

## A Panamanian Immigrant in Harlem

Maida Springer's humorous stories about her strong-willed grandmother and her moving portraits of other family members provide evocative glimpses of her childhood in Panama and in New York. The stories reveal the genesis of her family's deep attachment to Africa and the ways they negotiated class, ethnic, and racial hierarchies. The cultural and ethnic conflicts between Caribbean migrants and Panamanians were played out on a personal level between young Maida's Barbadian father and Panamanian mother. And the discriminatory employment practices that her father and other blacks experienced while working on the Panama Canal construction project under U.S. rule served as a prelude to her own experiences with racist employment practices in the United States.

Springer describes the nature of racism, intraracial conflict, and anti-immigrant sentiment that flourished in Harlem. With the great influx of blacks to Harlem throughout the 1920s and the restrictions on their settlement in other areas of New York City, tensions arose between blacks and the older immigrant communities of Germans, German Jews, Irish, and others. As Springer testifies, among the bitter experiences for Harlem blacks was their treatment at the hands of white business owners in the main shopping thoroughfare of 125th Street. H. C. F. Koch and his family followed up their discourteous treatment of black customers by selling Koch Department Store in 1930 rather than accede to demands for equal opportunity and treatment. That same year, L. M. Blumstein, who had long refused to hire blacks in any position at Blumstein's Department Store, allowed for their employment only as elevator operators. As an adult, Springer joined with an alliance of diverse organizations that in 1934 successfully used the strategies of picket and boycott to force these large department stores and other Harlem businesses to open up sales, clerk, and cashier positions to blacks.<sup>1</sup>

1. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York, 1890-1930*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 121.

During Springer's childhood, Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), championed the “don't buy where you can't work” campaign. Springer talks about her mother's activism in the UNIA and the indelible impression the movement left on her. Garvey came to the United States in 1916 and settled in Harlem where he built the UNIA into the largest organized black movement of its kind. With wonder Springer recalls the breathtaking oratory of UNIA officer Henrietta Vinton Davis (1860–1941). A famous elocutionist before joining with Garvey as one of the thirteen founding members of the UNIA in New York, Davis was very effective with recruitment drives because of her name recognition and her powerful oratorical skills.<sup>2</sup>

The various political movements for black rights that flourished during Springer's childhood demonstrate that people of African descent were eager to mobilize against the rampant discrimination they faced in employment, housing, health care, and education. However, the leaders of these movements were often in discord, inveighing against each other over issues of policy, personality, and nationality, and over color and class differences. The U.S. government had a policy of disrupting these organizations, deeming their demands for equal rights and African liberation a threat to domestic tranquility and the war effort. With the UNIA targeted by the FBI, Garvey was indicted on the dubious charge of mail fraud in 1922. His final conviction three years later and his acrimonious struggles with black leaders within and outside the UNIA led to the decimation and splintering of the organization. Davis eventually left Garvey's organization. The strong disagreements that black leaders had with Garvey's policies did not necessarily gain them the animus of Garvey adherents, however. Springer relates how her mother and others took consolation in the messages they delivered, for these leaders shared with Garvey a keen ability to express the black community's outrage and bitter disappointment over the continuation and intensification of racist treatment following World War I.

Springer discusses the activism of two such leaders, Asa Philip Randolph (1889–1979) and Frank Crosswaith (1892–1965). Both served as her mentors after she joined the garment workers. Randolph, who migrated to New York from Florida in 1911, became the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, and an AFL-CIO vice president in 1955. Crosswaith, who was from Frederickstad, St. Croix, the Virgin Islands, worked as an organizer for both the porters' union and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU). Early

2. See William Seraile, “Henrietta Vinton Davis and the Garvey Movement,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* (July 1983): 7–24.

advocates of interracial unionism, Randolph and Crosswaith showed courage in labor organizing efforts and civil rights activism. Randolph's impassioned indictments of the government led the U.S. Justice Department to label him "the most dangerous Negro in America," and his magazine, *The Messenger*, "the most dangerous of all Negro publications." The Lusk committee, appointed by the New York State legislature to investigate radicalism and sedition, also paid special attention to Randolph's activities.<sup>3</sup>

Although the experience of racial oppression sometimes deepened the chasms among people of African descent, this experience also brought about a sense of community and pride. Springer's descriptions of her community life in Harlem are of a close-knit neighborhood where everyone, including her future husband, Owen Springer, looked after the younger children. The lyrical portraits she draws of her community life are spiced with flavors of Caribbean culture. Institutions like the church and segregated schools served as unifying forces for all blacks.

For part of her teenage years, Springer attended the Manual Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth, a boarding school in Bordentown, New Jersey. She reflects on the dynamic black teachers and black visitors who served as role models, such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), Paul Leroy Bustill Robeson (1898–1976), and Lester Blackwell Granger (1896–1976). Du Bois was one of the United States' foremost intellectuals and the leading propagandist for civil rights. A cofounder of the NAACP in 1909, he founded and edited the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine until 1934. Deemed the father of pan-Africanism he always linked the struggle for equality in the United States to the anticolonial struggle in Africa. The U.S. government persecuted him in the 1950s for his radicalism. In 1961, he joined the Communist Party and moved to Ghana, where he died the day before the historic 1963 March on Washington.

Like Du Bois, Paul Robeson was persecuted by the U.S. government for his pro-Soviet views, defense of Communists arrested under the Smith Act, and unstinting criticisms of the treatment of blacks in the United States. The son of a runaway slave and a woman from a prominent Pennsylvania family that dated back to the colonial times, Robeson was multitalented, exceptional, and internationally renowned. He was valedictorian of his class at Rutgers University, a law school graduate, athlete, actor, singer, and activist. He devoted his talents to work against racism and in support of African liberation and trade unionism worldwide. As a promoter of international solidarity, he sang songs in a couple of dozen languages.

At Bordentown, Granger served as extension agent for the school and comman-

3. Jervis Anderson, *A Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 118–19.

dant over the boys from 1922 to 1934. His job included questioning applicants to the school and then following up on the progress of graduates as they settled in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Later, as a labor activist, Springer worked closely with Granger when he became the executive director of the National Urban League, a position he held from 1941 to 1961.

The strongest influence on Springer's early life was her mother, Adina Stewart Carrington. Having separated from her husband soon after they settled in Harlem, Stewart struggled as a single mother to make a secure home for her child and served as her fearless protector against unfair employment practices and discriminatory treatment. Envisioning a mother-daughter business, Adina Stewart sent the reluctant young Maida to Poro College, one of the beauty schools of Annie Minerva Turnbo Malone (1869–1957), a philanthropist and entrepreneur in the hair care business.

After declining an employment position with Madame Malone in favor of marriage, Springer held her wedding reception in the townhouse built by the other major hair care entrepreneur of the period, Madame C. J. Walker (1867–1919). Born Sarah Breedlove, Walker took her name from her third husband, newspaperman Charles Joseph Walker. Both Malone and Walker are credited with being the first black female millionaires. Walker had studied under Malone and served briefly as a Malone agent in 1905 before starting her own hair care business. Her daughter A'Lelia Walker operated the townhouse as a café/salon until 1928.<sup>5</sup>

In Springer's reconstruction of her early years of marriage, she portrays Owen Springer as patient, intelligent, and meticulous. Four years after their son was born, she was forced to find employment because the Depression lessened her husband's earning power. The unemployment rate for Harlem blacks during much of the Depression was between one and a half to three times that of whites in New York City. By 1932, more than 60 percent of Harlemites were unemployed.<sup>6</sup> The dress-making skills Springer learned as a teenager attending Bordentown and her brief job experiences as a preteen and teenager led her during these difficult times to find employment in the garment industry.

4. *The Ironsides Echo*, June 1955.

5. The home at 108–110 West 136 Street was built by renowned black architect Vertner Tandy for Madame C. J. Walker. See A'Lelia Bundles, "Madam C. J. Walker, 1867–1919, Entrepreneur, Philanthropist, Social Activist," 1998–2001, the Lewaro Corporation®, <http://www.madamcjwalker.com/>; Anthony L. Williams, "Annie Turnbo Malone," Black Heritage Day II, [www.isomedia.com/homes/bhdz/annie\\_malone.htm](http://www.isomedia.com/homes/bhdz/annie_malone.htm) (both retrieved March 18, 2003).

6. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1984), 31, 116.



I was born at home in Panama City, Panama. I am told that the woman who acted as a great-grandmother figure in my life, Nana Sterling, brought me into this world. I didn't know her. She was a local midwife. My father thought I was a cripple because I was born with my legs under me and my arms folded.<sup>7</sup> My great-grandmother and my grandmother massaged my folded limbs and pulled them out. It took them a week.

I'm told that my great-grandmother was born in Africa. They say she knew that she came from Africa when by her figures she was a teenager. She knew that she was from the west in Africa because the stories she told my grandmother and which were passed down to my mother and to me were West African folktales. As a small child, I grew up on West African folktales—Brother [A]nansi the wily spider, and all of the animals in the forest, the lion who was intelligent but could be outwitted by this wily spider. When I went to Ghana for the first time and heard some of these stories, it made my hair stand on end. They said, "Oh yes, yes, yes! You're West African!" (*Laughter.*)

My mother's name when she died was Adina Carrington, and my grandmother's name was Eliza Anderson. My mother's maiden name was Forest but my grandmother married again some years later after her first marriage. Carrington is the name of my mother's second husband.<sup>8</sup> My grandmother had a son in addition to my mother. His name was Elisha and he was four or five years younger than my mother. He was alive when we left Panama, but he died very young. He was as tall as my mother was short. He was very gentle, very sweet and quiet. I remember he was very loving to me because I was a quiet child. I was not lively. He'd let me sit on his lap and he would talk to me. I had a picture of him, but I am such a gypsy in wandering around that I lost it somewhere.

As a small, young girl, my grandmother was a household servant and a companion to the daughter of one of the wealthy Panamanian families, that

7. In an unrecorded interview, Springer stated that her father, after viewing her, threatened to harm her mother, whom he blamed for her condition.

8. In the early 1960s Adina Stewart married Barbadian-born Dalrymple Carrington. Born in Jamaica on February 28, 1870, Eliza Anderson went to Panama as a young girl and considered herself to be Spanish culturally. She was the youngest of several children born by Edward and Sarah Austin. Eliza lived to be 104 and her mother reportedly lived to be 125. Program, Recognition luncheon for Mrs. Eliza Anderson on her 100th birthday, March 1, 1970 (MSK PP).

group many of us called the robber barons (*laughs*), one of those ruling families.<sup>9</sup> Throughout her life as a young woman, she traded on this. She was the child of the house, so she had some clout. When you talk about Panamanian justice, you see, you knew somebody with clout. Just like in the United States, if you know someone, it moves the agenda for you. My grandmother was a very tiny lady. Extremely independent. Abrasive. Litigious. You could not talk sharply to her, and she never *forgot* anything you said to her. Always she would go to court for anything if you troubled her, and she troubled very easily. And God forbid if you were a foreigner, if you were a West Indian and not a Spaniard and you bothered my grandmother or you had some problem with her and you took her to court. The judge would let you know you were bothering the person associated with this famous family, and your justice was sometimes limited. (*Laughter.*) So my grandmother was a lady very feared because she would take you on. Everybody knew her. My mother told me these stories. All of this took place in my grandmother's young life.

