

Agnes MacDonald Interviewed by Katrina Fuller-7-24-84

KATRINA FULLER: Today is July 24th, 1984. I am Katrina Fuller, and I'm interviewing Agnes MacDonald at the Eisenhower Center. Can I ask you your name?

AGNES MACDONALD: Agnes MacDonald.

KF: Could you tell me your age and your date of birth?

AM: Oh, I was born in 1887, June. I'm going on 98 years old.

KF: Could you tell me about your family?

AM: Yes. My mother and father came from the old country. I was the first generation. My father and mother both came from Germany. My mother settled in New York. My father settled in Bridgeport and worked in Holmes & Edwards. That was a silver [00:01:00] plating concern over in the East End. And they had quite a family. At that time, the boundaries of Bridgeport, the eastern boundary, was Seaview Avenue, and the western boundary was Division Street, which is now Park Avenue. The year I was born Bridgeport extended to [Bishop's?] Brook on the east, and to Ash Creek on the west. So you see, my registration, my birth registration and birth certificate, are in Stratford, although I was born on Seaview Avenue. And at that time there was a great big lake, Pembroke Lake, and they used to have horse races on it. And I can remember my mother

telling -- our house faced the lake -- I can remember my mother telling me -- she would put the children all to bed, [00:02:00] and she'd go upstairs, and the children would be all wrapped in blankets, looking out the windows at the horse races on the ice. So that was one memorable thing that I can always remember, although I can't remember the horse races, because I was only a little infant. So that -
- my birth.

KF: Could you tell me about your childhood experiences?

Growing up, your childhood experiences?

AM: Well, I was quite happy. We never had very much money, but my mother made a very pleasant home. In those days food wasn't so expensive, and there was always plenty of food. And I can remember we had more snowstorms than we ever have now. Or the thing of it was the snow was never removed. And after the snow everybody [00:03:00] would go to the stores and buy groceries again. So -- what else would you suggest?

KF: Could you tell me about the number of children in your family? How many children did your parents have?

AM: Well, I had two brothers and one sister. They've all passed on. I'm the only one left.

KF: Back then did families have large families? You know, parents, they had large families?

AM: Their families?

KF: You know, any person -- when you got married, you had a large family? Or did you -- you know.

AM: No, I don't think so. I don't think there was any -- 8 or 10 children in any of the neighborhood families at those days. I guess people sort of were [00:04:00] careful, because it cost to bring them up the same as it does now.

KF: Could you tell me about your ethnic background?

AM: My --

KF: Ethnic background.

AM: Well, my ethnic background was just German. We had a lot of German customs. You know, that my father smoked a cigar. And every Sunday afternoon there was always -- people would come in to -- men, mostly -- and play pinochle. And my mother was a good, hard-working German woman that liked to bake and liked to -- and she was a good cook, too. I can remember the homemade bread, and sometimes, for a treat, she would put raisins and sugar, and that would be sweetbread. And I was very happy in my young life. [00:05:00] Now that's back to my young life again, which I'd thought we had gotten away from.

KF: Where did you live? In what section, what part did you live?

AM: The east side. I lived about two blocks from Barnum School

as I grew up. Those days, we didn't have no buses to take us to school, and our parents tried to move nearly where the schools were. Which my mother, fortunately, got an inexpensive rent, and we just lived two blocks from the school. And it was very nice. Barnum School at the time, it was quite a modern school at that -- I think the newest school in Bridgeport. And it's still used. It's between Noble Avenue and Harriet Street on the east and west. And Maple Street and Arctic Street, north and south.

[00:06:00]

KF: Could you tell me about your neighborhood? Was there any -

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AM: Oh, the neighborhood was very mixed. We had Irish, and we had Jewish people. And there was another woman, she was a fortune teller. And we used to think she was [the witch?]. And there was Yankee people. And there was people that grew to be -- it was what I would call a poor neighborhood, because my father had died. And I remember one of the men that was growing up when I was, he became chief of the Bridgeport Fire Department. His name was Martin [Hayden?]. And, well, that's -- a good neighborhood. We all went to school. I don't think they ever played hooky, [00:07:00] and I never heard of any crime being there. And we all went to church on Sunday. We'd gather the children, and

we'd all go to church on Sunday and go to instruction. I'm a Roman Catholic. We'd all go to instruction. And it was a very social neighborhood. Everybody helped each other.

KF: There was no problems or anything? No unrest between groups?

