

NPS-13/BERT WALKER

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TRINIDAD (BORN BARBADOS), 1948,

AGE UNKNOWN

MODE OF TRAVEL TO THE U.S. NOT RECORDED

NASH: Today I have the pleasure of visiting with Mr. Bert Walker who is the head of the West Indian News Service. Mr. Walker is also involved in public relations in the Caribbean area. He is also involved in the bringing of talent and representing the culture of the West Indies within the United States. Mr. Walker, every year, is involved with the Caribbean Festival held at Madison Square Garden. In addition, he is also building a home for girls in St. Vincent, West Indies and today Mr. Walker is going to describe something of his own experience as an immigrant from the West Indies to the United States and tell us something about the West Indies. Mr. Walker, where were you born?

WALKER: I was born in Barbados, grew up in Trinidad, about the most beautiful island in the Caribbean, now a country taken over in 1964 from the British. The population of Trinidad now is about one million. It was not that much when I left there in 1948 and, of course, my reason for leaving there was to further my studies in technicolor photography. Of course, I changed courses after reaching the United States and found myself taking a pre-dental course at New York University. Then, of course, I branched off to journalism, my first love and that is what I stuck with and now I am head of my public relations firm here on Fifth Avenue.

NASH: Mr. Walker, could you describe something of the culture of the West Indies.

WALKER: Well, as many people, especially in the metropolitan area might know, we have a very rich culture. We in Trinidad, we are responsible for calypso music, steel band music, which is about the newest type of performed music you have today and also limbo dancing which everybody tries to do sometime or another. Now I remember as a youngster in Trinidad that the thing

that I liked most was carnival time. This, of course, starts about two weeks before Lent and climaxes the two days before Ash Wednesday, that's Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. And during that period it seems as though everyone is out in costume and dancing to the tunes of the calypso music and so on, and this is what we call our carnival time. However, many, many visitors are misled by the gaiety around this period and they think that this mentality, this carnival mentality continues throughout the year. But we have our serious problems like everywhere else in the United States and Europe and other places, housing, unemployment and many, many other things. We, of course, have a rich country, though small, because we have raw material such as asphalt, oil and we also have a great amount of cocoa, sugar. But the question is whether it is utilized to the benefit of the people. In spite of, for example, in spite of oil being drilled in Trinidad and gas being refined there, the people there have to pay about eighty-five to ninety cents per gallon of gas. This, along with other inequalities, have made it very hard, the cost of living very high for the average person. Now, when I came here, when I left Trinidad in 1948, of course

one of my motives, as I said before, was to go to school and return to Trinidad, but having found many more opportunities here, I decided to stay in the United States. Now the United States, of course, I have had my problems here, too. Everything was not rosy and I had rainy days and I had some days with sunshine, but in all, I would say that I worked hard and I was never afraid of work and it has paid off.

NASH: What would you say is the special problem? Are there any special problems peculiar to the adjustment of people from the West Indies to the United States or do they have any special advantages?

WALKER: Well, I don't know about the advantages, but I know about the problems. We speak English, of course, and that is not a barrier, the language is not a barrier. However, coming to the United States, as you realize, most, if not all of the people who migrate from the West Indies to the United States, are black and of course, they suffer the same fate, if I may call it so, as any other black person; hard to find a job even though they might be qualified and so on. Of course, I have had personal experiences about that. But

rather than talk about things that people would know commonly what happens to the black man which the West Indian is, I would rather say that the West Indian problem was unique, because having left the West Indies, most of the people who left there were skilled people, qualified, and in coming here, it was a manner of frustration because, to begin with they had high hopes of making it right away and this, of course, you must blame on the people who returned there on visit and giving the people back there the impression that they are doing so well and all they have to do is come here and start picking up money in the street, you know. But most of us when we reach here and we realize that we had to work hard for it, we didn't mind that, but the frustrating part of it was that we couldn't get the jobs that we were qualified to do so we had to take other menial jobs which, of course, and in a way served as an experience, not a pleasant one but an experience nonetheless. Then, of course, as far as advantages are concerned, somehow the West Indian allowed himself, I don't know if I would call it an advantage. Some people do, I personally don't think it is an advantage because the West Indian in many respects has been placed in a special category as

a special black man. I don't go along with this, I don't agree with it, but there are those who have reaped a lot of benefits from this fact.

