

KECK-45

IDA M. JOHNSON

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BARBADOS, 1922

AGE 17

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GUMB: This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mrs. Ida Johnson on the 10th day of October, 1985. We're beginning this interview at 5:25. We are about to interview Mrs. Johnson about her immigration experience from Barbados, West Indies, in the year 1922. Okay, Mrs. Johnson, if we could begin with where and when were you born?

JOHNSON: I was born in Barbados, West Indies on October 22, 1905.

GUMB: Okay, and what was life like there?

JOHNSON: Beautiful. Very nice childhood in every respect.

GUMB: Did you live in the city or in the country?

JOHNSON: I lived in the country.

GUMB: What did your father do?

JOHNSON: My father was a manager of a plantation named Friendship in St. Lucy's. And then after he gave that up he bought another

plantation of his own named Pike Corner, also in St. Lucy's. But I didn't live at either of the places. We had our house from the plantation.

GUMB: Okay. It was St. Lucia's?

JOHNSON: St. Lucy's.

GUMB: Lucy's.

JOHNSON: Yes. L-U-C-Y-S, in barbados.

GUMB: Okay. So you weren't living on the plantation?

JOHNSON: No, no. Our home was far from the plantation.

GUMB: Okay. Some distance from the plantation.

JOHNSON: Yeah. Not far, but, you know, a reasonable distance.

GUMB: Right. Uh, so, uh, did you go to school there?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. I went to private school in Barbados. I went to, uh, Tommy Miller in the morning and then in the afternoon until evening we went to Mrs. Cumberbach [ph], two private schools in Barbados.

GUMB: Okay. Um, okay, so, um, uh, when did you decide to come to this country?

JOHNSON: In, um, 1922. A cousin of mine had been over here for about a couple of years and got married over here and she said why don't you come on over, it's so nice over here. Big, you know, because Barbados is a very small place, fourteen by twenty-one square miles. So, uh, after she encouraged me in coming over I thought I would try it, so I came over, in '22.

GUMB: While you were still in Barbados, had you, what sort of things had you heard about this country?

JOHNSON: Well, they said ( she laughs ) well, they used to say what a nice place the states was and how everything was so easy to be had and, as they say, they used to say that really, that was the topic that you could, the money over here was flowing, like that you could shake a tree. That's what they always told us over there, you know. Of course, that, you know that you can't, money doesn't grow on trees, but that was to the extent that they like the States.

GUMB: Had you met, while you were still living in Barbados, had you met people that had been here? Uh, did you hear about experiences of people that had been here?

JOHNSON: There were quite a few people had come over, so then after she said to me, "Why don't you come?" I said, "Well, I guess because I like to travel anyhow." So I said, "Okay." So I came over here.

GUMB: Did the people who, uh, you knew about who had been in this country and come back, what sort of things had they, you know, why had they gone? What sort of things had they, were they doing?

JOHNSON: Adventure, more or less. They didn't come back. The majority that I knew that came over were over here. They didn't come back to Barbados. But, um, adventure, what they came over for, and then, again, as they say, Barbados is a very small place and lots of people like to just travel.

GUMB: Right. Um, okay. Uh, so you really didn't go because of hardship.

JOHNSON: Oh, no, no. No. She was saying what a nice place it was and so forth so I thought I would come over to see the place. But, as I said, when I came, I felt as though I wanted to go back the next day because when I came in, well, I wasn't met in the first place, so when I was met and she took me into the apartment, it was just an apartment, and I wasn't accustomed to an apartment. I was accustomed to a house, a big house with land and so forth, around it. So when I went in and it was just like a, you know, imagine, living in a house and then coming into an apartment. I think at that time she had about five rooms. Yes. She had two bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen and a front room. Yeah. And having come from a place with, you can walk around your own place, and then come into one little cubby hole like, you know, I didn't like that part of it. And so she said, "You'll get used to it." ( she laughs ) So I did.

GUMB: How old were you when you came?

JOHNSON: Sixteen. I would have been seventeen in October when I came. I landed here the first of July, 1922. I left Barbados the 24th of June. IT took seven days, over.

GUMB: So you were only sixteen. How did your parents feel about you leaving?

JOHNSON: Well, they, I wanted to come over and I was coming to family, to my cousin, so it was all right. If I was coming on my own and coming to someone that I didn't know, you know, just to the place, they would not have consented. But I was coming to my relative.

GUMB: When you left, uh, did you think you'd ever come back?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. Yes. I have been back several times.

GUMB: So your parents didn't resist at all.

GUMB: Oh, no. No. Had they resisted I would not have come over. But when I told them they said, "Okay." So that was it.