My grandfather died very early when my mother was a child. But before that time my grandmother with her tiny, aggressive self was embarrassed by my grandfather because he was too pious and he let people do things to him. If a man spoke harshly to him or hit him, he would pray for him. (*Laughs.*) My grandmother didn't understand his behavior. It infuriated her terribly, and I think this is the basis for the weakening of their marriage.

On one occasion he had a difference of opinion with a man and the man knocked him down. He then got up and prayed for the man and said that he was a Christian and he would not use his hands. So the man knocked him down again. (*Laughter.*) Well, after they came and told my grandmother, she hitched up her skirt and went out and charged into this man. And when she got finished with that, she charged into my grandfather. Grandmother was so humiliated by this that she wouldn't have him in the house. My mother said my grandmother was so outraged with her husband that she called him every kind of coward that you could think of in Spanish. And my mother ran underneath the bed. They had high post beds. That marriage in due course got dissolved. No, she couldn't stand weak people. And she thought my mother was going to be like her father.

Doña Luisa was something special. In the Spanish community, they called her Doña Luisa. In the West Indian community, Red Liza. (*Laughter.*) To be

9. Panamanians largely referred to the leading families as *rabiblancos*, or whitetails. See Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 50.

derogatory, they called her Red Liza. She had big brown freckles and kind of copper-colored red skin from the sun.

As I said, my grandmother was always an independent woman and was an aggressive little businesswoman. She fed a portion of the men who worked building the Panama Canal when my mother was a child. Every day my grandmother prepared the midday meal for them. This business was a kind of restaurant, and she had women working for her. They grated the coconut and seasoned and prepared the food. They used these pans that are in three and four tiers. On the bottom would be the hot soup. Even today out of my family's tradition, I do not feel that I have been properly fed until I have had some hot soup with what I'm eating. The hot soup kept the rest of the food hot. On top of that would be the meat, and then there was rice and what they called the breadkind, plantains or cooked greens. And on the very top there would be a sweet, cassava pudding, pone. These young women would deliver these three or four layers of food to the men whose names were marked on the pans. They would get on a certain train and go down on the lines to take the luncheon. I guess there must have been many other folks doing this. But my grandmother had a flourishing business of feeding the men on the lines during the building of the canal.

After that, my grandmother was a farmer and she sold food as a market woman. That's what she did until she was quite old. With her second husband she had a farm outside Panama City. I remember it was way on top of a hill. It was very high because she had to stop the car kind of on the side of the road. She was nimble. She just went like this up the hill [*indicates rapid motion with her hands*]. And I was breathing hard, walking up to this place. This was the first time I ever saw such a variety of fruit growing. That was quite an experience. She would walk with her machete and show me ginger, turmeric, varieties of mangoes as I have never seen before or since, many kinds of bananas. I had seen small bananas like those before, but in East Africa. They did not turn yellow. They were ripe. Then I saw the red bananas. I saw avocados. This stuff would just rot on the ground because she was not able to take care of it. She could not farm it anymore. She was eighty years old and needed help. Her husband had died two or three years before. This was peasant farming, so who was going to work for her? She was up there alone.

This was all in the process of me trying to persuade that old doll to come to the United States for twenty, twenty-five years. I remember my grandmother having such strong views of the United States. I think she thought that everybody lived in wooden boxes, and you didn't have a lot of earth around you. She was concerned about this since she was a farmer. She thought you lived

in a shut up place, so she resisted coming to the United States for many, many years for that reason.

I had just turned seven when we came to the United States in 1917. The story is told that my grandmother tried very hard to get my parents to leave me in Panama until they found their way. But my *wonderful* young mother with not a clue as to what life would entail here told my grandmother that if she had to suck salt in the United States, I would be right beside her. She wasn't trained for anything in the United States. She had never worked anywhere. When she first came here, she worked briefly as a domestic. But she told her mother she would give me a little of the salt, and we would drink saltwater together. She would *never* leave me with anyone. I have always appreciated that. The indignities that were foisted upon a child left with relatives in that country I know about, because many of the women that my mother knew and who came here after her had stories. They left their children behind at first and brought them when they were ten, twelve, thirteen years old. So I saw some of what could happen firsthand. But that was my grandmother, and they said she loved me very much.

We wanted my grandmother to come here because as she got older and her husband had died, she had cataracts and wasn't seeing very well. The local minister whose church she attended took on the responsibility of writing to us about her. Since the mail system except in the United States and maybe a few places in Europe was horrible, we sent money to him for her because he was able to get mail by way of the Canal Zone. The postal service was better there where he had a post box. We took care of my grandmother in this way. My cousin Clarence Scott, whom we call Scottie, tried to keep track of the money we sent to the minister. He tried to make sure that things were looked after for my grandmother. Before he came to the United States to live, he would write to us and tell us what he thought was going on with her care.

We were instrumental in helping Scottie to come here. He remained the same concerned, gentle person close to us. And if my grandmother said he's my relative, then he's my relative. She never tried to explain how he is a relative, but she was very good friends with his mother. He's over six feet, but as a young man he had a much bigger body. He's a sick old man now. He's thin framed now and as gentle, always laughing. I have never in forty-five years heard him raise his voice or be ugly with anyone.<sup>10</sup>

My mother would go back to Panama periodically and, of course, try to talk my grandmother into coming here. She told my mother in no uncertain

10. Clarence Eleazor Scott (1908–1993), who came to the United States in 1948, died two years after this interview.



terms why she wouldn't come here. So my mother went down again and said, "You know, you're alone. We'll get a place for you in town." In due course, a distant cousin wanted money and my mother bought his property, a beautiful piece of land, loaded with water. It was less than an acre. Then she just sent me a telegram saying that she had bought it and what money she needed. (*Laughter.*) It wasn't a great deal, but by my standards in those days it was a lot of money. I then went to Panama and talked with my godfather, who was a builder, about building a house for my grandmother. I came back and borrowed money to build this house and later more money to improve the land, because my grandmother said there were no trees. There was just grass. So Scottie, who was then a very young man, got all of his young friends to help with the land. They thought this was very wonderful, fertile land. They planted the fruit trees that my grandmother wanted planted now that we'd brought her from her farm down into this city. We fenced it in. It was a very nice area, this place called Pedregal.<sup>11</sup>

After my godfather built the house, my grandmother wouldn't live in it because she said that my godfather used my money badly, that he bought old lumber and the rooms were too small. A little woman all by herself. She said she didn't like the house he built, and she would never live in it. (*Laughs.*) That was my grandmother. Well, anyway, the wood ants began to eat the house, because no one was living there and taking care of it. So we rented another place in town close to the house of some of my mother's friends. That was a good arrangement. But eventually we got her here because these same friends were coming to the United States. Her eyes were getting bad and people were robbing her blind. So at ninety-four she came here and lived here for ten years. She died at 104 in 1974.

How did you know you needed an act of Congress to bring your grandmother to the United States?

Oh, I think my son, Eric, checked out the legalities of it when we began to do all of the necessary papers to bring her here. He then got the services of our congressman. The purpose of that act of Congress was to indicate that this ninety-four-year-old woman was not coming to the United States to be a public charge, that I had a home, which was adequate. My son is a lawyer and he had an adequate living and was supportive of bringing my grandmother here. She was the only close relative we had remaining in Panama.

11. Lying just outside of Panama City, Pedregal had the character of a rural town. With Panama City's expansion, Pedregal has now become part of it. Correspondence from Eduardo Watson R., Panama Info-Doc Services S.A., Panama City, Republic of Panama, December 10, 1999.

When she came to the United States, she was always busy teaching my mother how to grow up. I'm a woman, but my mother was still her child and she was critical of her. And when she was not critical, she would sit in the kitchen and say, "You know, I never thought that you would do so-and-so nice. I thought that you would grow up a careless young woman." She said this because my mother had become a fanatic housekeeper, and my grandmother had not thought much of my mother's ability, I guess, at those sorts of things when she was a little girl.

My grandmother spoke Spanish when she was angry, irritated, or when she prayed, because I don't think she thought English-speaking Gods understood her as well. (*Laughter.*) I would hear her speaking and muttering in Spanish. But when she was annoyed about something, she would really let you know. When she was angry with my mother, she would tell her, "When I was Doña Luisa, you could not treat me like this!" Or she would say things like if she wasn't in the United States or if she was in Panama, my mother would not treat her the way she did. She said that my mother was doing or saying something to her because she was not the person she used to be, because she was now old.

What was my mother doing to her? She would say, "Mama, in the United States you eat this kind of breakfast." My mother gave her cornflakes. Well, my grandmother didn't understand these things. In Panama, she drank her early morning tea at four and five o'clock in the morning, and by eight or nine o'clock she had worked for many hours on her farm and would then sit down to a sturdy meal. She had breakfast, which consisted of meat and breadkind —by breadkind, I mean some kind of starch, a root vegetable—freshly cooked bread and tea. She might have codfish or fresh fish and plantains and dumplings, dates and cocoa. She would have at eight o'clock or nine o'clock in the morning what would be for us lunch. When she came here, she was up at 5:30. We didn't get up at 5:30. So the cultural differences, the way we cooked and ate in the United States, took some adjustment. My mother was an excellent cook, and she seasoned and cooked in the way they did in Panama, but we had absorbed a whole lot of new ways in the United States. So when she gave my grandmother cornflakes and bananas, she tasted it and promptly spit it out. (*Laughs.*) "What this?" No, she was something to deal with.

Did she ever get used to that?

My mother didn't give her cornflakes anymore. No, my mother made the changes. It wasn't difficult. Just don't give her what would be a standard American meal at nine o'clock in the morning. Give her a heavy meal, a substantial meal.

What was your grandmother's religion?

She was Presbyterian, Episcopalian, that kind of mixture. She joined the Presbyterian church just around the corner. Loved the minister, liked his wife and was very happy.<sup>12</sup> She wasn't a deep churchgoer, so let me disabuse your mind. She wasn't devout. But that church was *good* for her. She was happy. The minister came to see her every week, and he didn't talk to her about religion. He sat there and talked to her about the world and about how she was doing and what she liked and what she didn't like.

Tell me about your father.

My father came from the West Indies by way of England to work on the Panama Canal, as many West Indians did. In due course, he married my mother, unfortunately. (*Laughs.*) He had some semiskilled, clerical job, because he wore a clean shirt and cuffs. He read and wrote fluently and knew mathematics inside out. But, of course, he didn't get paid what he should have gotten because there was a gold and silver rule. He was paid the black wage even though he was doing work that a lot of the *white* workers were doing.<sup>13</sup>

When I came here I was pretty good with mathematics. When I was five in Panama, my father, a West Indian, believed a child should begin to learn. I had to learn the multiplication tables, the division tables, and subtraction. I would have to stand against a wall and recite them. Whenever I missed—and between five and seven you miss a lot of things, and you forget—the teacher who was my father's friend would crack my fingers with a twig. Now imagine a five, six, or seven year old reciting “twelve times one is twelve, twelve twos are twenty-four, twelve threes are thirty-six.” You were supposed to know your tables from one to twelve.

