very prejudiced against us. So we never spoke of it. But, when I graduated highschool, out of 650, there was only twenty of us. Now, all through school. So, it wasn't that he picked it because of, you know, I guess, that's what was available and what he could pay for. You know? But we didn't stay there too long. After a year or a year and a half. Then my younger brother became ill, and the doctor wanted to send him to a convalescent home. And my parents wouldn't accept that. I don't even know if they knew what a convalescent place--all they knew is they want to take him away. And, he, they told him that he had pneumonia and he only had one lung, and all this sort of thing, which we thought he had all this time, until the war came, and he was down in Tuskegee and enrolled in the Air Force, and they said, "Nothing wrong with your lungs. Get up there." But anyway, we came out here. Papa started looking for a place out here, 'cause it was country then, it was woods. 'Cause I been in this house, what is it, sixty years.

MS. DALLETTE: Tell me what it was like when you first came out here. From Jamaica.

MS. JAMES: Oh, great. There was plenty of land. We used to go and pick blackberries, wild grapes. I used to pick buttercups in the field, and make centerpieces for my mother. And daisies, and--oh, we had a ball! And actually, for all the things that happened to me after that, I must say if I didn't have had a beautiful childhood, I couldn't have had made it. You know, it was all here, all these houses, it was only this house and two houses over there. And all around was just woods and farms. And, I played with mostly Italian children. The neighborhood was mostly Italian, and Polish. And I used to be out there eating Italian bread with garlic, you know. Up to this day, I could kill myself on Italian food. Oh, God, can I kill myself. But, yeah, the ice man, he was an ice man, across the street, [Gallow], who later became wealthy, went into coal business, and then went into contracting business. And, he could neither read or write. And when I came back from California I went to work for him, because he felt he could trust me with the payroll, and the money and so forth. I only stayed there until he got himself together. But, I could tell you, I could count, on how many black families were out here. I could count them.

MS. DALLETTE: Very few.

MS. JAMES: Very few. But the ones who came out, in those days, had one thought in mind. To have a home, and an interest for their children, you see. And, so I've seen the whole place be rebuilt.

MS. DALLETTE: How about Mimi? Did she get acclimated to life in Brooklyn, since she was horrified by it at first?

MS. JAMES: Well, she was horrified mainly by the pier. That Brooklyn pier, you step off as the boat is coming in, I don't know how it is now, I haven't been in Brooklyn in ages. But, that Brooklyn pier, the debris was like coming into garbage, you know. That, in those days, was horrible. I tell you one thing about the water, he did a hell of a lot of cleaning. Around New York. He really did. And, oh yeah, I told you she became a staunch American, she wasn't going anywhere. You know? So, none of us really liked that place because we were cramped in, you see. And, it was--people talk right now about the newcomers, the Haitians, and [. . .] all live together, and blah blah blah blah. It was the same thing years ago. It was the same thing. It was the same thing. The Puerto Ricans, they--[ninety-nine] of them lived in two rooms until they could do better. And again, my mother left me with Mimi in Brooklyn, and went out to the end of the island and worked all summer so she could get

the money to send for my aunt.

MS. DALLETTE: She was back in Panama?

MS. JAMES: She was in Grenada. You know? And that's what they did. When she came, she worked, and then sent for our children, and this is the way it evolved.

MS. DALLETTE: Was there an area of work that was easier to get than others?

MS. JAMES: Oh, actually, this was the joke. Way back in that time, it was mostly service work, it was mostly service work. And, believe it or not--no, believe it or not, you have people advertise in the papers. They didn't want American blacks to work for them; they felt that the foreign blacks were more cultured, and that type of a thing. If they had children, they didn't want--so, work was easier for them to get.

MS. DALLETTE: There were actually advertisements in the papers?

MS. JAMES: In the newspapers, yes. That's right.

MS. DALLETTE: That's the kind that your mother got, and from that she would raise the money to send for the sister?

MS. JAMES: Right. Right. And, I think, if my father was alive today, he would be very pleased, because, let's see, all of us children except one have their degrees. His grandchildren. And that's what he was really interested in sending us for. More opportunities.

MS. DALLETTE: This is the end of side one of interview number 198 with Ayleen Watts James.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

MS. DALLETTE: This is beginning of side two of interview number 198 with Ayleen Watts James.

