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FREDI DUNDEE (FREDA SILVER)

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NASH: July 30, 1974. I am speaking with Miss Fredi Dundee who grew up in Dundee, Scotland and came to the United States in 1957. I met Miss Dundee at the YWC-- HA and I overheard this delightful Scottish brogue and now we are going to find out her story. Tell us about Dundee.

DUNDEE: Well, Dundee is a city. It's the third city in Scotland. It has about one hundred seventy-five thousand people. Since I left maybe one person less, but it's situated on the River Tay and Dundee is proud of its one and only volcano, extinct, and we all live, you know, all the houses are clustered on the volcano and we live on the water side. And it's just a very, very nice city. It's a working class city. It's a women's town where a lot of women did

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the weaving and the men stayed at home and looked after the kids. It's very famous for its flax and jute and had a lot of connection with Bombay in India because they used to make the jute bags. And seemingly, one of the books that I was reading about Dundee, the Dundee jute covered the covered wagons when they went across the United States with all their oxen and all the cows and the cowboys went across there. That was Dundee flax. That was on those, what do you call them, the horse and buggies. Or, when you went a--. Yes, the wagons, the covered wagons. The flax was very, very strong. That's what Dundee is famous for, its flax. But, now it has NCR, National Cash Register, it has Timex Watches, and it has factories, now so therefore the men and the women are working. Not only the women work. But I can remember when I only saw crowds of women going to the factories in the morning and the whistles blew and the women going to work. It was a woman's town, a hard working women's town. It was a poor town, but now it's thriving just a little bit. We're very poor, you know, in Scotland.

NASH: How did it happen that the women went to the factories and the men stayed home?

DUNDEE: Well, see the women were trained in flax work and factory work and, you know, nimble fingers, and it's -- was really a women's town. The women worked and the men were on the dole, you know, looking after the babies. They didn't have them, but that's how it was.

NASH: Could you describe the effect on just what it was like? Was it really a woman's society? Did the women control more of power in the society? Did they have positions of importance in the government?

DUNDEE: No, no. It's --I guess it's, you know, it's an ordinary government governed

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by our Lord Provost. It's like your Mayor Beame now. We have a Lord Provost and he lives in a very, very nice house in Dundee, and he was the boss at the time. But the women were just ordinary poor workers. The salt of the earth, you know, are the workers, and these are the women with their songs, their weaving songs, and their hard backgrounds. And they were very clean women and their children were clean. It's a very, very clean town, Dundee. You may have nothing to eat, but everybody scrubs and polishes and it's very clean. But as far as government and women having a say, I doubt it, no. It's a man's town as bad as that?

NASH: And did they -- oh, and they did all the cleaning at home?

DUNDEE: Yeah, the women -- the women do everything, yes, yes. I mean, you do everything because of what the neighbors say. You think of your neighbors in Dundee because it's such a small community, really. Everybody knows you. As a matter of fact, I stopped traffic when I wore outlandish clothes. To me it's nothing, but in Dundee they stop you and they look at you and they say f- a mess, what a mess or whatever and they have their comments and it's very nice. I like it.

NASH: What did your family do?

DUNDEE: Well, my father was an ordinary worker. He was a commercial salesman, and he earned an ordinary poor salary and was able to provide for his two children, but all his life he was in show business. He loved the theater. When he -- he came from Glasgow and he met my mother in Aberdeen. But all his life he was an amateur entertainer. He tap danced, he was a magician. He started off some very famous magicians in Scotland. He played the banjo and the ukulele and the flute and he was a tap dancer and singer. He was absolutely --- he was everything but he never really earned

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his money as is, but that was his love. And all during the war he put on shows for the poor factory workers in Dundee and midnight shows to keep up the spirits. He was very, very much loved in Dundee and a very, very jolly man, a redhead with a red moustache.

And during the war he was a policeman. You know what a special constable is? That was his war effort in Dundee. He was part of the police. He died a long time ago. But he was very nice. Very, very. And my mother was a frustrated comedienne so she took a back step when she met my father in Aberdeen. They had a piano in my mother's house in Aberdeen and my father, who was a commercial traveler, met my mother up there. So she said come on home and play the piano and he did and they fell in love and then went to the big city eventually, Dundee. And that's where my sister was born and I was born there.

NASH: Well, tell us something about your--well, (laughs) what happened between then and when you went to the United States?