In the house my father would not allow my mother to utter a word in Spanish. It was a very harsh, very severe situation. That marriage ended shortly after we came here. I put these and other experiences in the back of my mind and don't talk about it because what I remember was unpleasant and cruel in a child's mind. In an adult's mind it was cruel. He was mean to my mother also.

I had one sister whose name was H el ene. She died when she was three years, nine months, fifteen days. I was five. They said she didn't live because

12. The church's name was Westminster-Bethany United Presbyterian Church, located on Howard Avenue and McDonough Street in Brooklyn. The pastor was Reverend Claude C. Kilgore when she joined the church. Later, Reverend C. Herbert Oliver became pastor.

13. Virtually all blacks performed the heavy, dirty, dangerous unskilled labor and were paid according to the lower Panamanian silver standard, while U.S. whites were favored for the highly skilled crafts and mechanical work and received wages based on the higher U.S. gold standard.

she was so bright. She was, they said, born old. She did not like children, and she didn't like me especially. She always was with adults. She was very charming, and she lisped. But her conversation was an adult conversation. She was a *very* bright child, and she died of spinal meningitis. We came to the United States about a year and a half later.

When I go to New York, I have to go to Ellis Island and visit it as a museum, because this was my family's port of entry to the United States. I even remember the name of the boat we came here on, S.S. *Alianza*. My mother never let me forget it. (*Laughter.*) You know, people came here in all kinds of ways— with little bags on their shoulder, in steerage. I think it was very important to my mother that we came here on full passage. So she never let me forget that we came on the S.S. *Alianza* and that we weren't in steerage.

The one thing I remember about the trip is that the boat stopped in Port-au-Prince<sup>14</sup> after we left Panama. It is a play on the mind because I thought we went to the post office in Port-au-Prince, but I didn't know anything about post offices. Strange things stick in a child's mind. It was a little building with a pointed top. Now there may not be any reality to this, but this is what I remember. I remember the little boys would *dive* when people would throw money in the water, and then they would come up with the money in their teeth, which they could keep. I understand that it's still being done. I remember this because, you know, you're awed. I'd stand by the rail looking at them.

I remember Ellis Island because this was a sea of people. I'd never seen that many people in my life! They were all colors, all sizes. They were all speaking something different, many of them, because they were coming from all over the world. For many people, whoever was supposed to meet them was not there yet. There were Spaniards who were having trouble communicating, so my mother acted as interpreter since she was bilingual.

I remember that the cousins—my mother said that these were our cousins on my father's side because I didn't know them—were there early.<sup>15</sup> When we got there, they were there! This was a contrast against the people who were crying because there was no one to meet them. We went (*claps hands to indicate "quickly"*). Our papers were in order. We had funds—modest. We had somewhere to live and people with whom we were going to live. Evidently our physical examinations showed that we were healthy. So all of this had fallen into place. We had no problems.

14. According to the ship's manifest, the S.S. *Alianza* departed from Cristobol, Panama, on July 26, 1917, stopped in St. Marc, Haiti, on July 30, and arrived at Ellis Island on August 4.

15. The ship's manifest lists one cousin as James Reece of 135 West 143 Street.

I remember the physical examination and the people who were crying. I didn't know why they were crying then, but years later I learned that people were sent back, or either were stopped from coming in because they were sick. There was a very high incidence of tuberculosis. I learned these things twenty-five, thirty years later when I read about Ellis Island. Everybody I knew, that I worked with, was a foreigner, or their families had all come from someplace else—from Italy or from Poland or from Germany. I lived among my own Caribbean people and Central American people. So as a colored American I lived in a very different world.

What were the working conditions for your mother as a domestic?

In those days women worked as domestics for \$2.10 a day—ten cents carfare and two dollars. People would accumulate all their dirty clothes for a month and then pay you \$2.10 to wash and clean and do all of this work. When you washed clothes, you then boiled them in a big boiler, and you would have to hang them up on the roof. In February the sheets would freeze before you were able to get the clothespins in them. The person you worked for was only a little bit better off than you, but they could afford to pay you. I think my mother worked as a day worker maybe for a month. Then she said, “Never! Never!” When she talked, she was very dramatic. I think what finally broke her back was this incident. After working for eight hours washing clothes—and I think this lady gave my mother a hard-boiled egg and a stale roll for lunch—my mother did not get paid at the end of the day. This lady told my mother that her husband had not come home and she could not pay her. My mother said, “No?” Then she went over to the lady's china closet and held it and began to shake it. The lady went into her bedroom and found \$2.10 and got rid of my mother.

The humor and nerve of my mother was something else. An American friend of ours who was a great chef said to my mother, “Diana [pronounced Deean],<sup>16</sup> with your seasoning and cooking ability, we could make you a chef in a small place.” He got her some celluloid cuffs and a little hat with a poof, and she went to employment agencies. When she felt she had improved enough, she applied for a job as a chef, or maybe they called it a cook, in a very fancy little French restaurant. The cooks were all women, but they were all rather substantial women. My mother was short and small, thin. They looked at her and said she must be something very special if she came from the other side. By “other side” they meant that she was from the Caribbean,

16. It seems that Adina's name went through some changes in the United States.

was a foreigner. When the waitresses came in and started giving their orders, my mother was flabbergasted. The first two things she was told to make were “oysters à la Somerset” and “eggs à la goldenrod.” She said (*laughter*), “What do these Americans eat?” Well, to make a long story short, she started spinning around, and the experienced cooks in this little French restaurant saw that she was terrified with this, and they said some very harsh things to her. Since the waitresses weren’t getting their orders out, the owner said to my mother that she could stay and be a dishwasher. That was the end of my mother being a chef there. It’s probably a family trait that we do these strange things.

In due course, my mother decided to go to school. She loved the work of a beautician and went to school to become a beautician. After becoming a hairdresser, my mother never worked in anyone else’s place a day! What was so heroic about my mother that I did not appreciate until very late was her decision to go to school, and only having a limited English education she had to take the state board exam in New York with all of these medical terms. When she graduated weeks or months later, she saved her little money and opened her own business and worked there until the day many years later when my son and I forced her to sell the shop.

We made her give it up because the neighborhood became dangerous. The neighborhood was becoming part of a center for all kinds of illicit things. As against today it was infantile, penny ante stuff. We had moved to Brooklyn [730-A Macon Street] by then, and my mother’s shop was in what they called Spanish Harlem. She was Spanish-speaking and everybody loved her. But the young dope and prostitution lords wanted to use her basement, which she refused. The beauty parlor was street level, a big basement apartment was downstairs. They would call her *la señora en frente*, you know, the lady in front. They said they would pay her well. As a show of their good faith to her, they started out by flooding my mother with business. All the young girls who were their workers would come there and have their hair styled. She was so busy, and she had two or three other operators working with her.

When she refused to cooperate, life became difficult. All of the business they sent her was cut off. They’d leave dead rats, dead cats in front of the door. When the FBI came, they found dope stuck in the crevice between the window and the door of the building. They came in and asked my mother about it, and she said she didn’t know anything about it and didn’t know anybody. Maybe the FBI was rounding them up, so they stuck this dope in there. The dope peddlers knew that my mother was never going to say anything about them, but they simply wanted her out. They wanted that place. They

shot out the plate glass more than once, and even in those days the insurance was high.

When the worst of this was happening, I was out of the country. By that time my son, Eric, was living in Pittsburgh. It was in the fifties. But a good friend of mine—he was a black American Southerner named Donevant—he was a real estate person handling her affairs. He kind of kept track of her. Since this was beginning to get dangerous, we made her give it up. That was sad. If I had been more intelligent, I wouldn't have done that then. The ambition of her life we destroyed. But they would have hurt her. In any case, this is one of the things I do in a small way regret. Maybe we saved her life, but we destroyed something else.

Fortunately, I was busy enough in my life that she could share in a number of things. She was able to go to Africa. We stopped in Europe on our way to and from Africa. We stopped in Paris; there were some people we wanted to see there. She was very involved in what I was doing. Whether I was home or no, my home was an open house and Africans stayed there. My mother was very active in the block association to keep our block nice and participated when we had block parties. She would cook. A very talented, vivacious lady. If she had had an American education and had been more knowledgeable about this society, she would have been just tremendous. Bright! Bright! Bright!

Then my mother, this enterprising lady, had her own “overground.” She would go to Panama, and she would tell people, “Oh, come to the United States. My daughter, you know, is a union official. She'll get you a job.” And people would arrive at four o'clock in the morning, straight from Panama. I knew nothing about it. The bell would ring and my mother would be coming downstairs—we had a large old brownstone in Brooklyn—and she would say, “Well, May, I just said in passing when I was in Panama . . .”

Did she give you any house rules when you were a child concerning having company while she was working?

No, I was very good about that. She never had to say to me you cannot have somebody in your house. But back then, children and their parents had a different relationship. I assumed that if I had done something that my mother didn't want me to do, I would get in a lot of trouble. I tried to get a job, which she didn't know about. But what could really get you in trouble was bad behavior. Unh, unh. No. No. No. No. No. My mother was small but fierce! You just did not know that children talked back to their parents and children disobeyed. The kind of permissiveness that we have today was just not tolerated in my mother's household or with any of the children that we knew. I was a door-key child. I had a small key around my neck. By eleven, twelve

years old, I was an old person. And everybody sort of looked out for one another's children. If my mother's neighbor saw me doing something, she would come to visit her and would tell her about me. They didn't have telephones.

I had three vices. One, I used to hop ice wagons. When the ice wagon would start off with the horse, you would jump on the back step. Of course, the driver would chase you off. But it was great pleasure jumping on the ice wagon as it began to roll down the street. Now, that was not proper activity for a girl. The little boys hopped ice wagons. So anyone who saw me hop an ice wagon would tell my mother.

In those days, the icemen brought the ice up. We always lived on the top floor because the rent was cheapest there. Today the rent is more expensive because you have a view from the top floor. So we got ice on Saturdays, I think, a seventy-five-cent piece of ice and a thirty-five-cent piece during the week. You would carefully wrap it up in newspapers, so it would last a couple of days. And you would always have a window box outside the kitchen window to put certain foods that wouldn't fit in the icebox. That was your other refrigerator in the winter. My job was to empty the pan underneath the icebox, because the water would run over. I would forget very often. Ooh, my dear! My mother would have a fit.

The other vice I had was shooting emmies, playing marbles with the boys. A few girls played, too, but it was frowned upon. Well, when they saw me doing that, they'd tell my mother, come over and have a cup of tea with her that evening. So whenever my mother would say to me when I was going to bed, "Miss Maida," I would know I was in trouble. Somebody had reported something I had done.