Can you fill me in a little bit about the period in time that brought your parents from Grenada to Panama?

MS. JAMES: Well, I could only repeat what they said, that, the word got around that they needed help. There was plenty of work in Panama. How they got up the money, how they got there, who knows. But that's why they went. And, of course, there were a lot of areas opened, beside the building of the canal. One of the sad parts about it was that wherever the United States walk into a place, they carried their prejudice with them. The blacks on these islands were paid in silver. And the whites were paid in gold. They did the same thing--not the pay, but the same thing in Hawaii. They had educated the people around that when these black soldiers came, to keep away from them. You know. So there were other areas of work open. My uncle made a hell of a lot of money as a tailor. He made all these clothes for these servicemen, all by hand and whatnot. They were--I remember this part--there was a lot of Chinese there. And they had stores, and a few little hold-in-the-wall restaurants. And what else can I tell you that--they--it reminds me, when I see the picture of the opening of the [out/wild] west, you know how they all flocked so, they had their ladies of ill repute there, and they had their tailors and they had their cooks and whatever else. And there wasn't too much law. You know? So, that--

MS. DALLETTE: Was your father also involved in the building of the canal?

MS. JAMES: Not too long. I--I can't tell you too much that he did. You know, I can't recall. Why I say not too long was because--oh, this was in the fifties sometime--that the government here put out the papers that those who worked on the canal were entitled to so much bonus and pay and so forth. But they had to have a limit of I forgot how many years. They limit it to. And after filing my father's papers, he was short a year or two, so he didn't get the bonus. You know? And as time

evolved, and they start giving even the workers on the Canal who were not, you know, Americans, they start giving the Panamanians who worked on the Canal social security, pensions, and the same benefits that the Puerto Ricans had been getting, and we're getting here.

MS. DALLETTE: So as far as you know, did the United States government make it easy for the builders of the Canal to make entry into the United States? It sounds like your aunt didn't have too much trouble.

MS. JAMES: Yeah, well, that I wouldn't know. You have to remember, in my time, grownups didn't explain too much to their children. You know. You had to stay in your place. And there was only certain things that I was able to observe and figure out myself. Not that they would be explained to me.

MS. DALLETTE: How about your initial impressions? You talked about the fear that you had at Ellis Island. Was there anything that helped you to overcome that fear at Ellis, or was the whole experience very negative? Were the doctors--

MS. JAMES: To me, the doctors were the only ones, in the first place, we understood what they were speaking about. Talking about. That was number one. And, as a child, he impressed me as being very tender, you know. But other than that, and--like I said--part of the problem were the Europeans were speaking all kinds of languages, must have been about ten different languages there. It was just like a bedlam, you know. Everybody speaking their--doing their own thing. So, that part was very negative. And which no one could have done anything about. But, the food serving was horrible. It was just like slop being thrown in, you know, bowls and handed to people who were actually pushing to get it because they were starved. You know? And who knows what circumstances they had left. Over there. These things, of course, you figure out as you become an adult.

MS. DALLETTE: And when you were getting your feet on the ground, for the first time in this country, is there anything else you can recall about what surprised you about the way things worked here, or how it was different from--sounds like you had sort of a carefree childhood in Panama?

MS. JAMES: Yeah. I remember one time I got very annoyed. My mother enrolled me in public school, and I had to get up and read a story. And, the story was something about this girl, Agatha, and I got up--she told me to get up and read it. And I said, "And Agatha said 'So and so and so.'" And she said, "It's not Agatha, it's Agatha." And she kept on interrupting me every time I said "Agatha." And finally I remember stamping my foot, and I said, "Now don't you tell me. My aunt's name is Agatha. And that's the way she spells it." And she looked at me. I guess she hadn't been used to this kind of person either. And, that was the end of that. That was that experience in the public school in Brooklyn. Public school out here? As I said, it was country, it was a lot of fun. You know? You knew everyone. And the difference of today, my children, grandchildren, um, my father knew all the parents. Whether they were black, Polish, Irish, or what, he knew the parents. And all the parents scold us. And if they heard that Miss [Scrinicy] down the street spoke to me, then they turn around and do it again. So then we had a lot of babysitters. You see? And it was a whole different ball game. Everyone knew everyone else, and their mother and their grandmother, and so forth. The Italian guy around the corner, he--just right around the corner--he had a stable, and he made it a treat for kids on a Saturday morning or whatever. He'd let us ride the horse. Can you imagine riding a horse around here? So, it was like, when they moved

into the house, it was a big joke to the children, because my mother would get this little piece of plant and she'd go over to that lady around the corner and she said, "Now if you give me a piece of this, I'll give you a piece of that." And that's how they were finally able to get their shrubs and all of that. It's--was a beautiful childhood, that my children missed.