AM: No, no, no. And there was no robberies those days. I remember our door was forever open. And when it did happen to be closed, if my mother was going out, the key was left under the mat. Well, everybody left their key under the mat. Of course, everybody knew where the key was. Yeah.

KF: How did your mother support you all after your father died?

AM: Well, she did housework and [00:08:00] did the best she could. There was no food stamps. There was no welfare. There was no assistance of any kind. She just went out by the day and did housework. And then my older brother was 10 years older than I, so when he was 14 he went to work to help out the family. And we managed. No bills and nobody knocking at the door to collect bills. That was it. And, as I said before, food was cheap, very cheap. Milk was \$0.05 a quart. We used to get a penny once in a while for spending money, and you could get a nice piece of penny candy in the store. [00:09:00] You said something about education?

KF: What level of education did you complete?

AM: I just went through the public school, that's all. The ninth grade. And, as I say, high school was the exception rather than the rule those days. And so after I was 14 -- I was 14 when I got through public school. And after that I went to work. But we learned a great deal I'm quite sure, because -- I don't know whether I absorbed it from reading or not, but I think I can hold my own when people talk. And I know we learned a little Shakespeare, and I know we learned mathematics, and we learned grammar, and history, and hygiene. And [00:10:00] each teacher had between 45 and 50 pupils. And we were all well-behaved, and there was no unruliness. And very seldom the teacher had to discipline us. Never the girls. Once in a while, the boys would get kind of noisy or something like that. But I can't see how they make the distinction that these days that children have to be bussed, and there's only a few, and -- one thing, when we went to school, we stayed in the same room. We didn't go to room to room for the different studies. The teacher started in in the morning, and she took the variety of subjects as I came along. In the afternoon we'd have -- the morning we would have mathematics, and spelling, and [00:11:00] the heavier things. And in the afternoon we would have reading, and we would have geography, and history. Those lighter things,

you know? And the school hours were from 9:00 until 12:00, and from 1:30 to 3:30. And we had an hour and a half for lunch where everybody went home and ate lunch. There was no school lunches those days either. Such a difference, of course.

KF: How were the teachers paid? Were they paid by the city, or something? The teachers, how were they paid?

AM: How were they paid?

KF: Yeah. By the city?

AM: By the city. But the pay, if I recall, wasn't very much. I don't think they got \$20 a week those days. I really don't, [00:12:00] because people used to say, "Oh, she's going to high school, and she's going to be a teacher. She'll be getting a lot of money." Well, \$15 a week, I guess, was considered a lot of money. Now, I'm not sure about that, but I know that the pay was very little, considering that they had to go four years to training school. High school and training school.

KF: How many years was high school?

AM: Well, I suppose it was four years, and then they went to training school afterward. Four years, always, I'm quite sure was the high school.

KF: Could you tell me something about the Depression? Some experiences or things that happened during the Depression?

AM: Well, [00:13:00] I think the Depression all depended upon what you expected. Now, we did with less, but I never remember being hungry. And, of course, there was always a fire in the kitchen stove. I never remember being cold. We'd all gather around the fire in the kitchen stove. No, I -- and perhaps we didn't have as many clothes to wear. In fact, you can tell by the clothes closets in the old houses that people didn't have many clothes. I live in an apartment that's very old, and I have one little clothes closet. And the apartment is well-kept, and it's well-populated, but still there's only that one little clothes closet. So evidently [00:14:00] we didn't have too many clothes. But the depression -- I can never remember that it was such an awful hardship. I guess maybe because we had a happy family, and if we had to do without things, we did without them. That was all.

KF: So your family is really close?

AM: Yes, very.

KF: Were a lot of families like that? Or were you just an exception?

AM: Well, some of them -- you know what I mean. There were some there that, perhaps, didn't know how to manage, and perhaps they expected too much. I couldn't speak for anybody else, but I know that we were never unhappy, never.

My mother lived to a fairly good age. My father died pretty young, and we got along without him. [00:15:00] But my mother was always there to -- a shoulder to lean on.

KF: And when did food stamps come into effect? Food stamps and welfare, when did that come into effect?

AM: Well, I think it's -- the welfare had been first, which I think is -- sometimes it -- welfare is abused. In the same way the food stamps -- I know people -- or I think I know people -- that have food stamps that aren't entitled to them. But of course, like that, I figure they'll have to answer for it, not me. So I let them go ahead with their food stamps, but still -- and all that, it's a burden on the taxpayers.