My third vice was belly whopping. When there was snow, you'd throw yourself on the sleigh and slide down the hill. In Manhattan there was St. Nicholas Park where children used to go sleigh riding. My mother told me the one thing that no girl should do was go belly whopping. After all, you were going to grow up and be a young lady and you might hurt yourself. But I loved to go belly whopping. I didn't think I was a tomboy because I'm not that athletic. But I enjoyed it. My mother was disgraced. She was outraged. So these were my vices. These things kept my mother in a dither. I was always doing one or the other. Our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Murray—our buildings were numbered 135 and 137 on West 142nd Street—would not tell on me, but she would talk to me because she thought my behavior on ice wagons and shooting emmies was not really good.

Mrs. Murray always included me in whatever she was doing with her children. I was friends with her daughter, Dora. At age seven, we were in the



Catholic school, St. Marks, together. When I was maybe ten years old, I saw a pattern of a dress with a little waistline. And my mother said she would buy the material. She was so pleased that I wanted to do something besides hop ice wagons. (*Laughs*.) A friend of hers who was a very fine dressmaker cut out the pattern for me, and I made a dress for Dora and me with little tam-o'-shanters to go with it.

Mrs. Murray started helping my mother find her way in, as my mother called it, "the United States of America." She was introducing this Panamanian mother to the American social mores. Mrs. Murray loved young people. All of her weekends were devoted to her children. She took me under her wing and introduced me to the American system. She took me for my first library card in the 135th Street library. She took me on my first kind of family picnic, my first museum, things like that. She was a beautiful Creole lady, butter-colored and graceful manners. They were from New Orleans.

Mrs. Murray's mother kept the house and her two grandchildren. I think I almost lost my family relationship with them when we were learning how to make taffy. When her grandmother was out of the house, Dora and I pulled this taffy and stuck it all over the kitchen and couldn't get it cleaned up in time. And we spilled hot water all over the floor. Her grandmother said that it was my fault, as she called me, "that ole big-legged gal next doe [door]" (*laughs*), because I was short and small but had very fat legs. But Mrs. Murray forgave me. She knew that children do these things. Mrs. Murray and her family remained close and were a part of my life until she died. Both of her children died as young adults.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Murray worked. For a *colored woman*, Mrs. Murray had a very fancy job. She worked for a very prestigious pharmaceutical firm, Ben Diner and Schlesinger. At that time, it was very unusual that a person of color was working in any capacity with any firm. Her husband was a very proud Pullman porter, because those were good jobs in those days. You never *saw* a great deal of him because he was on the road all the time. But he was meticulous. He was always so spotless in his uniform and his shoes. They lived well and had a very nice home.

When I was given the Rosina Tucker Award of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in June last year [1989], I talked about how Dora and I as children used to fold and stuff leaflets for Mr. Murray that told of the problems of the porters and their demands. I didn't know what I was stuffing or what Mrs. Murray was doing then when she was inviting these ladies, porters' wives, to her house. This was before the porters became a really potent organization. These men were trying to organize and they would carry their leaflets

on their run. As they stopped off different places, the men who were working with them would get the material and circulate it. I learned that this was a porters' organization years later. Pops Murray was wonderful. He would laugh and tell me about those times, when many years later my husband Owen, Eric, and I lived in the apartment on the top floor of the brownstone that the Murrays had bought at 218 Edgecombe Avenue after moving from 142nd Street.

Dora and I started school together at St. Marks. This was a mixed school. We were the only two colored children in that class, 2-A. We sat together in double seats. The teachers were all maiden ladies or nuns. In those days a woman could not be married and teach school. You had very rigorous training in the classroom. You had to do your homework.

Was this integrated school, St. Marks, in your neighborhood or near?

It was in the neighborhood! You know, you didn't talk about "integrated" schools in those days. In my block on 142nd Street, the owners of the grocery store and the drugstore and the butcher were white and all lived in the neighborhood, lived upstairs, above the stores. So I didn't know anything about the word "integration." That came later. (*Laughter.*) With the first apartment my parents had—their marriage ended very shortly after we came here—the superintendent had an apartment in the cellar with his family. In those days, we called them janitors. He was white. His children and I went to the same school. They had their other things they went to that we didn't go to. Then as Harlem began with the waves of people coming from the South and from the islands, the white community began moving out and your community began to be more colored.

When I went to the public school, P.S. 90, the teachers were tough also and they taught you, because the classes were mixed. But teachers in the public schools told parents, all the black parents I'm sure, that your child shouldn't take this course or that course because they wouldn't get a job, they wouldn't be able to find any work. They would say the black child should take some industrial course like basic typing or the boys should go to school and learn a trade. This was flagrant.<sup>17</sup>

When I was in sixth or seventh grade, my mother didn't know the Ameri-

17. White educational administrators' discouragement of black children from pursuing higher aspirations was a systemic problem nationally. Osofsky, *Harlem*, wrote that school administrators said that they hesitated to encourage blacks because they feared that "it would only lead to frustrations after graduation." Rarely were black teachers allowed to teach in mixed schools. Springer commented that she did not see a black teacher the first four years after coming to the United States (200).

can system, but she resented the fact that a counselor or the teacher would tell me that there was no way I could do whatever it was I wanted to do at the time. You see, we had to write down what we wanted to do. They would talk to you in the class about this. I guess this was the counseling that she was doing with the black kids, to discourage them from wanting certain goals. She wrote to my mother about this. So my mother went to school and chewed that lady up and down, never using a vulgar word. No, not being abusive. No. That's what people very often do when they're angry, curse and be very vulgar. Not my mother. She said, "Miss Teacher, how do you know? How do you know?" Because I had all good marks.

Were you aware in your neighborhood of aggression toward black people? Were you aware that there were certain boundaries you shouldn't cross?

Aware of boundaries, but in the language of integration, segregation — no. We were different. We did different things. We didn't go to the same social things as whites. By the same token, not only did we not socialize with whites, but the American colored community was a separate entity from foreign-born blacks. In my mother's life, our enclave was generally the people who were culturally like us—blacks from the Caribbean and Central America. Colored Americans dealt with people culturally like them. But because of our similarity of circumstance, we did some things together.

For example, the Negro church was the cultural unit for all blacks, the social center, because this was the place where you had theater and concerts. This is where the artists and poets performed. This was your religious community and your social community. So in this all the colored community shared. This was a part of the social outlets and the opportunities for black people to show their talents. We had entertainment in the church basement, as well as readings and entertainment in your home. There was certainly much more of that kind of entertainment available to us than there is today where everything costs a lot of money.

I ran across some information that said you had a piano at home when you were young.

Yes, of course! Well, in every household your child learned some musical instrument. My mother got a piano. She bought it on time. (*Laughs.*) She paid weekly money for it, because her child had to learn music. Some children played the violin. Girls didn't play trombones and things like that in those days. So we had a piano, and I went (imitating a simple scale) dee dee dee dee dee dee. (*Laughs.*) When adults came to my home, they played this piano. People entertained at home, and so you would have Saturdays and Sundays for this.

In one of your letters, I read that among the people you saw in church were Florence Mills, Ethel Waters, and Bert Williams.<sup>18</sup>

My husband Owen was a collector of black art entertainment. He was a great collector of records, and he had all the records of Bert Williams. He did wonderful mimics of Bert Williams. You would not generally think so because he was a quiet, serious person. But he was a great mimic. Eric still has some of the old OKeh records.<sup>19</sup> Florence Mills played in local theaters. I think she was one of the first [black] people in a Broadway show, early on. So she did not do as much in my youth. She was beyond that. She was a really big personality in the theater. But almost every great artist gave of himself or herself in the black church. It was a part of the social responsibility. It was part of the strength of the church. There was a social environment that was much more community oriented, and the Negro church played a multiple role.

A friend was talking to me a few days ago. She said, “You know, on Sunday morning we went to Sunday school. Then, I went to church with my parents. Then we had dinner in the church. Then in the afternoon at four or five o’clock, we went to BYPU [Baptist Young People’s Union]. Then you had evening service. And then if there were special occasions like readings or a cultural program, we went to that.” It was a kind of welcome. Your life was centered around the church. The events of the day people discussed in groups. As they still do, people visited the sick. But visiting was certainly, from a child’s point of view, almost like a family relationship. My mother would make her specialties, something cooked or a basket of fruit, and I always went with her. When somebody moved in the neighborhood, you went to invite them to the church and found out what was their denomination. We were not Baptists, but I would go with all my little friends who were Baptists. Church for my mother was high church, because all the people from the islands (*laugh-*

18. Internationally acclaimed actress Florence Mills (1895–1927) used her status to comment on racial injustices. She first appeared in the musical *Shuffle Along*, which was written, directed, and performed entirely by blacks. Her funeral was the largest in the history of Harlem at that time. See Park Net, National Park Service, “Florence Mills House, a National Historic Landmark, Places Where Women Made History,” A National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary, [www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/pwwmh/ny24.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/pwwmh/ny24.htm) (accessed March 18, 2003). Ethel Waters (1896–1977) was a singer and actress. Appearing on Broadway and the movies, she was nominated for an Oscar in 1949 for her role in *Pinky*. Antiguan-born Egbert Austin Williams (1874–1922) was internationally renowned as a singer, comedian, and an actor in the minstrel tradition. He appeared on Broadway in the *Ziegfeld Follies*.

19. The OKeh record label started the black music recording industry with the recording of Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” in 1920. See David Edwards and Mike Callahan, “OKeh Album Discography,” [www.iconnect.net/home/bsnpubs/okeh.html](http://www.iconnect.net/home/bsnpubs/okeh.html) (accessed March 18, 2003).

ing) were all Anglicans. I laugh because there are so many recollections later of people making fun of these people and their high church.

Then, in addition of course in my family, my mother was a member of the Garvey movement. This was a place of great innovation, because you had Marcus Garvey talking about “Don’t buy where you can’t work” and a back-to-Africa movement. You listened to great oratory. At nine years old, I was listening to great stuff. The woman that made a great impression on me—because I had never heard a woman speaker before—was Henrietta Vinton Davis. She was a very highly trained American woman and was one of the leaders in the Garvey movement and one of the great advisers. Perhaps if Garvey had listened to her, he would not have done some of the extreme things, which permitted the American government to charge him with all sorts of things and chase him out of the country. Only recently when I looked through the *Sage* compilation of women, did I realize for the first time that Henrietta Vinton Davis was an American woman. I had thought she was part of the West Indian entourage. At nine when I saw all of these men posturing and talking and reshaping the world, this woman could just hold you. I would sit there in attention and with awe. She commanded an audience. As an adult I have read of her fine dramatic training. This one woman and Garvey’s wife [Amy Jacques] were so compelling.

So Harlem was the center of the cultural ferment. Everybody was coming from everywhere to be a part of Harlem. And then, of course, later came what is called the Harlem Renaissance. I lived in a community where all of that developed.

UNIA Hall was five blocks from where we lived. We were there Sunday morning and Sunday afternoon, or maybe you went to church Sunday morning and went there in the afternoon. There were always hot political issues, and my mother was always there, and I was with her. There were no babysitters. We didn’t know that word. Only very wealthy people have people to take care of their children. Your children were taken care of by a relative, or everywhere you went, your child went with you. We had no relatives. So life was very, very different. You were very closely tied to your family. My mother was one of the Black Cross Nurses. I remember her marching in a Garvey parade as one of the Black Cross Nurses with her white uniform, a nurse cap, and a red, black, and green cape. She was not a nurse, of course, but she knew the smelling salts and other emergency remedies. There was Garvey with his hat with plumes and all the pomp and circumstance. And I’m marching right along with my mother.