DUNDEE: Well, I grew up in Scotland. I went to school there. I was a very, very bad student, would never study. So, therefore, I hardly ever passed any exams. I was always out playing with the boys. I was a tomboy. And I think the happiest day, when I was fourteen, is when I left school. When my father died I thought I'd have to earn the living for the family, so I left school, which was fantastic. And I went to work for my uncle who had a business there. And my sister worked too until she went to university when she was eighteen. But I went to work for my uncle's wholesale warehouse and I met people. I met all sorts of Indian peddlers and hawkers working, beggars, and people selling combs. So therefore it was a very interesting experience for me until one day there was an ad in the newspapers that they were looking for photography retouchers at a picture postcard factory

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in Dundee.

And I didn't know anything about photography or retouching or this kind of art. Now I had gone to art school all this time in Dundee. I was painting boats and going to lectures and drawing and I was always very, very artistic. Anyway, I applied for this job at this factory in Dundee and I brought the samples of my sculpture, my paintings or whatever, and before I knew what happened I was called a photographic retoucher for Valentines of Dundee, and thank goodness I stayed a few years there. If it hadn't been for this-- you know-- profession, I don't know what I'd have done in New York because this is what I have been doing all this time in photography, being a photographic retoucher, but doing it more to a refined point, and learning an awful lot in New York.

But I grew up in Dundee and when I was pretty young, just in the early twenties, I went for a vacation to London to spend it with my sister and it was such a fantastic experience, I stayed there for two years. That was my -- I said goodbye to Dundee more or less. Of course, I went going ba-- I went back to Dundee more or less all the time. But I stayed in London for two years and I became a folk singer there just -- just for fun and met a group of people. And I was having a very, very good time in London. I was doing my profession, working as a photographic retoucher, which was fine thanks to Valentines. I always went back and thanked the people there for helping me with this profession. Otherwise I don't know what I'd do.

So, during my time in London I met some Israeli students and one said he was going to Israel for -- you know, to see his family. And I said, "Gee, for two pence I'd love to go to Israel too to be a farmer." So, I wrote and told my mother I wanted to go to Israel. So she said the only way I could go was by the proper route, by going by sea. I wanted to go by car with this

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person and go through all the countries, but she wouldn't let me go. So, in 1955 I sailed to Israel to be a farmer. I knew nothing about the land, I knew nothing. I never lifted a finger in the house because -- very spoiled. I didn't know anything about anything. But I thought I would have an experience. So, this office in London sent me to this kibbutz in Israel. They said they were going to be waiting for me at the port in Haifa and they were going to take me to this kibbutz near Jerusalem and I was going to go to school there and learn the language and work half a day. But when I got to Haifa in this old, old ramshackle boat, which I thought was the most beautiful boat in the whole world--to me it was romantic. It was the first time I had ever been in a big boat--and there was no one waiting for me.

So I was more or less like a refugee. So my first impact was with a microphone. I went to the lost and found and asked if anybody would want to claim me. But nobody came forward. So this girl who was in the next bunk on the ship, she took me home to her mother's house and I stayed overnight there. The next day I went off in a bus to this kibbutz, but it wasn't a very good experience for me. I didn't like this kibbutz in particular. So, I stayed there for about five weeks and I really worked very, very hard. I was up at six in the morning and I was scrubbing floors. I learned how to iron and I learned how to do the laundry, you know. Spoiled a few things in the making, but it was a very, very good experience for me.

And I went all over to different *kibbutzim* to see if I would really like to live in a kibbutz, but you know, it wasn't for me. And I ended up living in an artists' village there. And I was supposed to be sculpting there and drawing, but I played a guitar and I sang folk songs, and one evening I was there Warner Brothers came along and asked if I would make a little tourist movie for American television. I said, "Of course." So I was there, you know, talking about this artists' village, so it was very nice. During this

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time, at the artists' village, I met an American and we got on very, very well together, and he was a producer and he produced shows all over Israel, guitar festival. And I said, well I played the guitar a little bit, and I assisted him making those festivals in Israel. And we had guitar festivals and all over the place. And movie festivals and different kinds of festivals. And I went to visit sheiks to get a palace where everybody could stay and get Arab fishing boats for all the guitarists. It was really a fantastic experience.

And eventually, he said would I ever like to go America, and I said, well, gee, I never even thought I'd ever--to marry him, of course--would I ever think of going there. And I said it would be a fantastic experience. But I never thought I'd ever be there. So we were married in London with my family and we came to America and we came to Idlewild at the time, and it was 1957. And I came a very, very skinny, skinny girl to the United States. I stayed married for about six years but unfortunately we had, you know, we were divorced and that is the reason I came to the United States. And after I was divorced my mother said, "Come on home my wee baby, come on home." I said, "No, no, no." It's a fantastic experience. So I have been here all those years, working as a photographic retoucher, commercial artist. That's my bread and butter. And I think I have been having the most fantastic experience of my life just living here, doing the things that I do, because playing the guitar has brought me into contact with many, many different kinds of peoples and fantastic situations.