KF: Why did they decide to start giving money? Government money.

AM: Well, [00:16:00] in the earlier years, there was no income tax. And I guess the -- I don't know how they run the government, because there was no income tax. But they must have had some method of taxation, or some method of raising money. Well, I guess -- I don't know whether the welfare caused the income tax, or the income tax caused the welfare. But we've had welfare and food stamps for quite a while. And Social Security, of course. That was in 1937. I think it was -- Social Security was -- that was one of

Roosevelt's -- you don't know who Roosevelt is, I suppose. He was a very wonderful president in lots of ways and [00:17:00] not so wonderful in other ways. Of course, that's that. But Social Security was the first of that. And I think that was patterned after England's dole. I'm not sure of that, but that's what I have in the back of my mind. And I was working at the time, and we had to contribute so much a week. And I think they still have to contribute so much a week. But the amount we contributed was so small it was funny. But the income -- or the Social Security itself was rather small those days. Now you see it's going up, and up, and up. I worked in place for 32 years, in Warner Bros., and I think when I left there, my [00:18:00] income tax was \$66 a month. But of course, like that it's gone up every year. And now it's pretty much more than \$66.

KF: When it first started -- because people didn't have jobs, or something? They didn't have money to support --

AM: Well, they figured out that it was a good thing for the country, as far as I can see. And people had nothing when they grew old. They had to live with their families if they had families. And I guess they figured it was time for change. And it was a very great benefit to so many people.

KF: Could you tell me about some experiences or some things
[00:19:00] that happened during World War I?

AM: World War I? Well, yes. My husband was a veteran. And I remember food was rationed. And butter was very, very scarce, and we heard that the butter was sent over to the other side, and the Russians polished their boots with it. (laughter) But whether that's just hearsay or not. And Bridgeport was humming. You couldn't get a room in Bridgeport. I remember [hearsaying?] that people were renting out a room for three people. You would occupy it for eight hours, and I would occupy it for eight hours, and somebody else would occupy it for eight hours. There was three shifts in all the factories [00:20:00] -- not in all the factories, but in the war factories, of which there were many. There was the Remington Arms, and there was the -- let me see. There was -- well, there was several war factories in Bridgeport at that time. And, as I say, if you got a room -- if you didn't have a home, why, it was just too bad. But if you got a room, you couldn't possibly have it by yourself. You had to share it with someone. But I remember we had food stamps. We had just so many pounds of meat a month, and we had -- the other food was rationed, too. Sugar was rationed. And that's all I can remember. [00:21:00] Sugar, and butter, and meat. We had

plenty of tea, and coffee, and potatoes, and things like that. Vegetables. And people had gardens those days don't forget. We had yards, and we always had a little garden.

KF: Did you have children?

AM: Did I have children? Yes.

KF: How many did you have?

AM: Two.

KF: They were with you during the War? World War I?

AM: One of them was, but the other was living with their -- my mother-in-law, her grandmother. But she has since passed on, and the boy is still living.

KF: Was it hard for your family during that time?

AM: Was it what?

KF: Was it hard for your family during that time?

AM: No, [00:22:00] not especially. If you had money for the rent, and we had a quarter meter for the gas, and enough food to put on the table -- of course, not an abundance, but enough. I don't think that we should -- it shouldn't hurt me any. And my son is still living, so there you are.

KF: Could you tell me some things that happened during World War II that (inaudible).

AM: World War II? Not too many. Let me see. No, I was working at the time. My husband had died. And they were making [00:23:00] parachutes down in [Warner?] where I

worked. But everything went on pretty good. Prices were a little bit high, but it wasn't too bad. I was more interested in my foreign nephews and my sister's children. She had four in the service at the same time, but they all came back, thank god. And they got great benefits. Now, when World War I veterans were discharged, they got \$30 for a severance pay. And there was no after educational benefits or things like that like there was in World War II. You got your \$30 when you came home from the service, you got your railroad [00:24:00] fare home, and that was it. If you were able-bodied, you got no pension. If you were injured, the pensions were very small.

KF: But during the years, it seems like all the women outlived their husbands. Why is that? Was it -- the husbands had a harder time or something?

AM: Young lady, women are still outliving their husbands.
(laughs)

KF: Yeah, I noticed, but --

AM: Well, I guess, perhaps they don't worry so much, or they take out their worry on their husband. I don't know.

KF: Do you remember some things during the Korean War? Some effects that happened during the Korean War?