Marcus Garvey was attempting to develop what you call today real estate ventures. So Negroes began to buy property and fix them up. My mother was a member of the Terry Holding Association, probably a three-dollar shareholder, a minimal shareholder.<sup>20</sup> We never had any money to really invest. Some people made great investments and did very well in that limited period.

Don't forget, there were such restrictions as to what the Negro could do. If you walked to the movies at Loew's on 125th Street, you had to sit upstairs. This was in our community! My mother was fierce about those things and did not care to sit, as she called it, in the poop deck. I guess on some occasion I must have gone there with her to see something. But she would not permit me to go. I went to the movies in my neighborhood on the corner, and they didn't have an upstairs balcony. There were stores that you were not welcomed in. You could not go into and sit down and eat in Childs Restaurant in the middle of 125th Street. In the stores in my *own* community on 125th Street, you never saw a nonwhite person working there. This was seventeen blocks away from my home and was the shopping center. There was a big department store that did not hire Negroes. "Don't buy where you can't work" was the Garvey theme picked up later on by Adam Clayton Powell Jr. In my own small way, I picketed up and down those streets against Blumsteins and other such stores. I was a little older then, and this was with the Fellowship of Reconciliation.<sup>21</sup> This was around 1934. At that time I was an activist in the American labor movement and was busy with everything that was going on with protest. So that tells you about this black and white community. And after three o'clock, we children didn't cross certain boundaries, or you would fight for your life. Because it still was an Irish, an Italian, a Jewish mixture you had in this community.

Oh, there were many things that were wrong. I first heard of Frank Crosswaith and A. Philip Randolph as soapbox speakers. Later they became my friends, and Randolph, my mentor. You had limited access to the press. So the street corner was the people's place. Anything you had to say, you got up on a soapbox and put up the American flag and articulated that. These men

20. The Terry Holding Company was established by Watt Terry. A Virginian by birth, he moved north in 1901. Starting with fifteen cents, he made a large fortune in land speculation in Massachusetts before settling in Harlem in 1917. He was reportedly one of the wealthiest blacks, if not the wealthiest, in the United States. See Osofsky, *Harlem*, 119.

21. The Fellowship of Reconciliation began in England in 1914 as a movement against the horrors of World War I. In 1919 it was founded as an interfaith international organization committed to fighting injustices through nonviolent means. See Fellowship of Reconciliation, "History and Supporters," [www.forusa.org/about/history.html](http://www.forusa.org/about/history.html) (accessed March 18, 2003).

were *passionately* discussing the state of the American Negro. Don't forget, you came out of World War I, the war that you had fought for other people, to improve their lives, and you find that you came back and they were ready to lynch you! Lynchings were going on, and you could see the pictures of people being tarred and feathered in the Negro press. You heard the stories of repression and the jobs you could not have! Don't forget that A. Philip Randolph during World War I was called the most dangerous Negro in the United States.

I heard these people on the street corner, because my mother was a street corner person. She was listening to everything. My mother always knew who was speaking where, because some of our friends, some of the Caribbean people, were among the noisemakers on the corner. Whatever terrible work you did during the weekdays and on Saturday, hitting rocks or doing whatever menial job, on Sunday you were a man or a woman. Many meetings, just Sunday afternoon gatherings, were held at my house. My mother was an extraordinary cook. She would cook fricasseed chicken and fried plantain and rice and peas and coconut bread or coconut cake in the summer when you could get all these things.

We shopped "under the bridge," as they called it where you got all the Caribbean foods, spices, and seasonings. "Under the bridge" was downtown on the East Side and it was in Harlem underneath the New York Central Railway. You were able to buy things cheaper in the summer. It was an open-air market that catered to this diverse community of foreigners. They've closed that now and you have an indoor market.

My grandmother would send some things to us from Panama from her farm. During these gatherings men played music. People recited. People talked politically, *passionately* about discrimination. I don't even think it was called that word, but they talked about just the oppression people faced.

Were you aware as a child of any discussion of the conflicts between Randolph and Garvey?

By the time I was really aware of that, I was older and maybe away from home and had read some of this. But as a child at home, no. No. When we came here in 1917, Randolph was talking antiwar. J. Mitchell Palmer was the attorney general. He considered Randolph one of the most dangerous men in the United States, and so of course you read that. You know that in America that there was a division, a feeling of black Americans that *maybe* this is a chance; we will serve the country. Maybe we will get respect for our citizenship. And Randolph was saying this is a war that you have no business being in. That kind of talk I heard because the adults were talking, all of these

Caribbean people were talking about the situation here and having opinions on it. They weren't talking to me. (*Laughter.*) They had conflicting feelings as to what was happening in America.

Did you ever get a sense that people were denouncing Randolph?

Never! Never! They thought Randolph was a great man, that he was speaking to the hurt of black Americans.

What do you now think about some of the ads selling hair straighteners and skin lighteners that were in the organ of the UNIA, the *Negro World*, and other black papers?

All right, this was dollars, evidently. They were selling newspapers. And you know enough about what we do today, I mean our whole society, what kind of contradictions we have. You know that in this society *still* the question of color is very alive and well. You look at all the creams that can make you fairer and all of the things that you do to your hair. Yes, it's a part of a contradiction. We still are full of contradictions. (*Laughter.*) It's better now, though. I think we are respecting ourselves more. But skin lighteners were very prominent. Part of the income from all the Negro newspapers was from these ads about bleach creams. You cannot live in a culture, in which you are 10 percent or less of the population at that time, that denigrates you because of color and not be affected negatively. Within the black community there was this demarcation—the lighter you were, the more opportunity, the better job you could get. This was true until a few years ago, quite.

Did you have an understanding that these skin lighteners could be dangerous?

No! I think I knew when I was a teenager someone who suffered from this. You knew someone who got sick and broke out in all kinds of bumps because they poisoned themselves with these skin bleachers. But you were not talking in terms of health, and you did not know the scientific reasoning. This is your generation. And since nothing like that could be used in my house, there was never a problem. My mother would kill me. (*Laughs.*)

Her threat always was with anything I did to displease her that she would kill me. And when she was annoyed with me even when I was an adult, she would say, "You know if I had had you in the hospital, I would disown you." She would say this to me because I would wear subdued clothes and not bright colors. She said I did not have a little dash of paprika. My tastes were so limited. She said it when I sent my six-year-old son to his first camp, and my husband agreed with her. How could I be so cruel as to send my only child with all of those strangers? She thought that was the worse thing I had ever done. But Eric as an old man has happy recollections of camp.

I wanted to take him out of that cocoon and put him in an atmosphere where he would be with other children, where he was not special. I thought



this camp would make him a more social person and not pampered so by this family of his. Six of his seven first cousins were older than Eric, and one of his cousins was the senior counselor of the camp. Eric was my mother-in-law's very special child, I think for the reason that his father was a very fragile child and they did not expect him to live. So she was so grateful that Owen grew to be a man, married, and had a child. While she loved her daughter, Owen was very, very special and tender to her. This family even today is like this, very close. I come from a small and narrow family and for all intents and purposes am an only child.

What made Eric's camp experience look worse in my mother's view was that he got off the bus looking very grimy and happy, with scratch marks on his legs. If he had gotten all of that at home, this would just be boys' play. But the fact that he went to camp against her and my husband's wishes, she said, "You see. Look at this boy! Look!" My mother was fierce about her grandson. What I learned was that no one had ever had a grandchild other than my mother. No, she was a very special lady.

In an autobiographical sketch I found in your papers, you wrote that young Africans, mostly from Nigeria, stayed at your house during the summer in the early twenties.

Well, as I have told you, my mother from the time we came here was involved in the Back to Africa movement. The Nigerians we met were going to Southern colleges and working in New York in the summer, and we were part of a network. My mother had a room to rent and someone would be recommended. In this way over four or five years, this helped to pay the rent. I remember only one particular student. His name was Said Ibrahim. He was a very introspective man. He was more serious than the other people who had stayed with us. I remember him because he thought that my mother should not let me go out to play, that I should be studying something that I had no knowledge at all about, some higher mathematics. I was a reader so that was not a problem. But he thought my mother allowed me to be too frivolous. He would talk to my mother in the evenings about my frivolity. Instead of jumping rope and hopping ice wagons, I should be studying. So I would never forget him, because if I had known the phrase then, I would have said, "Later for you." My mother took him seriously and thought he had a good point. She worked during the day and couldn't control what I was doing. I would quickly do whatever it was I was supposed to do in the house and then go play.

The other reason I remember Mr. Ibrahim so well was that he told my mother the reason I should study math was that I should be the first black aviatrix. He and my mother knew Herbert Julian, a man from the Caribbean

who was called the Black Eagle. Once he was flying to Africa in an airplane and I think he flew over a river and dropped in it. (*Laughs.*)<sup>22</sup> Later he was heading the Ethiopian Air Force and buying their planes. He was always an entrepreneur. He was the best PR person, a great name. And he was a very, very dashing man. Many, many years later, when we were on the same plane, I spoke to him and he remembered my mother. I think he may have told my mother also that I should be an aviatrix. So you know I didn't like this man, Said Ibrahim, *at all!* He wanted me to be sitting in the house studying math all summer when my friends were having so much fun. This man was a scholar. I didn't know anything about scholars. I just thought he was a nuisance. (*Laughs.*)

What were your early experiences with intraracial hostilities?

There was hostility against people from the Caribbean, West Indians, Central Americans. They said we were clannish, we talked funny, we cooked with strange-smelling herbs. You know, you pick on all kinds of trivial things to disassociate yourself. The American Negroes are being stressed and pained and humiliated and discriminated against, and I think this was a natural lashing out at someone who was different. Because you are so pained, you are looking for a scapegoat. Of course, when you are old, you can rationalize what happened. But the bottom line was that employers dumped on both of us.

And I do say that in that period, many of the people from the Caribbean arrived here very politicized. When we came here, my family got immediately involved in the Garvey movement where there was *hot* debate and discussions by West Indians about the conditions here. There were no laws against discrimination. You called the people what you wanted, you chased them off the job, you paid them as little as you wanted. There was no FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Committee], no Social Security for blacks or whites, no unemployment compensation, no Wagner Act.<sup>23</sup> For the poor whites—

22. Herbert Fauntleroy Julian, who was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, became an officer of the UNIA, which had as one of its auxiliaries the Black Eagle Flying Corps. In 1924, after collecting funds through newspaper advertising, Julian announced he would fly to Africa. Although he did not have sufficient funding to keep to his July 4 departure date, he proceeded anyway because there were strong indications that postal department agents would prosecute him for mail fraud. A crowd of thirty thousand met him at the 139th Street pier where he took off in a Boeing hydroplane he had never flown, named *Ethiopia I*. After the right pontoon ripped away, Julian was forced to nosedive into Flushing Bay, miraculously surviving with only a broken leg. See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 111–12.