And I found myself in hospitals, entertaining poor people and sick people and dying people. Some very, very bad experiences, which has reminded of my father. And I have been to -- sent to Albans [ph] Naval Hospital. I have been to a prison. I have been to every different kind of place. So my guitar has really opened up the door for me. So, and it all happened as a

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mistake that I had been visiting a friend. And then just out of nothing to do with show business or anything like that, and he asked me if I knew Scottish songs. I said, "Yes, just the songs I learned when I was at school." He said, "Do you know any by Robert Burns?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Could you sing them?" And I sang a couple of songs by Robert Burns and he asked me if I would care to give a concert at the recital hall in Brooklyn Academy of Music. I said, "Gee, I have never sung in my life in front of anyone. I don't know if I could do it." But I did it and it was very nice. And we did about three concerts.

And then we did the life story of Robert Burns at the Masted [ph] Institute with all sorts of different actors, which was a very nice experience. And I got to do all my Scottish poetry that nobody else wanted to do; I was able to do it. So from that I have been singing and playing the guitar and spending about seven years in Greenwich Village in different coffee houses trying to be a comedienne. And sometimes, you know, it's very, very hard because you want to make the audience laugh and a lot of them cry. But I went to the comedy--there is comedy center here--and that's where I got some material from a writer. It's a comedy center where a lot of comedians go. Von Mieder [ph] is there, went there, and every big comedian that you can think of went to this comedy center. And I came there not knowing a thing about comedy and I spent one year at a coffee house in the Village called Feast Two, just learning how to sit on a stool and speak to people. At that time I didn't have any comedy material so I did my comedy on the American way of death and they told me I was depressing all the customers and I had to change my material, so I did. I brought a resume with me just in case you would like to ask me about a few things here. These are some of the things I have been doing if there is anything there that you see.

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NASH: One thing I wanted to ask you is where did you learn all the Scottish songs?
I mean at what point in your life did you learn all sorts of poetry and songs?

DUNDEE: Well, the only Scottish songs I ever learned were at school because I was never a folk singer or not even interested in that. So I just had to think up of all the songs that I knew and I was amazed that people were really interested in it. And I learned, you know, the Robert Burns poetry so when I did those programs I was only doing things that, you know, that I had learned. But I never -- I didn't have a fund of songs. In fact, maybe I started off with five and then I started to ten, you know, and learned more poetry. There is a lot of research here.

NASH: So you learned quite a bit here.

DUNDEE: Oh, definitely, definitely, yes. In Dundee I had never entertained in my life. And in London I had never really entertained. This is the only time I have ever entertained and it's fantastic. I always wanted to have the goal of to do things like my father. He was very well liked. He did everything. He wasn't good at everything, but he was an all around entertainer and that's what I would like to do. I'd like to entertain and I bring the American people my culture from Scotland about bonny Prince Charlie and Sir Harry Lauder--this is Scotland's most famous entertainer--and the poems of, you know, Robert Burns. And I talk about, you know, different -- different people, sing love songs and do comedy songs and so I have a repertory.

(phone ringing, voices)

NASH: Do you go back to visit?

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DUNDEE: All the time, yes. In fact, I am going back in two weeks. I am going back, yes, to see my family and they are all waiting for me. I have to brush up on my accent, you know.

NASH: And nobody came to the United States in your family? I mean since you came.

DUNDEE: Oh, yes. My sister has been here and my mother has been here twice.

NASH: But not to stay.

DUNDEE: Not to stay, no. All my family is in Dundee, Scotland. My mother says it's either too hot here or too cold here, but she comes here and she is hysterical. Everybody has such a laugh when she comes here. She is a real comedian. I wish she could come and spend a vacation with me. She says the only way she will come is if I ever get married she will come for my wedding. So I will have to get married and let my mother come here and let everybody meet her. But, yes, my family has been here. My brother-in-law has been here for a vacation. But I am the only one in my family. I am all alone here in New York, all alone.

NASH: Did people from Dundee immigrate to the United States long ago? Did they come in large numbers?