GUMB: So once you decided you wanted to come, what did you have to do? What kind of arrangements did you have to make to come?

JOHNSON: All I had to do was to get a passport, which I did, and went to the, my mother took me to the company and I got my ticket and so forth and that was all I had to do.

GUMB: Yeah. Did you have to go to the American consulate?

JOHNSON: Yes. You had to go to the American consulate.

GUMB: And what did you have to do there?

JOHNSON: That's where you got your passport, from the consulate.

GUMB: Okay, um, okay. Um, do you remember how much the voyage cost?

JOHNSON: No. ( she laughs ) I don't know how much the voyage cost, but I know I had two hundred and something dollars on me, because I had to give it to the person when I got on the ship.

GUMB: Uh, you had two hundred dollars?

JOHNSON: That's right. Yeah.

GUMB: And you had to give that to . . .

JOHNSON: Well, yes, they give it to the person for safekeeping. You don't usually keep it on the ship.

GUMB: Okay. Um, uh, so you bought the ticket for the voyage. Uh, what was your exit port? What, where did you leave from?

JOHNSON: I left from Bridgetown, and I came into, I think it was Hoboken, New Jersey, that I, the ship landed in Hoboken, New Jersey.

GUMB: Okay. Uh, well, could you tell us about the voyage?

JOHNSON: Well, the voyage. The first day I was all right, the second day I was all right, but the third day I was seasick, and I was in my room then until the fifth day and the nurse would come in and look at me and so forth and the fifth day she said, "Well, you've got to go upstairs and have lunch today." So I got dressed and I went upstairs and I had lunch. And then there were other, three other passengers with me, and they said, "Well, let us take a picture." So we went and we had the picture taken right there with the nurse and the other three that were at the table with me. Then I couldn't go back downstairs to supper that night because I was too sick. Yes, so I was, but I was sick on the ship, but I was taken care of, you know. I wasn't neglected.

GUMB: What class were you traveling?

JOHNSON: First.

GUMB: Okay. So the vessel, when the vessel first came to land, you know, came within sight of New York Harbor, do you remember your first impressions?

JOHNSON: No. All I wanted to do was to get off the ship and get to Boston. So I really did not look at anything. I was sick, as I told you, on the voyage over, so I didn't want to do anything but just get to where I was going, and that is to Boston. So really

I didn't look at any sights or anything.

GUMB: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

JOHNSON: No, I really don't. No.

GUMB: Okay. So the, the vessel docked in Hoboken.

JOHNSON: Hoboken, New Jersey. Yeah.

GUMB: Okay. And once it docked, what happened then?

JOHNSON: When it docked I could have gone ashore, but there wasn't anyone there to meet me. So I don't, I think it was either the nurse or, the nurse was there, but someone else, they said, "Well, we won't allow you to go to, like, unknown, to go ashore by yourself, so you wait here for a few moments and we'll take you into, um, Ellis Island." So they took me to Ellis Island, and then from there there was a Traveler's Aid Society, and they took me in hand from there and put me on the train to Boston. And at that time there was a strike on the train. The train left a four o'clock in the evening and I didn't get to Boston until two o'clock in the morning the next morning. So when I got to Boston then the Traveler's Aid Society was there waiting for me also, and they took me in their office in Boston and called my cousin and she came and got me then, but I was with them until my cousin came and collected me.

GUMB: So, how did you get from the Hoboken pier to Ellis Island?

JOHNSON: Um, I was taken there, I don't know how. I really don't remember how, but I know I was taken from Hoboken, New Jersey to Ellis Island. How, I really don't know.

GUMB: Do you remember . . .

JOHNSON: I don't remember.

GUMB: Do you remember who took you?

JOHNSON: ( she laughs ) I really don't know either. I don't remember who took me there, but I know that they, um, I was taken there.

GUMB: And, uh, you were taken there because . . .

JOHNSON: Because there was no one there to receive me on the ship. So they took me to, um, Ellis Island, as I said, then, to the Traveler's Aid. And they got, uh, my ticket to Boston.

GUMB: Right. You might have said before but I don't remember. Why wasn't anyone there to meet you?

JOHNSON: I don't now why my cousin wasn't there, but she wasn't there.

GUMB: You didn't ask her later?

JOHNSON: Well, I . . . ( she laughs ) I really don't remember, but she wasn't there. No one was there to meet me. I think she did say, if I remember correctly, something about a friend of hers that lived in New York, because she lived in Boston. And a friend of hers in New York was supposed to have come to the ship to take me and they didn't show up. So that's why there was no one there to meet me, and that's why I had to go to Ellis Island.