23. In 1941 Franklin Roosevelt established the FEPC as a wartime measure against discrimination by the government and defense industries after Randolph threatened a march on Washington. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) barred certain antiunion practices and established the right of workers to form unions of their choice.

and the majority of whites were poor—there was a song, “Over the Hill to the Poor House.”<sup>24</sup> The employer would retire the mules that worked in the mines, but the worker, black or white, was on the dump heap after he finished with them. So we mutually were abused. There was no government intervention to alleviate the conditions of the nonworking poor. *All* of this legislation came many, many years later with the advent of Franklin Roosevelt.

So if as an old, old woman I still reflect on the positive aspects of the American labor movement, it is because it made not the leader of the union but that amorphous mass of workers down there, a people who could live with dignity. The union structured health centers, their own vacation centers, set up colleges to train their people. So I have an unending love affair with the American labor movement. I make no apologies for whatever has been found to be wrong with the American labor movement, but so much has been right that I will always be an advocate. The strongest working-class Republicans can afford to be so because the American labor movement did the kinds of things which *made them whole*. This or any other society will never be a classless society, and that is true whether it is the Soviet Union or the United States. But to the degree that a government can be challenged and workers can have the right to help to determine their hours of work, conditions of employment, redress of their grievances, it's the labor movement that made this contribution on behalf of the working class. I remain a member of that class without apology.

When did you first start to work?

Between ages eleven and thirteen. Since I was tall for my age at that time, although I've never grown an inch since I was eleven, people thought I was older. My mother, who was short, despaired, because she felt she was going to have a giant. I had big feet, big hands, and was five feet four inches. My friends—I had become Americanized by then—went to work in the summer. Children went to work at age fourteen because most families had six, eight, ten, twelve children. The oldest child and particularly the girls got out and worked. Everybody tried to get a job, to help yourself, help your family.

An older friend was working in a factory and said to me that she could get me a job there as something called a pinker. A pinking machine had a small wheel that you used to cut these jagged edges that you see on the seams of garments. In those days, they did them by hand. You would put the edges of the garment on this machine and you rolled this little wheel around very quickly to make the jagged edges. Then it went to the operators. I had never

<sup>24</sup>. “Over the Hill to the Poor House” was originally a poem written by Will Carleton in 1897.

seen a pinking machine, this little wheel. My friend described it to me. She had used pieces of paper for the garment to show me how you worked the machine.

So when I went to the factory and was asked did I know how to pink, I said yes. They showed me the machine and gave me a bundle of work. I sat down and I began turning the wheel. With the first bundle that they gave me, I cut the center fold of the skirt instead of the side seams that were to be stitched. So I made an opening that the designers had not planned. Fortunately, the employer came over—it was a husband and wife team—and he looked at this bundle. Since it was new work, he wanted to see what I was doing, if the cutting was straight. I was evidently quick. When he saw I had cut the center fold open, this man screamed. He said he'd throw me out the window. His wife, who must have been a compassionate, loving woman, came over and said after all the commotion as he was chasing me out, "This girl has nerve. Let's give her a chance."

I worked there the whole summer, and I caught on. I was quick. I did a lot of other things. The wife encouraged me not to go back to school, that I could stay there and work and move up in the factory. But I didn't. The garments were for a very fancy house, a place called the Tailored Woman, which had expensive, fine-tailored garments. This was one of the most daring experiences for a young girl who had never seen this little machine grinding out jagged edges. That's one experience I'll never forget. That man's rage! Well, he was justified. (*Laughter.*) There may have been two pinking machines. And they were busy and had a lot of work when they took on this absurd young girl.

In that shop, there may have been five black people. It wasn't a large shop, there were about thirty, thirty-five people. The rest were Italians, Jews, a few others. There may have been a Spanish person. In the industry at that time, none of the power machine operators were black. None! Most of the owners of the shops were Jewish and Italians.

How did you get to work?

Oh, listen. The subway fare was ten cents round-trip. I guess I either took the bus or the subway. Ten cents transportation, fifteen cents for lunch. Ten cents for a sandwich, five cents for a soda. Or either I took my lunch from home after my mother found out that I was employed. At first, she was very much opposed to my working. But our financial circumstances made her concede that if I was helping myself, I was helping her. I could save the money I earned in order to go back to school. Some of my other friends were working doing different things. These friends were not from my neighborhood. It just

so happened that most of the children in those days and the people who were our family friends were all in better circumstances than we were. My little friend, Dora Murray, never worked.

By age thirteen, I had had a couple of jobs. My friend was working in this airbrush factory, and so I went down and got a job there. Women were wearing what looked like hand-painted garments which were fashionable at the time. The designs were done with an airbrush, a stencil. You laid out the stencil pattern and with an airbrush you made the design. The colors were marked one, two, three, four, five. It was piecework. I was very good at it; I was very fast. I was precise, so there was no damage because I did not spill over the pattern. The end of the week I had earned about seventeen dollars. This man said that I made mistakes on the work and he would not pay me. So I cried and went home that Friday night.

My mother didn't know I had this job until about midweek. She went to work a half hour before I left the house, and I got home before she did. I'd push my work under the bed, start burning up the dinner. (*Laughter.*) She's coming home from work, and she's tired and she's not really noticing. But by the third day she knew something. People worked on Saturdays in those days, but my mother took the day off and went to the factory. I had all the slips of the work I'd done. I wouldn't give them to him after he wouldn't pay me. My mother was small, but as she said, "*pura Latina.*" She was a pure Latin. She told him off. She did not use vulgarity, but she used her eyes and a way of stamping her feet. And when she would really take off, then she would tell him in Spanish what she wanted him to know. What she finally told him—this little short, small, thin woman—was that she would eat him without salt and leave him with his head hanging out. He paid me. Never wanted to see me or my mother again. And that was the end of that job. I don't think I worked anymore that summer. I think my mother promised to eat me without salt. (*Laughs.*) I caused my mother so much trouble trying to be helpful.

From that job, she let me spend most of the money. I've always had a rocking chair. As you see, even at this old age I have an antique rocking chair in my bedroom. I wanted to buy a chintz print to make a seat for the rocking chair and a bedspread to match. She permitted me to use that money. She said she thought I had earned that. I guess the print was maybe ten cents, twenty cents a yard. I must have used three or four dollars to make this outfit for my bedroom. These experiences are kind of landmarks in your life when you are beginning to be an adult.

There was one instance that was the most searing experience. My friends were applying for a job at the telephone company. You took an oral test and

a written test. What I was told then was that my enunciation was good and that my written test was very good. But the woman in charge *said* to me, “What white mother would want you to sit next to their child?” I had said I was fourteen, but I was eleven years old, and I was devastated. (*Chuckles.*) All the operators sat together on the switchboard lines, and it was for that reason I was not considered. That’s hard to accept today when you look at the telephone company and the diversity of the people who work there. But racism was *blatant*. There were no laws. There was nothing an employer could not say or virtually do to a person of color.<sup>25</sup> It was a very different world. Racism is still here. It takes subtle forms. And if there are overt forms, there are ways that you can begin to challenge it. That experience was all very strange and very difficult. As old as I am, that experience, *despite* a long life of a lot of other very good experiences, remains stark with me. *This* was the first time I had this very *open* hostility.

When I was older, I worked with Madame Malone. I had worked at Poro College because my mother had forced me for two or three summers to take hairdressing. That is where I met Madame Malone. She had Poro schools in many parts of the country. She was a very religious woman. At midday every day in the school, you stopped for midday prayer.

You see, my mother had a great passion. She wanted to become a beautician and thought that I would become a beautician, too. And because I would have been trained in the American schools, I would go further and learn all the new innovations to develop a large business. This was in the back of her mind all these years, and her ambition. Before my mother went to beauty school, she made me on my summer vacations go to beauty school, go to take hairdressing, which I hated! I went to Poro school on Seventh Avenue in Harlem and took the course and passed it. I never worked as a hairdresser one hour in my life! I despised it! I hated it! I didn’t want to wash anybody’s hair. My mother loved it—manicures and all of that.

Because New York was her second headquarters, Madame Malone was here a lot.<sup>26</sup> She took a fancy to me and gave me a job as a receptionist at the college. That summer, I was one of the students. She would call me into her office and apartment back there and talk to me. She thought I had a future,

25. The New England Telephone Company barred the employment of blacks and Jews as operators until the 1940s. No blacks were hired in any capacity above that of janitor in the entire Bell system into the 1930s. Stephen H. Norwood, *Labor’s Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878–1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 42–43.

26. The first Poro College founded in 1917 in St. Louis served as the base of Malone’s operations.

that I had a presence, and that I was well spoken. So she wanted to teach me to travel on behalf of the school. They wanted to train me to be a teacher. By then, I guess, somebody must have told her I would never be a good hairdresser. (*Laughs.*) But anyway, that was her hope. This is how I got close to Madame Malone.

You called her Madame Malone?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You were very proper. I tell you, we prayed every day. (*Laughs.*) Every day.

My first impression? Awe. She was a soft-spoken woman, but very correct and very, very traditional. Just extremely correct. I thought too correct for my taste. (*Laughs.*) This is how she impressed me. When she spoke, you listened. She would dress as befitted a lady of her station, the head of an organization. She always had on hats and gloves and muted shades when she walked out. She wore *no* flamboyant colors and wore very nice things. You could look at her clothes and see that it was, as we say, “high-class stuff.” (*Laughs.*) I remember her having a faint smell of lavender.

By the time you first worked summers at Poro College, you had spent a number of school years enrolled in an industrial school.

I spent three years at Bordentown Industrial School in New Jersey. The first time I went to Bordentown, they rejected me; they sent me home. All of the girls who went to Bordentown had to be young ladies. But I was not a young lady the first time, although I was tall for age eleven. I was the correct grade, and they accepted me, but when the matron, Mrs. Davis, asked me what you ask young ladies, I didn’t know what she was talking about.<sup>27</sup> So she just said to my mother, “How old is this little girl?” My mother hung her head and said I was eleven.

I returned and was accepted when I was thirteen. This school especially sought children who came from one-parent homes. I did not know the kind of school it was until many years later when I saw a story about it in the *New York Times*.<sup>28</sup> This article mentioned that I was one of the graduates. Bordentown was a church-oriented boarding school as most of those institutions were. You lived in a dormitory. My first year I think we were three in a room. After that, we were two in a room. I would visit my mother at Christmas and Easter. People didn’t have that kind of money to go home often. But my mother would come and visit me.

27. Minnie Davis, matron of the girls’ dormitory for twenty-one years, resigned in 1941. She had asked young Maida a question concerning menstruation.

28. “School in Jersey Aids Negro Youths,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1948.

A student that stands out in my mind was this beautiful young Indian boy, Charles Irquoit. He was mixed Indian and Negro. He had a great, long hooked nose and walked as though he was barefooted or had moccasins on. He had a thrilling voice. I don't know why I remember him except he was so beautiful and so kind. He was a tall young man. He moved quietly. He talked quietly.