AM: No. I know I disapproved of it very, very much. It was unnecessary, and a lot of bloodshed, [00:25:00] and a lot

of talk of how it was prolonged by the bankers to make money. But whether that was true or not, I don't know. But we didn't get anyplace, and nobody else got anyplace in the Korean War. And it was still -- prisoners of war are still missing, many of them. So that was that. I'm talking about the (inaudible). They've made a beautiful memorial in Washington, for the veterans. I haven't seen it, only by television. But I hope to see it someday.

[00:26:00]

KF: Could you tell me any effects that happened during the Korean War or Vietnam War, that took effect on Bridgeport? You know, anything changed, or everything stayed the same in Bridgeport during the time?

AM: No, I couldn't tell you too much about that. I know that Bridgeport, whether it was its nearness to New York or not, there was a lot of Puerto Ricans came here. And of course the colored population has increased. I couldn't tell you too much about what it's done to Bridgeport. I know Bridgeport's going ahead [00:27:00] slowly. We have good citizens in all parts of it and in all races, and bad citizens, too. To be expected. I'm very fond of Bridgeport. As I say, I was born here, and I -- well, I lived a year in [Miami?], but that didn't count. I came back and was glad to come back. But I expect to end my

days here.

KF: Does the Civil Rights movement have a large effect on Bridgeport? The Civil Rights movement?

AM: More or less, I think. I think that, frankly, [00:28:00] it awakened the higher-ups to the fact that you couldn't push people in the corner and forget about them. I think that they had to be recognized. They had to be provided for. They couldn't be excluded from neighborhoods. And I think it did a lot of good. It made us realize we were all one under -- more or less.

KF: Were there any people in Bridgeport that didn't like it or didn't go for that? You know, took an outcry or an outcast against it?

AM: I don't know quite what you mean.

KF: Were there people that didn't want the Civil Rights movement? You know, the --

AM: Yes, there were plenty of neighborhoods that, until it became [00:29:00] a misdemeanor to refuse to rent -- well, of course, there was white people with a lot of children that some people would rent to, but now you can't discriminate whatever. So I think there was a lot of it.

KF: Like the Ku Klux Klan? They were here? Ku Klux Klan?

AM: Ku Klux Klan? I never remember that being very active in Bridgeport. Never.

KF: Did religion play an important part in your life growing up?

AM: Well, our mothers sent us to instruction. My mother was Roman Catholic, [00:30:00] and we went to instructions. And we went to the Catholic church, and I'm still going to the Catholic church. And they weren't as sociable as they are now. Of course, now there's bingos, you know, and more get-togethers. But when we went to church on Sunday, that was the end of our church association, you know what I mean? But our religion extended into the home, those days. We said our prayer, and there was no blasphemy, or no fighting, or no -- we lived like Christians. Whether that was what you mean, [00:31:00] or --

KF: Do you remember any experiences that you had at Seaside Park?

AM: Oh, Seaside Park, yes, that was quite a place. The trolleys those days was a nickel. And still we'd walk to Seaside Park to go bathing. Always on August 16th, our mothers would come with us. That was the day of the [cure?] in the water. And there was band concerts on Sunday. And Seaside Park was always beautiful, but it didn't extend out as far as it is now. The seawall was just perhaps a little bit past [Iranistan?] Avenue. But the bathing house and the boulevard had been -- in recent

years. And Beardsley Park, I remember [00:32:00] that quite well, because we lived on the east side at the time, and this man named Beardsley, he donated the land. I think there's a statue up there at the entrance of Mr. Beardsley. And I can remember when that statue was dedicated. My mother took my sister in baby carriage and me by the hand, and my brothers walked along, too. And we walked up to Beardsley Park to see the dedication of Beardsley park, those days. I can remember that quite well.

KF: What about Pleasure Beach?

AM: Pleasure Beach, that was another place of joy. I can remember when it was Steeplechase Island. There was a man -- you remember that?

KF: Mm-hmm.

AM: There was a man named Tilyou. He had Steeplechase Island down at [00:33:00] Coney Island. And he came in, and he developed it. He put a dance hall. He put a skating rink, and he put all kinds of different rides and amusements. And it was a place to go and enjoy yourself. And before you went over to the bridge, there was a very famous shorehouse, Lehmans, L-E-H-M-A-N-S. And, well, I guess those days they were beyond me. But I can remember going to Lehmans twice for a [shore?] dinner. And then we walked over the bridge. And the bridge is still there, although I

suppose it isn't the same rickety bridge that we walked over. And enjoyed ourselves many -- and there was so many picnics over there those days, too. And a beautiful beach to -- there was a bathhouse, and there was a beautiful beach to [00:34:00] -- sand was like glass. It was so smooth and so fine. It was just a lovely place to go.