GUMB: How did you feel at that point?

JOHNSON: Uh ( she laughs ) how did I feel? Terrible. That's why I didn't really look at anything. Nothing interested me at that point but getting to Boston where I wanted to go, you know.

GUMB: How did people treat you? What . . .

JOHNSON: Very nice, very nice. I was treated very nice on the ship and, as I said, when I went to Ellis Island I was treated nicely there. The Traveler's Aid just took me in hand and took me on the train.

GUMB: Okay. So once you were on Ellis Island, uh, do you recall at all where they took you or what it looked like, what your impressions of the place were at all?

JOHNSON: No. I was primarily interested only in getting from where I was there to Boston, and to look around to see sights or anything. I don't remember anything like that, no.

GUMB: Do you have any impression of Traveler's Aid, you know, what it looked like, or . . .

JOHNSON: Well, they just had a booth, as it was, set up in Ellis Island, seemed as though they were there for that purpose, to send folks that didn't have anyone with them, to put them on the train, because there were no planes running at that time. You had to have a train. So they had the booth there set up and they took me from the e to the Traveler's Aid Society.

GUMB: Do you have any recollection of where that booth was?

JOHNSON: No.

GUMB: In relation to the ferry?

JOHNSON: No. ( break in tape )

GUMB: Okay. So we were talking about the Traveler's Aid booth. Um, you

don't have any recollection of where it was, or . . .

JOHNSON: No. It seemed to me as though it was right there on Ellis Island, and I don't remember going to Manhattan or the Battery to get a train. It seemed as though I got a train from right in Hoboken there, from Ellis Island.

GUMB: Uh, a train to Boston.

JOHNSON: Yes. I don't remember a ferry at all.

GUMB: But as far as Ellis Island itself, uh, how long did you spend there? Do you have any idea how much time it took?

JOHNSON: Um, it was quite a while, because it must have been about noontime when I was taken to Ellis Island, and the train didn't leave for Boston until four. But I was with the Traveler's Aid at that time. But it seemed as though the Traveler's Aid was in Ellis Island.

GUMB: Four o'clock in the afternoon?

JOHNSON: Yes. I remember leaving at four, and I didn't get into Boston until two o'clock the next day.

GUMB: Uh, as far as Traveler's Aid, what sort of, do you remember anything about the people who helped you, you know, what they were like or what they, what sort of people they were?

JOHNSON: Well, they were people like the Salvation Army, folks that were designated just for that purpose. And they made you feel comfortable until you could get on your, um, 'cause I was there talking with them quite a lot, until I was ready to board the plane, the train, at four o'clock.

GUMB: Were you speaking English?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

GUMB: That's, in the West Indies, that's the, that's the language?

JOHNSON: Yes. English is the . . .

GUMB: So that wasn't a problem.

JOHNSON: Oh, no. Because Barbados is called Little England. It's an English colony.

GUMB: Was money a problem at this point, or . . .

JOHNSON: Problem to whom?

GUMB: As far as your traveling on and . . .

JOHNSON: No. I had money, so that was no problem.

GUMB: Had you already bought a railroad ticket, or . . .

JOHNSON: Well, no. I gave them, the Traveler's Aid, the money for my railroad ticket. They just saw that I got on the train, that was their mission. Since I was alone and didn't know where to go or how to get train tickets or anything, they got my ticket and put me on the train to Boston.

GUMB: I see. Okay.

JOHNSON: They were only intermediaries, not to give me anything, because I didn't need anything.

GUMB: Do you have any recollection of if there were other people in Ellis Island at this, when you were there?

JOHNSON: Yeah, there were a lot of people walking in Ellis Island at the time, yeah.

GUMB: What did they look like?

JOHNSON: Back and forth, they were just going back and forth from one place to the other.

GUMB: What sort of people were they, what were they like?

JOHNSON: Travelers. Because it seemed as though Ellis Island was just for travelers, people who came from abroad the island.

GUMB: Right. Were they immigrants, or, I mean, did you have any impression of what sort of people they were that were there or anything?

JOHNSON: No. It seemed as though they were just people traveling.

GUMB: Okay. Uh, do you recall, uh, where the, how you got from Ellis Island to the railroad station.

JOHNSON: No. ( she laughs ) As I say, it seemed to me as though I walked from Ellis Island to the station. It didn't seem as though the train was very far. The station was far from Ellis Island? So I really don't know. That's why I asked you are there trains on Ellis Island, near to Ellis Island.

GUMB: No.

JOHNSON: No?