NASH: Could you describe this special category? What are its features?

WALKER: Socially, the West Indian has been accepted by whites somewhat and were told that they were different from the black Americans. This, I personally do not accept, but others have and still are accepting this. I would rather personally be accepted as an individual, regardless of color. Now about the migration of West Indians to the United States, I would like to say this much. Even the United States government has used discriminatory moves. I am referring in special reference to the Walter-McCarran Act of 1952. They made it specially hard on West Indians. In fact, we are definitely sure that it was designed to curb immigration of West Indians to the United States because, before then, every West Indian came to the United States on a British quota which was so enormous that it was almost unlimited. In 1952, the Walter McCarran Act stated that the West Indians,

even though the countries were not independent, they were still under British control, part of the British empire, a special quota was designed for the West Indies, limited. This, of course, curbed immigration of the West Indians to the United States. We fought, of course. It was futile and, of course, over the years we gained a few things such as amendments here and there, but it never returned to the British quota or anything similar to what we had before which, by the way, is the quota which I came on, the British quota. Now these amendments, of course, had to do with first, second, third, and fourth preference and so on, husband and wife and children being the first reference and sister and mother and so on in second and this refers to, of course, if you were here as an American citizen and bringing in your family and so on. But then, of course, it reached the point where it was eased up and the skilled people were allowed to come in if they could prove that they had a job waiting for them. That in itself was not a very workable situation because how is somebody going to employ you without knowing you, but, of course, it worked much better than we thought it would work. So actually the West Indian, who has contributed, or I

should say West Indians have--I should make the statement first that West Indians have definitely contributed to the economic and the social and everything I would say to the advantage of this country.

NASH: I would like you to go into it a little bit. Could you name some people in particular and what their contributions were?

WALKER: Well, there are many, many West Indians who have contributed quite a bit, but I think it would be proper to mention Marcus Garvey first, because Marcus Garvey, even though he was ahead of his time, has contributed so much to America that even now, many years after his death, what he predicted and what he fought for, these things are now being materialized. Now he came here in 1917 and he started the "Universal Negro Improvement Association" between 1917 and 1920.

This, in thinking in terms of that day without the aid of television and radio and Marcus Garvey developed, or organized, I should say, over one million black people in this country throughout the United States. And, of course, he has been very

successful -- during the period that he had the organization, during the peak years -- he was responsible for capitalizing, though it may seem very insignificant, capitalizing the word Negro. He also, of course, this was after he failed to get people, black people to call himself black. Of course, we are seeing that today.

NASH: Well what is this significance of capitalizing the word "Negro?"

WALKER: Well this was more a psychological thing I think on the part of Marcus Garvey, because one of the things that he was trying to do was to make the Negro proud of himself and he found that there was no pride. In fact, there was very little pride among black people and the West Indian who was very proud was not copied -- his attitude or, of course, I don't think you really can transfer pride from one person to the other. It is an inborn thing. And, of course, the black American at that time rather than join the black West Indian, he laughed at him and called him such names as "Monkey Chasers" and made songs on him and so on and there were sketches in the theaters, the

comedians made jokes on stage about the West Indian and his habits and, of course, he was a prudent fellow, so he saved a few more coloreds in the American and he was called the cheap, very cheap. Every West Indian was known as a cheapskate, you see. But Marcus Garvey, going back to Marcus Garvey, Marcus Garvey instilled pride. Not only in West Indians but in black Americans and started, in fact, all of the movements, Malcolm X, what have you, that we know of today, actually started with Marcus Garvey back in 1920, early '20s. And, of course, he had his assistants and the help that he had was not capable. They were very unskilled people, not trained in any particular area and they were given jobs to do that they obviously could not do. So in the end Marcus Garvey was disgraced and deported. But what he did during those years remained here and, of course, I can go on for a whole day and describe what Marcus Garvey has done.

NASH: Where was he deported to?