DUNDEE: I don't think so. I really don't think so. I think a lot of the people from Dundee went to Canada. But I ha-- I know one thing, wherever I go, there are so many people in America with Scottish blood that I am welcomed absolutely everywhere. A lot of Scottish people here that must have come from Scotland (laughs) somehow. From Dundee, I don't know in such large masses because they didn't probably have a lot of money. If they did come

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they may have come in a very, very early, you know, 1900s and been pioneers. But I don't think too many people could afford to come to America, you know, from Dundee. They were too poor. I have never met anybody from Dundee. It's funny. I never met any Dundonians, (both laugh) yes Dundonians.

NASH: Well, a lot of people came in the 1850s and 1840s from Ireland.

DUNDEE: Oh, yes, I know.

NASH: And perhaps Scotland, I don't know.

DUNDEE: A lot of people came from Scotland, yes. There's a lot of people with Scottish, you know, roots here, but they came -- they came a long, long time ago so their children and their children's children are all American. But there are so many people from Scotland.

NASH: Are there a lot of Scottish people here now who have immigrated that you have met?

DUNDEE: I only know about the Scottish-American Society and these are the people that I travel to Briton with, to Scotland, but I have never met them. I know there are a lot of Scottish people in Brooklyn. I have never met them. I've only spoken to them on the phone and I get my tickets with them and I fly with them, but I've never seen them. I've never hardly met anybody Scottish here. (laughs)

That's how it is. Yes, it's really -- it's really something. The -- the -- ma-- I think there must be many, many in Brooklyn. They have a big, big Scottish contingent in -- in Brooklyn, but in Manhattan I have never met anybody

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from Scotland.

NASH: Have you brought over any kind of habits or--I mean anything that you keep doing that's sort of distinctly Scottish in this country?

DUNDEE: Well, I wonder what. I think the only thing I keep doing is singing my Scottish songs and I have the bagpipes. I learned to play the bagpipes just a little bit. I don't have the whole big bag because my neighbors would complain, but I have the bagpipe chanter and I am going to try to play it on Friday, just a little song. But you need to have a lot of puff to play the bagpipes and I only do it for fun if I have to.

NASH: How about food?

DUNDEE: Oh, you are looking at the world's worst cook. No, no. See, the Scottish national dish is called the haggis and no one would ever want to eat a haggis. I always say that's probably what Scotland's secret weapon was against the English. They must have thrown that at the English and the English --

NASH: (laughs)

DUNDEE -- must have run because a haggis is a very unromantic piece of food stuffed into the stomach of a sheep with blood and guts. It's like the American derma or *kishke*) as they call it. You just have to look at it. In fact, I was at a party and I had to honor the haggis. You know, say a big Robert Burns poem and everything. Everybody ate the haggis but me. I couldn't eat it. They loved it. But I said, "No, no, no, it's only for Americans." I couldn't eat the haggis. That -- I -- and porridge, of course, the Scottish people eat a lot of, but I don't. And they eat kippers. They eat

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kippers. I'm afraid, I mean I'm not afraid; I'm very American, you know, I eat bagels and lox now. I discovered that since I came to America. It's very nice if you can afford it. And, of course, I have my Scottish dummy, you know, that I was telling you about. A beautiful Scotsman. He is four feet and --

NASH: You are becoming a ventriloquist.

DUNDEE: I am. I am not --

NASH: No, I thought we should clear up who your Scottish dummy was.

DUNDEE: Yes. Oh, no, I never married to --. No, no. No, no. He's a -- I reckon I have been out with so many dummies I got myself my own one. His name is Angus McTavich and. I come home at night and I say, "Hello Angus," and he doesn't answer and I am very happy. He just sits there and people, you know, who ring my bell and they look in and see my dummy sitting at the dining room table, you know, they say, "Boy, this girl is a nut." But that's my friend at the moment, Angus McTavich and -- and I'm getting a license in ventriloquism. And I'm going to introduce him for the first time this week. It's scary, but if I don't introduce him I'll never do it, so I am going to take him on the stage with me and do a little bit so-called vent work and I hope that the people will like him. And he is beautiful, just beautiful. He is tall, dark and handsome with red hair, actually.

NASH: Well, best of luck to you. Thank you. (Both laugh).

[long pause]

NASH: It has come to my attention (laughs) that not only are you Scottish, but you

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are Jewish.

DUNDEE: That's right.

NASH: Well, I'd just like to go back a little bit and--were there many Jews growing up in Dundee?

DUNDEE: No, just about ten families, and that was a big city, the big Jewish metropolis. As far as my mother, who came from Aberdeen, there were about three families there, so we came to Dundee and that's where we grew up and they had a *shul* [synagogue] there, you know, one room synagogue, and the men were in one part and the women were in another part. Segregation of the sexes were very, very firm there in Scotland, you know. As a matter of fact, in my house we couldn't get meat very often because it had to come from a kosher butcher from Glasgow, which was miles and miles away in another big city. You know, a few hours, so I really didn't know what meat was because we didn't have any kosher meat in Dundee.