MS. DALLETTE: Was it all changed by that time?

MS. JAMES: By that time. The war changed this whole place. The whole city of New York. I can't tell you about any place else, but I know the war did a lot of changing, a lot of morals dropped, values changed, you know. And, but you just have to live with the times, sweetheart.

MS. DALLETTE: Did you find it easy to get acclimated? It sounds like it came fairly naturally.

MS. JAMES: Yeah. I think, it's my belief, if children are happy, otherwise--they get love and so forth--they go on playing and they don't hold things forever and ever. You know, an episode is an episode, and they just go on, you know. And they're not paying any rent, and they're getting love, so I didn't have any problems. There's only one thing that I was afraid when I came here, come to think about it. My brother supposed to watch me. If my parents weren't in. And they would tell me, "Look, you sit right there and don't move. Don't you dare move. 'Cause we could tell downstairs if you move." They want to play marbles outside. And I'd sit there like a damn fool for hours until they came in. And then one day my mother caught them. But, other than that, immediately my mother started me with piano lessons, I don't know, for twenty-five cents a month or something. And my brother with violin lessons. Oh, and you had to be cultured. That was another thing. So we all had music lessons.

MS. DALLETTE: Did you carry on that tradition with your family? Your children?

MS. JAMES: No. My father was disgraced; she wanted to go into ballet, and he thought that was a disgrace. But I let her go into ballet. No one asked me if I wanted piano lessons. No one ever asked you in those days. You just--this is part of your education, you just went and played.

MS. DALLETTE: What happened when your daughter came along and wanted--

MS. JAMES: She wanted ballet. So I let her go to Fred Astaire School.

MS. DALLETTE: Did you raise them with stories of your early childhood? Did you tell them about what your early life had been like?

MS. JAMES: I'm pretty sure they know, because see, we carry on certain of our traditions. Christmas, wherever you are, we still have a family reunion. So they'll get pieces from me, pieces from my brother, pieces, you know, from everyone. And Easter we'll do the same thing. You know. And then we have a picnic every other year, which is the gathering of the clan, we call it. And at the picnic, we carried a lot of native foods, just to keep--perpetuate the background.

MS. DALLETTE: What kind of food?

MS. JAMES: Oh my goodness, well, a lot of tropical foods, of course. You know, like tropical vegetables, and it's not just the food, it's the way it's cooked. And, the old ones used to play the games. It was interesting to see them play a game with rocks, which I don't know anything about. But I guess they had--like my brothers, you know, said, they didn't have toys, so they got other things to play with. But they'd get in a circle and they'd do something like you do checkers with these

rocks, you know. But most of now either got arthritis or expired, so that's that. And they sing songs, you know. So my children have a pretty good idea of their background. What they do with it, I don't know.

MS. DALLETTE: Can they keep alive the recipes? Have you passed those along?

MS. JAMES: Actually, when you speak about recipes, I always crack up--people always say to me, "Give me your recipe." When she went to Africa, she had a program, a T.V. program, Lynn?--on, to teach them how to cook certain foods. And she would write back home, 'cause my mother was some cook. She used to do a lot of the catering for millionaires, you know, and she was really some cook. And we had a time, my mother and I, because my mother never read recipes. You know, dit-dit-dit, dit-dit-dit, and I'd sit there and try to figure out, you know, when she makes three shakes on it--what that come up to. But, then, [. . .] an excellent cook on our native foods. Listen, I went to work, and she stayed home with my mother, so she picked it up.

MS. DALLETTE: I just want to thank you very, very much.

MS. JAMES: I'm sorry I don't have more to give you, but I was too young.

MS. DALLETTE: You gave a lot. That's the end of interview number 198 with Ayleen Watts James. The time is 2:25.