WALKER: He went to England. He went to Jamaica first and then he went and settled in England. And he went back to

Jamaica. In fact, he died in England and now there is a big monument in Jamaica. They have a Marcus Garvey Square and so on, and while he did not live to see many of his ideas work, they are working today. And, in fact, they are developing rapidly the name black, people who now accept the name black. That was started with Marcus Garvey. He also introduced this Afro-American concept, Afro-West Indian concept and, in fact, he was way ahead of his time. Many, many people, historians especially, agree that he was way ahead of his time. If you were to read about Marcus Garvey today you would wonder when you imagined what it really was like in 1920 where you couldn't, the black man couldn't even get on the bus or the train, you know, you wonder how he was able to do so much in that day. But he succeeded quite rich, he succeeded in buying a few ships. He had a shipping line.

NASH: Where did he get the money? He got it from the people, is that right?

WALKER: Yes, their people bought shares and, of course, with their hard-earned money. Money, of course, was very scarce among Black people at that time. But they

believed in him and they trusted him and there are people today who proudly -- in fact, I know this for sure because this has been shown to me -- shares that were bought in the Black Star Line. People still keep them now as a mark of pride and they show them off. They are worthless, very worthless. Marcus Garvey is dead, the shipping line is long gone, but they are still very proud to show off their shares that they bought in the Black Star Line.

NASH: Could you describe what, if any, cultural exchange has gone on between the West Indies and the American society or what Black American society? I think you already did describe one, of course, the effect of Marcus Garvey on the politics and the psychological and every aspect of Black society. Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

WALKER: Yes. In addition to Marcus Garvey, of course, going back to before the Second World War. In fact, just after the first World War when you had an influx of West Indians to the United States, especially the New York area, the metropolitan area, Harlem was then white and no black people lived beyond 96th Street.

Well, this was a peculiar thing for the West Indian, not being restricted in the West Indies in this manner. The black American, of course, was accepting this. The West Indian could not so he decided to do something about it and, of course, there were several riots, fistfights and what have you.

NASH: Between who?

WALKER: Between the black and West Indian, the West Indian who was black and the whites. Then the black American joined in and they decided that if they wanted to be free and walk on any street that they wanted to walk - - this, of course, seems ridiculous today -- but I was told in my search that there was a fire house on 96th Street.

NASH: A fire house did you say?

WALKER: Fire house where black people could not go beyond the fire house on that side of the street. I don't remember whether it was east or west, but that was as far as they could go and they decided, they got together, West Indians and black Americans and decided

that they would fight their way through to the other side and they did. Of course, that reminds me of a man who was also West Indian. He is dead now, several years. H.B. Austin - and Austin was a seaman and he decided to get off the ship, of course, and live in New York City. And he know a lot of seamen. He was looking for a type of hotel, a small hotel, and couldn't find any of them that was a suitable house for this, and he had a white lawyer who was a friend of his, and through the lawyer he bought a house on 126th Street which, of course, was white. That area was white at the time. And Austin, of course, his white neighbors were very upset when he moved in and he took advantage of this. And he encouraged his boarders to play on the guitar and sing calypso songs all night to run the whites. It worked, because the white neighbors had their houses up for sale by the morning and Austin, of course, again bought the houses and they were glad to get rid of the houses so he got them at a very good price. And he became the first -- I don't know about the first black millionaire, but I know about the first West Indian millionaire in Harlem. And this is one of the stories about how Harlem turned from white to black. (laughter)

NASH: Let's go the other way now. What effect has American culture and also black cultures, had on the West Indies?

WALKER: Well, as you would realize, quite a bit. Living in a country you don't know at what point you are accepting the culture of the country in which you live, but this is one of the reasons why the West Indian, I think more so than any other immigrant in this country has sold himself short as far as information is concerned. There is very little information on the West Indian because he has blended into the American society. He does not think really that his culture should be maintained or he doesn't believe strongly enough in maintaining his culture, I should say, because even though he thinks of the West Indies, he returns to the West Indies on vacation and so on, he does not do very much in the line -- lets' say literature, for instance, or even supporting the local papers that, for instance, carry news from home. I know this because I started the first, I published the first West Indian newspaper in this country from 1958 until 1962 during the West Indies Federation, and I was very

surprised that I did not get the support from the many hundreds of thousands of West Indians living in the metropolitan area. Of course, I got some support, but not half as much as I anticipated and throughout the years, for instance, if you were to go to the Shomberg Collection where you have data on most black people --

NASH: Where is this?