NASH: So you were observant Jews?

DUNDEE: Oh, very, very observant, yes, yes. I guess everybody was in Dundee except the people, you know, the new generation is not that observant because, you know, times change and philosophies change and hypocrisies change. So as long as you are a good human being, I guess that's the big thing. And I am a Jew in my heart but I have eaten non-kosher meat now, naturally. (laughs). [not understood]

NASH: How did the Jews get to Dundee or to Scotland?

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DUNDEE: Well, my mother came a baby-in-arms when she was two. She came in my grandmother's arms and they arrived in Aberdeen, but they didn't know -- they thought they were in America. You know, they gave all their money to the fishermen.

NASH: Where did they come from?

DUNDEE: They came from, oh, some part of Russia, and the family -- some family came to Philadelphia, so all they knew is a big sea and the water. So they gave the fishermen money and my grandmother arrived with her *sheytl*, you know, her wig and her *perina* which is an eider down for the bed -- and her candle sticks. And they came to Scotland and my mother tells me it took them twenty-five years to realize they were still in Scotland -- they didn't know, but don't believe that one. But my mother grew up in Aberdeen and with my aunts. One aunt was born there and another aunt, you know, came too. And my grandfather was in Aberdeen with his long purse and his big fur hat and his long frock coat. The fisherwomen in Aberdeen must have had a fit when they saw him walking down the road, but this is how my grandfather was in Aberdeen. And my grandmother, you know, who was in a wheelchair with rheumatoid arthritis because it's so damp in Dundee, she wouldn't let any Scotsmen come up wearing the kilt. She didn't like to see the knee. She made them wear her apron; you know, very, very, very *frum* [observant] family.

But that's where, you know, the Jews came. And somehow, that's how they came sometimes. They didn't know where they came to. So my family came to Aberdeen and that's where they stayed. And my father, who came from Glasgow was Jewish, was a commercial traveler, and that's where he met my mother in Aberdeen, so when as a Jewish family you invite them up to the house and you sing together and that's how my mother met my

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father. And that's how I came to be born in Dundee, when they came to the big metropolitan city. And ten Jewish families, that's a big thing, you know, in Dundee. So my mother speaks Yiddish with a nice Scottish accent, and I speak too with a Scottish accent.

NASH: Can you speak a little Yiddish with a Scotch accent?

DUNDEE: *Ikh [not understood] a bisl Yiddish* [I a little Yiddish] but I don't know if it's so Scottish. My mother says, "[not understood] vi zo und zo," you know, she says it all with a Yiddishe Scottish accent. She speaks it fluently, but I don't speak Yiddish so much. They would speak Yiddish so that we wouldn't know what they were talking about, my sister and myself. But now I speak Hebrew and she doesn't. I don't speak that well, but I do speak a little that I went to school there.

NASH: Scottish or Jewish or American?

DUNDEE: Well, I -- I live in America. I mean this is my home. This is where I earn my bread and butter and this is what I do. I'm a haggis, yes. This is where I survive and I have made my life. As far as being American, I'm not American, but I survive as an American in this world of survival. You have to earn your milk and meal and you have to eat so therefore I think and I go to work like a hard-working American. As far as being Jewish or Scottish, I am very Scottish and I am very Jewish. *man laasot*, as they say in Hebrew, what can I say, what can I do, you know. I -- I -- I -- my background is Yiddish and my background is Scottish. When I am up there doing the Highland Fling, I can change into this *kazatzkha* or the hora or whatever you want, very willing. As a matter of fact, on my bagpipes I play *Hava Nagila*, you know, so people can't believe when I say now join me in a trip to Scotland and imagine the purple heaven, the mist is falling, and if

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you listen very carefully you may hear something like this--and out come the drones of *Hava Nagila*. They don't know if I am putting them on, if I am serious, but they usually have a good laugh. They understand.

NASH: Do you tell them that you're Jewish?

DUNDEE: They know. *A ley tatanoy* [sic], *gevalt* --a bit of Yiddish here with the *Hava Nagila*, come and say, "How does a Scottish girl know *Hava Nagila*?" So I speak Yiddish to them and they -- they still don't believe it. They think it's Gaelic. They say, "No, no, no," you know, but they can't believe it and they say, "Gee, tell me about yourself." So now I am telling somebody officially about myself. That's how it's.

END OF INTERVIEW