GUMB: It's an island, so there isn't any, isn't any trains at all. So, finally you made your way to the railroad station somehow and, and, uh, . . .

JOHNSON: The Traveler's Aid took me to the station.

GUMB: Someone accompanied you?

JOHNSON: Yes. Someone, Traveler's Aid took me to the station, got my ticket and saw that I got on the plane [sic] and spoke to the conductor, telling the conductor they wanted, they wanted them to see that I got to Boston safely.

GUMB: Okay. Was there a charge for this service?

JOHNSON: No, no. They're just good Samaritans, it seems. And do they have them now?

GUMB: Yeah, yeah. There is a Traveler's Aid Society, yeah, sure.

JOHNSON: And do they charge people for that service?

GUMB: No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

JOHNSON: No. I think it's a service that they render on their own.

GUMB: Were you carrying a lot of baggage at this point?

JOHNSON: No. One suitcase.

GUMB: Uh, just, only one?

JOHNSON: That's right.

GUMB: Was this, were you planning on just a short visit, or was this a, were you planning on immigrating?

JOHNSON: I was planning on if I didn't like it well enough I was going back. ( she laughs ) But I got used to it, and that's why I'm still here.

GUMB: Okay. So once you arrived in the, uh, do you remember anything about the train trip to Boston?

JOHNSON: Yes. I thought I would never get to Boston. I told you, we left at four and I got in at two. There was a strike, and they stopped at everyone's back door and started again when they felt like it. And every time they stopped I'd ask, they got sick of me, I'd ask, "Are we in Boston yet?" Every stop I'd ask if we were in Boston, and they told me how far we were from Boston and then I gave up. Thought I would never get to Boston. But it did take me from four in the evening until two in the morning to get to Boston.

GUMB: What were, when you arrived in the railroad station, what were your first impressions?

JOHNSON: In the railroad to come to Boston?

GUMB: Or when you arrived in Boston, what were your first impressions of the new place?

JOHNSON: Well, when I got to Boston it was two o'clock in the morning and there weren't any people really around, just in the station. There was, uh, the same setup for the Traveler's Aid, and I was taken to the Traveler's Aid by someone on the train, I don't know if it was the conductor or whom, but someone took me to the Traveler's Aid station there, also, because that was what they were told, to see that I got to the Traveler's Aid station in Boston. So they delivered me to the Traveler's Aid in Boston there. Then the Traveler's Aid, in turn, called my cousin and they came over and got me.

GUMB: Right, right. Well, once you had gotten in, once you had settled in

Boston, uh, what were the difficult aspects of, were there difficulties in adjusting to the new country?

JOHNSON: Well, yes. There were difficulties, because everything was altogether different, but I adjusted.

GUMB: How was, you mentioned the living in an apartment versus living in a house. Were there other ways that it was different?

JOHNSON: Well, the way was, um, as I said, when you're accustomed to living that you can walk around the house and then going in an apartment, but that was the way how it was and that's the way it was, so I just fell into it.

GUMB: What did you start? Did you go to school, or start working, or what?

JOHNSON: Yes. I started to work when I came over here. I couldn't go to work right away because I wasn't old enough, I'd have to get a permit up to seventeen years, so I, um, was seventeen then in the October, so I went to work.

GUMB: What did you start doing?

JOHNSON: The first day, a friend of my, um, cousin's was, um, used to go up to a place in New Hampshire in the summertime, the Overnight Porches, it was called, and she used to wait up there in the summer, so she took me up there with her in the summer. I stayed for about, um, six weeks. And then when I came back I went to work, too, um, Jordan Marsh's, a store in Boston, here. And I worked at Jordan Marsh's until I got married in 1929.

GUMB: Uh, what were you doing in the department store?

JOHNSON: Uh, elevator operator.

GUMB: Oh. And how did you get that job?

JOHNSON: How did I get the job?

GUMB: Yeah, was that a friend of, uh, your cousins?

JOHNSON: No, I went with a friend up to the Overnight [ph] Porches [ph] in New Hampshire.

GUMB: Oh, for a vacation.

JOHNSON: Yes. And when I came back in the fall, they needed, um, I saw it in the paper. Yes, so I went to work for Jordan Marsh's.

GUMB: Was there some problem getting that job not being a citizen?

JOHNSON: No, no.

GUMB: Didn't matter. So how long did it take before you could become a citizen?

JOHNSON: Eh, when did I become a citizen? I don't remember if I became a citizen. After I married I became a citizen. I got married in '29. I think I was a citizen in 1930. My husband was a citizen, so I got citizenship from his papers.

GUMB: Uh, did you feel like you were closing a door on Barbados when you became a citizen, on the West Indies?