Since it was an industrial and agricultural school, you spent part of so many days a week sewing and cooking and doing those sorts of courses. You raised most of the food. But you also had academic courses. Because most of the men and women were first-class brains, were scholars, they gave you so much. I think I still read a lot today because of my history professor and a woman named Frances Grant.<sup>29</sup> She taught English literature. Every year she would travel to some part of the world. One year it would be Europe, and then it would be in Latin America. She would come back and draw word pictures for you. My interest in reading and my curiosity—I'm not educated, but I'm fairly well read—came out of this background.

My history professor's name was Mr. Williams.<sup>30</sup> He graduated from Harvard. It was said his father had been a janitor there. That's how he went to Harvard. His talk fascinated me. I never learned anything in public school very much about ex post facto law and the slavery codes and what happened after the Revolution. He made history poetry. He was a giant of a man. He must have been six three or four with great big lips and coal black in color and great big feet. When he walked across the room and talked about the history of the United States and the politics of black men and women like Sojourner Truth, I sat in awe with my mouth open. It was music. It was music.

So at Bordentown the history of the American Negro became alive! The music of America, which I had been introduced to in the Negro church, was kept alive. Big names, people like Paul Robeson and Dr. Du Bois walked across your stage, ate in the dining room. You served them! If I was lucky and it was my week to work in the teachers' dining room, I saw all kinds of people. They made a circuit of the black schools. *These* were the people I saw. They would

29. For more information on Frances O. Grant, see Maurine Rothschild, "Frances O. Grant, Interview," in *The Black Women Oral History Project*, vol. 4, ed. Ruth Edmonds Hill (New Providence, NJ: K. G. Saur Verlag, 1991), 361–421.

30. In 1918, Thomas Calvin Williams began teaching history and civics at Bordentown and served as the school's assistant principal. He retired in 1946. Alumni remember his commanding presence and proud demeanor and recall that their secret nickname for him was Blue Steel because of his dark color and strong presence. For information and literature about Bordentown, I am indebted to Richard Gross, alumni Arthur T. Harris and Nat Hampton, and former Bordentown teacher Helen M. Roberts. See the school newspaper, *The Ironsides Echo*, June 1955.



come on some special occasion and speak to a class and always address the entire school in the assembly. The best voices like Roland Hayes came.<sup>31</sup> Roland Hayes was this great star that could not really be recognized in the United States but could sing *lieder* in Germany. (*Laughs.*) A great voice. You name it, I've seen them on the stage in this little industrial school. Although this was an industrial school, not for the supposed intellectual, the quality of the teachers as I continue to reflect on this was just amazing. Somebody ought to write about the contribution of these people to the black schools.

Most of those brilliant men and women, that one percent graduating from excellent institutions of higher learning, found there were very few places they could be employed. William Hastie had just graduated from Amherst before he came to Bordentown as a science teacher.<sup>32</sup> That's how I met Judge Hastie. When he was, many years later, a very famous person, I was thrilled that he even remembered me. Possibly he did because we had a lot of mutual friends. One of them was Lester Granger, whose wife was the registrar at Bordentown.<sup>33</sup> Lester was the commandant there. Lester Granger took me under his wings after Bordentown with the various things I was doing. He became the executive secretary of the Urban League. I was a member of the Urban League.

At one time when Lester was the executive secretary, he tried to get a scholarship for me at NYU. He thought I was very bright and thought, in terms of my work in the labor movement, there were all these special courses that you could take with a scholarship. Since I was a married woman with a child and working, he thought I might get this grant. But I did not get it. That was one of the horror days for me. When I walked up to the building for the interview, my petticoat fell off in the street. A lot of young college people were sitting on the steps until their next class and they laughed. I stepped out of it and put it

31. Roland Hayes (1887–1977) was the most acclaimed black tenor of the first half of the twentieth century. He sang opera, black spirituals, and African folk music. Library of Congress, "Tenor Roland Hayes," *Imagination, American Treasures of the Library of Congress*, [www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trio32.html](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trio32.html) (accessed March 18, 2003).

32. William Henry Hastie (1904–1976) was a lawyer, educator, and government official. He graduated as valedictorian of the prestigious Dunbar High School in 1919 and of Amherst College in 1925. Hastie taught for two years at Bordentown to finance further education. In 1930 he graduated fourteenth in his Harvard Law School class of 690. He served as the first black governor of the Virgin Islands from 1946 to 1949. In 1949 he became the first black judge on the United States Court of Appeals. See Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Inc., "William Henry Hastie," [www.kornet.org/beckcec/hastie2.htm](http://www.kornet.org/beckcec/hastie2.htm) (accessed March 18, 2003).

33. Granger met his future wife at the school and married her after one year. Harriet "Lefty" Lane Granger held the position of bookkeeper from 1916 to 1951. Lester Granger, interview by William Ingersoll, 54–81, Oral History Project, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York, NY; *The Ironsides Echo*, June 1955.

in my purse. But I was so shaken by this that I arrived in the professor's office a basket case. I called Lester after the interview and just told him I mumbled like an idiot. When I told him my petticoat fell off, he couldn't stop laughing.

How did you get to know your first husband?

Owen Springer and I lived in the same neighborhood; we were neighborhood children. I think I'm five years younger than he. So he was one of the big boys in our block. Everyone knew everybody in our neighborhoods, and parents looked out for other people's children. All of our families shopped in the same neighborhood stores and talked to one another because we all came from somewhere else. Owen's family was Barbadian and mine were Panamanian. He had, I think, four aunts and an uncle living in the same block. Owen was one of the big boys that sort of looked out for the younger kids in the block, and I was one of those in a whole group.

The people in our block were very close. I remember in those days, the politicians having block parties. The Democrats controlled the area. They used to cordon off the block so that at one end of the block they had lemonade and cookies and cake for the children and fruit and nuts and hot dogs. And at the other end of the block they had beer and other things for the adults. They were buying your vote. In those days, there was a joke about them registering tombstones. That was the democratic process at its best. (*Laughs.*) I didn't understand all of that, of course, but I understood that this meant that they were cheating in some way. None of the organizations were clean, but Tammany Hall was a cesspool. J. Raymond Jones was considered the black political genius. They called him the Fox. He was very strategic in black political affairs; he delivered the black vote. He was a dispenser of goodies, got all of the political crumbs. (*Laughs.*)<sup>34</sup> I think Mayor David Dinkins is married to a relative of his.

Owen worked in an ice cream parlor owned by a German. As I said, in the community in those days most of the store owners either lived above their stores or close by. The ice cream parlor was on the corner of our block. We went—Dora Murray and maybe another friend—down to the parlor, sat on the stool, and had ice cream. I would eat pineapple temptations. Owen would buy ice cream for the three of us. I'm sure he didn't go home with much

34. J. Raymond Jones was from St. Thomas, the Virgin Islands. He gained his name "the Fox" through the legendary reputation he had fighting corruption and election fraud. In the 1960s he became the first black leader of Tammany Hall. Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), 113–14.

money. If they paid him five dollars a week, I guess we ate two dollars a week. (*Laughs.*)

I couldn't go in by myself. The neighbors would tell my mother. Children were not as independent and abrasive then. They did not talk back to their parents the way children do today. It was a very different psychology of child and parent. Your parents worked, your parents were right, and that was that. So we'd always be a group. You didn't go off somewhere. I guess some individual children did, but it wasn't done in my house or no one else's house that I knew, friends of mine. We did not disobey our parents. We found substituted ways of getting around them. But I wouldn't go off somewhere. No. No.

We didn't have television and all of the things that children have today. Let's see, what did we have? Victrola with a big horn. We didn't have a radio. We didn't have a telephone. We had a movie house on the corner. Everything was right in the neighborhood. If Owen wanted to take me to the movies, he would take me and two of my friends. If I was sitting alone in the movies at ten years old with a boy, my mother would be at the movie because one of the neighbors would have told her that I had gone into the movie with that Springer boy. (*Laughs.*)

Oh, I know the worst thing that happened to me. I think I was eleven. I had measles and Owen came to my house to ask my mother how I was doing. He heard I was sick. I think she was polite to him. After she told him I had measles and closed the door, she came in to me and said, "Who is that long man at my door asking about you?" I guess my fever went up ten points. So I told her his name, and I told her she knew his mother. Then Owen and I lost track of one another. There was nothing more involved than that until way up in my high school days. When I became a teenager and a boy could talk to a girl, I knew he was interested in me.

By the time I was nine or eleven—I knew this later—Owen had intentions on me. He would always ask my little friends if I wasn't in the block or if my mother had gone somewhere, if I was with my mother or where was I. His mother told me after we were married that he had told her that when Maida Stewart grew up, that little girl up the street—he pointed me out to her—he was going to marry or court her. So that's that. Everybody knew everybody's family and their family history.

Were you working for Madame Malone when you started talking to each other?

Oh sure, sure, sure. By that time, yes. Not seriously, I don't think. Maybe seriously. Honestly, I don't remember that detail anymore, because I don't think I was serious about anybody. When I determined that I wanted to grow up very quick, I wanted to get married and go to school. By that time, I was rebelling

against my mother in a very modest way after I graduated from Bordentown —not rebellion in talking back to her and rebellion in staying out late and doing independent things. Noooo!

My *mother* was interested in me going down the aisle in a veil. No, I didn't want that. I was terrified. In the second place, we didn't have the money. Neither of our families had the money. I begged her. My mother would have borrowed, and we would have been in debt for the next five years knowing her, because she would have pulled out every stopper. "My only child." I was always the one thinking about money and how you pay for things. My mother was the expansive person, that you *did*. She said I would put shame in her face, because there would be a feeling that there was something wrong with me, that there was some reason (*laughs*) I was getting married, that I was pregnant, which she knew I wasn't. She said she had to invite her friends. So my compromise was that I would agree to a wedding reception, but that I did not want to be married in a big ceremony with the veils and the marching down the aisle. Owen came from an *enormous* family. So between my mother and mother-in-law, everything at that wedding reception was prepared by them. There was *nothing* except maybe toothpicks that they didn't make. Even some of the drinks they made. It was a typical Caribbean wedding reception with mauby and ginger beer and rum. The mauby and the ginger beer were made by my mother and my mother-in-law. No. I won that battle. As I say, we would have been paying for it for five years.

Well, my wedding reception was held at Madame Walker's salon, which was rented for social occasions. Madame Walker was a millionaire and as a commercial venture had this public place which was considered a very nice quality place opened for the black community to do the social things—I think we were the colored community.

What were your intentions about school?

I don't remember what I wanted to be at the time. I knew the one thing I was not going to be was a *hairstylist*, because I've already graduated from hair-dressing school. I had an agenda. I was going to get married and go to school. I'd be an adult in my own house and, you know, grown up! But less than two years later, Eric had some opinions about that. Eric was born. (*Laughs.*) So intermittently, all my life, I went back and forth with some schooling.

When I became pregnant, I read all of these books about prenatal care. And the more I read, the more ignorant I became. I kept running to the hospital, because I kept getting these false alarms and was terrified. We kept a bag packed and Dora Murray, who was then a government worker, would take time off to run to the hospital with me. They got so sick of the two of us.