WALKER: The Shomberg Collection on 135th Street, West 135th Street. And you will find that it is hard to get books and so on the West Indies. There are very few. Of course, again this proves that West Indian literature is hard to come by because of lack of support of West Indians. And sometimes we have exhibitions and so on that are not well-attended. In fact, the only successful portrayal of West Indian culture is the "Caribbean Festival" and I think that is mainly so because we have starring there "Mighty Spara," who is very well-known and a very good performer and so on, so actually I doubt very much if the people come to see him or come to the Caribbean Festival because of the culture. They come to see a good performance. I say that because any time you

have an exhibition or anything like this, it is poorly attended, and exhibitions, of course, tell people about the culture of the country from where these things are being exhibited.

NASH: Do you see any possibility of things occurring this way from what you said about Marcus Garvey? In other words, Marcus Garvey, a West Indian, came to this country with the pride of his own background and affected indigenous Americans, black people, to develop their own pride in their own background and perhaps now the movements among American blacks to go back to their roots, do you think that will somehow have an affect on West Indians to go back to theirs? Do you see any development in that direction? I mean, to get in touch with their own culture and feel more connectedness with it.

WALKER: Oh well, don't get me wrong. I am not saying that West Indians have abandoned their culture and because maybe I am a little too ambitious in that area. I am all for West Indian culture, I am all for portraying West Indian culture, but there are those who will say that we are doing enough. I personally don't think we

are doing half as much as we should be doing and again we do not get the support and if you don't get the support, it does not encourage people to do things when they know they are not going to be supported. However, I see West Indians having no alternative in years to come, if you want a prediction. I see West Indians being caught up in the wave of progress, you have no way to go but the way the wave is going. And they will be forced, because everybody else is looking for identity and the West Indian will have to in the near future think of himself first as a West Indian. You know, this is my native land, this is my culture, I'm going to develop it, I'm going to do all I can to show the world that I have a culture, which is very important. Of course, the difference between the West Indian say and the European is that the European realizes the importance of maintaining, portraying and improving or doing whatever have you to put the spotlight on its culture. The West Indian has not yet realized the importance of how -- the part, the important part that culture can play, the portrayal of culture can play. And when he, of course, as I said I hope he doesn't wait until its is forced upon him. I hope he will voluntarily go out there and do it. But,

of course, there are those people again who will say, "What do you want us to do? We are portraying our culture, we have a West Indian Day parade on Labor Day," and so on and so on. That is not what I am thinking of. And this is one side of it. We masquerade on Labor Day and we make some very fine costumes, we play our calypso tunes and so on and enjoy ourselves. But there are other things. There are fine artists and painters and writers and we have a very, very good playwright from Trinidad. In fact, he was born in Cualcert, he was born in St. Lucia, and he now lives in Trinidad and he has had many plays here. I doubt very much if many West Indians went to see these plays. So, these are the areas, the different areas that I am thinking of where West Indians can show evidence of how they would like to improve their culture. Of course, I must give credit to the West Indians in Hartford, Connecticut who have been doing a very, very good job in maintaining and again portraying their culture and doing everything possible to improve the lot of the West Indians in that area. They have been doing a wonderful job. But, as you know, the bulk of the West Indians, the West Indians have been scattered. They are people who

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-- they are not gypsies but they are scattered all over the United States.

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BEGINNING SIDE TWO

NASH: Mr. Walker, do you have any concluding statements?

WALKER: Yes, of course, as you know, West Indians are very law-abiding people, but there are those things among other things that we are responsible for that because we are not very good at singing our own praises. Other people don't know the many things that we have contributed to the American society.

NASH: Thank you very much Mr. Walker.

WALKER: There are other things I'd like to go into, time permitted, but I am sure there are a lot of people...