JOHNSON: No, no, no, because then I could always go back, and I wasn't, no, I wasn't closing any doors.

GUMB: Did you, you didn't hesitate about becoming a citizen.

JOHNSON: No, not at all. And I wanted my children to be citizens anyhow, so I had to become a citizen before I had the children, so that

they would be citizens automatically.

GUMB: Right. Did you find it hard to adjust to the food?

JOHNSON: No. Not at all. It was nice because I had two sets of food, then. I had the American food and I had my own. So I was quite ( she laughs ), it was quite nice.

GUMB: Okay. Um, let's see. Okay, Mrs. Johnson, you were talking about landing on Hoboken and getting on the firm ground at that point. What were you about to say about it?

JOHNSON: No, you were asking me if, what was my impression of Ellis Island, but I said I didn't have any impression on it because all I was worried about, and I was glad that I was off the ship, and I just wanted to get to Boston as quickly as I can. But to look around to see the surroundings, I wasn't really interested in the surroundings. I was primarily interested in getting to Boston.

GUMB: Right, right. Uh, when you were on the vessel, you were traveling first class. Did you have any sense of how first class differed from the other classes?

JOHNSON: Yes, the first class, on those ships, you can travel all over the ship, you can go all over. But in the other classes, they couldn't come up to the quarter deck or anything. That's the difference in first class and the other classes. You can go all over the ship in the first class, walk all over downstairs, down, wherever you want to go. But the others can only stay in their particular sphere.

GUMB: Do you remember if there was a steerage area, you know, where people were traveling steerage on that boat?

JOHNSON: I really don't. I never heard of the steerage, I don't know about steerage. What is steerage?

GUMB: That's the, uh, area in the bottom of the boat, where people who didn't have any money traveled.

JOHNSON: Oh, I see. That's why they couldn't come up to the other part of the ship, they had to stay down.

GUMB: Right. I guess they had to stay down. So, when you came into Hoboken, um, uh, you had to go through some kind of immigration and customs procedures. Uh, do you have any memories of that, whether it happened on the boat, whether they checked your passport on the boat, or at the dock, or how that was done. Do you have any recollection of that?

JOHNSON: No, really, I don't remember where, if it was done on Ellis Island or on the boat. I really don't remember.

GUMB: Um, was the fact that you traveled first class, was that a, was it a deliberate thing that you, you, you . . .

JOHNSON: Yes, my parents wanted me to travel first class.

GUMB: Do you know if they were aware of the immigration procedures and if they, they . . .

JOHNSON: I really don't know if they were aware of that or not but, uh, I, they wanted me, and they paid my passage, for first class. So that's what it was.

GUMB: Right. Okay. Okay, uh, well, as far as your life in the new country, uh, can you, can you tell us how the, uh, how your new life has compared to your expectations of it when you were in Barbados?

You know, how the reality has compared to what you were expecting?

JOHNSON: Well, over in the States, as you know, there are a lot of things that you don't have in the Islands. A lot of, the roads, for instance, of course, they're larger now than they were then, but everything is so much more than over there. Stores, for instance. Over there they don't usually, in my day they didn't, you couldn't go to the store and have things done. We had to have them, we had the dressmaker that made our clothes. In the States you can go to the stores and pick up what you want. That is some of the differences over here that they didn't have over there.

GUMB: Right. Were there any customs that you brought from the Islands and continued to,uh, practice in this country?

JOHNSON: No. The only customs that I kept was some of the dishes that we do over there. I fix them over here.

GUMB: Any special celebrations or any kind of events or anything that, you know, Christmas celebrations?

JOHNSON: Well, Christmas is Christmas all around, but we don't have Thanksgiving in the West Indies. We have a day in June, that's the Queen's birthday, and you usually have, then we have another day in November they call Guy Fawkes Day, and that's the day that we have our firecrackers and so forth, not on the Fourth of July, Guy Fawkes Day, November 6th, I think it is.

GUMB: Uh, you were, this whole time on the vessel you were traveling alone, you were a sixteen-year-old girl traveling alone. Did anybody ever suggest that you needed a chaperon?

JOHNSON: No. Well, the nurse, she took hold of me from the time I went on the ship. That's why she was with me, there in the picture.

GUMB: Oh, I thought that was because you were sick.

JOHNSON: Yes, ut when I went, yes, well, I was sick the second day out. The first day I was fine, but the second day when I took sick and then she came over and chaperoned me all around the ship. I was around with her, and she took me around the ship in different places and so forth.

GUMB: Okay. This is the end of side one. This is the end of the interview with Mrs. Ida Johnson.