(Laughs.) My husband had paid whatever the amount of money was for the hospital *months* before. Then when the time really came, I was so petrified that I wouldn't move. I just kneeled on the floor until my husband came home. Somebody called my husband from his job because I wouldn't. When Eric was born, Mrs. Murray and Dora outfitted his room. They bought his crib, bassinet, baby's tub with a dressing table that he pulled on. Very fancy. Until Mrs. Murray's death, she was my second mother.

When I first married, I lived in the building my mother-in-law lived in. For the first moment I lived in their apartment, five rooms. My mother-in-law and her second husband just wanted a bedroom and her kitchen to cook on the weekends. And then I got a small apartment on the top floor, a four-room apartment, as soon as one was vacant. This building must have had six floors. So we had a whole big family living in that building. My sister-in-law was downstairs; the deacon's sister was across the hall on the floor the deacon lived on. The deacon was my mother-in-law. And then across the street and at the top of the block, oh my, there were others. One hundred West 142nd Street was my first married address.

How did she get the name "the deacon"?

I gave her the name "the deacon." The deacon was always preaching to me, and then she was a deacon's wife, her second husband. Well, I just thought it was a fun name. She was so good to me. I loved her. And so everybody then called her the deacon. She was trying to teach me how to be a sensible adult. That's all I can tell you, because I was not a sensible adult. To this very day the relationship with all the Quintines<sup>35</sup> has been very good. If I had anything to learn from the family, I certainly learned what family relationship meant. From A to Z, they were all wonderful to me. The deacon was something else. She just didn't live long enough. She had a stroke. Eric was five or more when she died, because he called her "the deacon" too. She was funny; she didn't have a voice, but she would love to sing to Eric when he was a baby. Put him on the end of her knee and sing to him, and we would fall out. Oh dear, she was good to me, very good to me.

You told me that Owen was a coach for a warm-up team.

Owen was always interested in basketball. His team, the Metro Diamonds, was the warm-up team for basketball players who were the forerunner of the great stars who did the fancy stuff holding the ball. They weren't the Harlem

35. Quintine was the maiden name of Owen's mother, Beatrice. His father's name was Joseph Springer. At the age of eighteen or nineteen when Beatrice married, her marriage certificate listed her as a seamstress and a spinster. The name of Maida Springer's sister-in-law was Eugenia (Gene) Payne.

Globetrotters but I do not remember the name of the team. [The New York Renaissance Five, popularly known as the Rens].<sup>36</sup> They played at the Renaissance Casino Ballroom. Owen's team did the opening game thing and their guys were good, but they were not the big stars. On Sunday mornings when Eric was a baby, Owen pushed him in a baby buggy to the basketball practice. He was one of the early men, I thought, to push a baby buggy, because men didn't used to push baby buggies. And I was so pleased. If they were practicing in a court somewhere, he would just take the baby and all the guys, you know, whoever wasn't up, they were looking after Eric, rocking the carriage or doing whatever. Every Sunday morning in the spring and summer, he was gone with Eric.

Once Eric was ill. He was a baby, maybe a year old. He had some childhood thing. When I went into the Renaissance to get Owen, I left Eric in the cab. The man could have just driven off with my child. But it wasn't like it is today. I was crying and going on. The cab wasn't going fast enough. We only lived four blocks. . . . I lived on 142nd Street and we were going down to 138th and Seventh Avenue. The cab driver was commiserating with me. At the Renaissance they told me that the game was on and Owen was on the floor. So I made a big fuss and screamed and carried on about my baby. I wanted Owen to come with me, to get off the floor and stop doing whatever. This is my child, sick! So there was no being rational. I said, I'll pay any ticket price you want. Then somebody came by and said, you know, that's Owen's wife. So they let me in. I went up on the floor and screamed there. (*Laughs.*) Oh, I am sure I behaved terribly. You know he went with me to the hospital. I told you that he was wise beyond his years. And he just sort of said, May, May, May. . . . He just calmed me down and made whatever arrangements he had to make and got off the floor. If he was coming, then it was all right. But I had no reason, no reason; basketball my foot.

You talked to me about how very neat Owen was.

Oh my goodness, don't remind me (*laughter*) how neat he was. This was my exposure, my first experience. He took off his socks and *folded them* to put them in the hamper. He folded his pajamas *neatly* and put them in the hamper. When he sliced meat, it was like the chef's slice that you could run a skewer through. He was very neat, very meticulous. I felt crazy. I had never seen anyone do anything like this.

36. The Rens were a professional basketball team founded by Bob Douglass in 1922. Composed of the most talented group of players for its time, they disbanded in 1948–1949. See Harvey Frommer, "Remembering the New York Renaissance Five," Travel Watch, [www.travel-watch.com/renfive.htm](http://www.travel-watch.com/renfive.htm) (accessed March 18, 2003).

Did he ever say anything to you about your habits?

No. I wasn't untidy. But by example I think he tried to show me. Eric to this day . . . you see those coins lined up over there? Owen always knew exactly how much change he had in his pocket. He was very neat about that. He would always roll up the pennies, the nickels, and the dimes. To this day, my son, who is an old man now, does the same thing. You see that over there? I had that box full of loose change and Eric brought the papers back—Look! See them there—to roll them up. Honestly!

(*Laughter.*) He has picked up some of his father's habits?

Many, many. Most all of the good ones. Yes, most all of the good ones.

Do you consider your son to be like you?

Like me only in the sense that he believes in the community beyond himself, and he thinks he has a social responsibility. In that sense, he is like me.

Did you and Owen have the same goals or outlook on raising Eric?

All of his early life, as a baby and as a young boy, yes. Where we had problems was his junior high and high school years. Owen felt that, given this racist society, I was attempting to set standards for Eric that would help to mislead him to have higher expectations. Owen thought that Eric should get everything he could in terms of learning; it wasn't a question that he thought his son should be limited. But he thought I had a very different view. Well, I worked in an atmosphere, in the trade union movement, where I was always seeking ways that would lead to greater opportunities, programs that children were involved in. This is where we differed. Owen felt that I would give Eric the kind of false expectations that would hurt him. I couldn't see that. We were ideologically different.

What kind of work did Owen do?

He worked for a firm called Claudius Ash and Son. It was an English firm that made dental instruments, and Owen learned from the ground up. He was very skillful, and he was mechanically a genius. I think he started there as a late teenager and learned the skills of repairing and adjusting these instruments. These dental instruments were among the finest instruments made. The Germans and the British were making the fine steel dental instruments. So *Mr. Springer* answered all of the questions pertaining to assembling, repairing, and adjusting these instruments.<sup>37</sup> Since they would come packed from Britain, they would always need adjustments, and dentists would have questions about them. They would call from all over the country. When these

37. Maida Springer emphasizes the name "Mr. Springer" in this way because it was not customary for whites to knowingly accord the title of "Mr." or "Mrs." to blacks. Whites who called the firm and spoke to her husband assumed he also was white.

dentists traveled to New York—those who were from out of town—and would go over to this firm in New Jersey, they were always surprised to see that *Mr. Springer* had a brown face. (*Laughs.*) He was very, very, very bright. When I would say, “But Owen you don’t know how to do that,” he would always say, “Well, May, but who taught the first man?” He was very talented. He could make anything. My son has some of his manual talents. For exercise my son builds mobiles, and he can build furniture—precision things. As well he’s a fine lawyer, they tell me.<sup>38</sup>

Would Owen travel to New Jersey to work?

Yes. We lived in New Jersey for a short time. Originally the firm was in New York, and then they moved and they had a big plant in New Jersey as their business expanded. We lived in East Orange and the plant was a little bus ride away. Then, of course, when World War II came, the firm closed down because they could not get supplies and the Depression had hurt them. The stock market crash in 1929 affected everything. We suffered as a result of that because Owen had a cut in pay. And the business continued to go down. By 1939, you saw this very fine firm was going, going, going, and the war clouds were overhead.

How long did you live in New Jersey?

A very short time. (*Laughs.*) Owen was there a longer time, but I moved back to New York. I was not mature enough for New Jersey life. I was an urban child. In New York City when you rented an apartment, it had an icebox, a stove. When we went to look at this two-family house in New Jersey, it had a coal stove furnace in the basement for heat, a gas stove and a refrigerator, but the gas stove and refrigerator were only there temporarily. You bought those things yourself in New Jersey, but nobody bothered to tell us. The renting agent didn’t tell us that. So on a freezing November day, we moved into this house with this beautiful, big coal stove—I had never been near a coal stove in my life—and the vast kitchen with no icebox and no cooking stove. Those were disastrous times. Everything that one could do wrong, I did wrong, like flood the boiler. In the morning, Owen would do whatever you did to the furnace and then go to work. Then I would have to call him, because by mid-day I had done something horrendous. It was awful. He would come and find smoke that first week or so until we got a gas stove in the kitchen. I would do something wrong which would cause this coal stove to be smoking. And then

38. In 1971 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Eric Winston Springer and John Horty founded Horty, Springer & Mattern, P.C. With a national reach, the law firm was the first of its kind to devote its practice exclusively to the health care field. See Horty Springer, “Legal Services, Attorney Bios, Eric W. Springer,” <http://www.hortyspringer.com/LS/bios/bio.springer.htm> (accessed March 18, 2003).



this little two or three year old and I would stand out in the yard, both of us crying. (*Laughs.*) No, Owen endured a lot.

What did he do after the plant closed?

Oh, he went into the wartime industries in the shipyards of Baltimore. He was working away from home, and it was a hard living because the people who were renting rooms to these men doubled them up. They would rent the same room to two people, one who was working night and the other one was working day, because the shipyards ran twenty-four hours. I did not know really the hardships until many years later because he did not tell me. He would, of course, come home for the weekends or whatever his days off were. But he never complained and told me how difficult it was then.

What were your impressions of the Depression during the really bad part of it?

You saw the things that were happening, not daily, but minute by minute. You saw all the people you knew whose plants had shut down, who were out of jobs, *able-bodied* people. You saw the Hoovervilles, the shacks that the people were living in around the railroad yards. You saw people you knew selling apples on the street. Almost every family you knew was touched by the Depression. No, we saw it firsthand. The limited jobs that American Negroes had become even more limited, because with the pressure and the needs caused by the Depression, competition for jobs—jobs that normally white Americans would not take—increased. White Americans were then fighting for those jobs. Oh, you saw it in abundance, in abundance—the people who were homeless, the people whose children had to go to work, find some kind of job and not continue to go to school.

While our very modest living was lessened, and by the thirties I knew I had to go to work, we never suffered any of the real deprivations like not being able to pay your rent, not having food in the house. Our life was simply more stringent and more difficult, but we never had any of the deprivations that some of the people with a lot of children, people with older parents had. By that time my mother was considered such a fine cook that she was a chef in a very nice small restaurant. And then she was going to school to become a hairdresser after which she opened her own shop.

I had not worked since marrying. I had worked for Poro College for a few months just before I got married. So I went to work in the garment industry when my husband got a large wage cut. Well, for ten dollars or fifteen dollars you fed your family for the week. So I had to find work. I was surrounded by all of my husband's family, so child care was not a problem. My mother, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law with seven children helped care for my three-year-old son.