KF: What happened to it? Everything is gone now, isn't it?

AM: I haven't any idea. I don't know why. I was over there maybe ten years ago. We had a picnic. Of course, all the amusements have gone to pot. I don't know whether the merry-go-round is still there or not. But I don't know. Maybe people have different ways of enjoying themselves now. I don't think there was so many cars at the time, you know? We just took the trolley, and there was a boat used to leave by the Stratford Avenue Bridge. The name of the boat was the Lenoir, L-E-N-O-I-R. And I think we paid \$0.15 to go over on the boat. [00:35:00] It was a nice sale. And that docked over at Pleasure Beach. And that was -- one of the joys of going to Pleasure Beach was to go over on the boat. And I guess if we come back on the boat, the same \$0.15 or something like that.

KF: Was Pleasure Beach good for the city of Bridgeport?

AM: Was it what?

KF: Was it good for the city of Bridgeport? Did it have a lot

of --

AM: Well, I guess I wasn't very interested in the city of Bridgeport at those times. I was just interested in Pleasure Beach. Of course, I was growing up then, and roller skating, and dancing, and bathing -- I don't know what effect it had on the city. I'm quite sure that [00:36:00] they must have collected taxes on it or something. But it was always crowded. I never can remember a Saturday or Sunday that there wasn't a crowd. And my mother would come over with us sometimes. And she'd pack a lunch, and when it came time to eat, we'd all gather around and eat her lovely sandwiches and always something else. So that was Pleasure Beach. Oh, it was a shame, because that place is really a jewel if they'd only -- but of course, like that there's more vandalism going on these days than there was when I was young.

KF: Do you remember the Polka Dot Playhouse over [there at Pleasure Beach?]??

AM: I went to the Polka Dot [00:37:00] Playhouse, but it wasn't at Pleasure Beach, I don't think. It was someplace else. Not too well. I have nothing to say about that. I know it was out in Fairfield that -- the day that -- the Sunday after Kennedy was assassinated I was to a performance at Polka Dot Playhouse. And that was on a Sunday that the

assassin was shot. I can remember.

KF: Who?

AM: The assassin that killed Kennedy. He was shot Sunday, that following Sunday. He was in custody, and he was shot. And it happened to be shown on the television. [00:38:00] And we were going to the Polka Dot Playhouse that afternoon. And I know that I can't remember a thing about the Polka Dot Playhouse, because all we were talking about was the killing of the assassin. You know, the man that was supposedly -- shot Kennedy. So that's the Polka Dot Playhouse. That's rather far afield, isn't it?

KF: Well, could you tell me about the theaters in Bridgeport? The theaters, movies in Bridgeport?

AM: I don't quite get you. The theaters? They're all gone. There were plenty of them. There used to be a \$0.05 [00:39:00] nickelodeon over on the corner of Elm Street and Main. There was the Cameo. There was the Bijou. And, of course, there was the theaters that are up on Main Street now, the Majestic and the Palace. And then we had stock company, and we had another theater, Smith's Colonial Theatre, that used to have the New York productions. Oh, we had very good theaters in Bridgeport in my younger days. And as I say the New York productions would come up, and New York stars would be -- this was in Smith's Colonial

Theatre on South Main Street, about where -- well, below the bank there, below State Street. Between State and Gilbert [00:40:00] Street there was this theater.

KF: What happened to all the movies? They just left, all the theaters?

AM: There's now -- there's the one out in Black Rock. And I don't think there's any in the center of the city I know of. And then there's, of course, the Merritt. But they don't interest me. We have our televisions now and our easy chairs. And when you get kind of old, you'd rather sit home and watch pictures. You can't -- you still have (inaudible) dismal [00:41:00] interview, don't you?

KF: No, it was nice. I like it. Thank you. Thank you for your time and [energy?].

AM: Well, I still think it's a dismal interview. No?

KF: It's nice.

AM: OK, if anybody else is going to like it. You'll say -- I should have put -- you'll have to excuse me, I'm almost -- I'm going on 98, so that excuses a whole lot. (laughter)

KF: All right.

END OF AUDIO FILE