

190929\_1324 Transcription

\* Transcribers note: There were a lot of parts that were difficult for me to hear clearly. I wrote [????] for things I couldn't get at all. Things that I could partially understand but wasn't sure about, I italicized. I also made some footnotes in certain cases.

Interviewer: Jazma, oral history 9, Ricky Spragia. So, did you want to share a memory, a story...

Participant: I'd like to share a story about how my folks come here and where they came from, okay?

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: I do go back to [?????] the area of North Carolina. Uh, some of the names you forget, that's why I wanted her to come here so she can help me out with this. But, uh, I know they said that they came through the West Indies. So, their hair texture was different, they had Indian, West Indian people, mixed in. And, they came through North Carolina, and, um, it was with um, aww shucks I can't think of the... Elliot! family that was with them. That's why you're gonna have to call me [???] till I get my papers again.

Interviewer: Okay, that's fine!

Participant: and, um, when he went into North Carolina he married and had one wife there in North Carolina, and something happened...

Interviewer: And, when they came to North Carolina were they free or enslaved?

Participant: Uhh, I think they were slaves, they were enslaved.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: and they followed this Elliot guy with them, and um, something happened there between the Elliot, this Elliot family, and it broke apart.

Interviewer: Is the Elliot family the enslaver, or?

Participant: Yeah, the enslaver. That's where the name comes from. And, the Smiths were also with them, another family that will later come into this. It's hard for me to talk when you're moving the...

Interviewer: Oh, I'm sorry.

Participant: So anyway, um, they came across and they left there and went to Mississippi, Atawa, Ataba County, Mississippi is where this old slave house is, it's still there today. Atawambi.

Interviewer: Atawambi<sup>1</sup>?

Participant: Yeah, that's a Smith, [?????].

Interviewer: Is that a Native American name? The Atawambi?

Participant: Yeah, that's a Native American name.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Uh, my folks are mixed with American Indians, also the Indians that lived in the Alabama region. Uh, so, he died but all those Elliot's, they were skilled workers. So, there's a branch that left out, I can't think of... it's in that book. You ever seen... it's *snead*, the story's in that book.

Interviewer: Which book?

Participant: The *snead* book, it was out there. *Snead*<sup>2</sup> and bones. A lot of that story is in there. Well, anyway...

Interviewer: Is it by, um, Annalisa Cox?

Participant: Yeah!

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<sup>1</sup> I can't quite make out what he said here... I believe he is referencing Itawamba County, MS.

<sup>2</sup> It sounds like he is saying "snead," but I believe he is referencing the book *Bones and Sinew of the Land*. I didn't quite know how to transcribe this bit.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Participant: She did a story on the Elliot's stuff, part of the Elliot family, Cornelius.

Interviewer: I didn't know that.

Participant: Yeah, Cornelius. They moved to that county that's on the state line of Alabama. See, it's complicated, okay? But anyway, they were there for a while and they left there, and there was a, aw shucks I can't even think of my folks' name now, but anyway, the Elliot family lived in that area of Mississippi right next to the state line by, um, Timbogwes<sup>3</sup> Waterway, or something there, and then there's Alabama and there's Carbon Hill area, uh, that county in Alabama, oh lord I can't even think of this.

Interviewer: And it's fine if you don't remember the exact names.

Participant: Right, you gotta call me if you wanna get all of this correctly [????].

Interviewer: Yeah, and that's fine.

Participant: I've been up since 5:30 this morning, so.

Interviewer: Me too.

Participant: [?????], so. Anyway, the Smiths was there too, in these communities of Winfield, Alabama, that's...

Interviewer: It came back to you.

Participant: And Lamar County, was one of them. And, I can't think of the other county but there was a concentration of the Smiths and [????], oh I can't think of the names, and they're all intermixed in those communities because they *wasn't allowed outside [????], it had wagons*. So, they interbred and stuff, and, uh, so anyway, there's a lot of interbreeding in here, double cousins

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<sup>3</sup> After doing some research, I think he was most likely referencing the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.

and stuff, and one of the Smiths took off and headed straight up from Alabama across Tennessee and Kentucky and ended up in Orange County, and you've heard of Orange County?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: Okay, there's a settlement there. They used to call it Little Africa...

Interviewer: I've heard of that.

Participant: Okay. Anyway, they stayed around French Lick and stuff, in the area, and he became, he bought land there.

Interviewer: Who's 'he'? Ivy?

Participant: Ivy Smith and Cleo Smith

Interviewer: Brothers?

Participant: Uh, no, that's his wife Cleo.

Interviewer: Oh, um, okay!

Participant: And they started bringing more relatives, followed them from there and they ended up moving into around french Lick, and then from there they moved up here.

Interviewer: To...?

Participant: Around Longtown.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Longtown covers a big area

Interviewer: Yeah, so I was gonna ask....

Participant: They moved to Union City, which is the South Side of here...

Interviewer: Indiana?

Participant: No, Ohio and Indiana, it's right on the state line like this.

Interviewer: Okay, okay.

Participant: [???????]. When I first moved here I lived on the Ohio side, and when I started working for phone companies I moved over here.

Interviewer: See, somebody asked me that recently, um, how did the border play into, like, where they decided to settle and this is back....

Participant: You know why they settled there? Because if somebody ... a slave hunter was after somebody, they cross that state line and get away with it. So there was another wealthy guy besides the Clements, was called Anderson, he lived over at Winchester on the [?????] side, and you had the Clements farm over here. They were very wealthy farmers, this story can get really long and I will probably bounce you back....

Interviewer: Okay, that's fine!

Participant: Uh, so these people, I've noted, have been up here for a while. My mother, [?????], well my mother came after the Second World War. She left Alabama and moved to Mississippi. Then they came to Chicago, that's where I came around. But, the Smiths were intermarried into the *Cottmans*?<sup>4</sup>, you know the guy that's coming to the get-together?

Interviewer: Yeah, Ricky Cottman?

Participant: Yeah, Ricky, to the Smiths. And, they lived up at Portland in Jade County, I lived in Randolph County. They, they connect. And so, but, we didn't know each other. But, my mother knew that we had kinfolds here, so she told me don't be dating anybody here, because I may end up marrying a cousin. Uh, and she married, then we got a divorce and she married another cousin of hers. I don't think she knew that, the Bourbons. So, we're...

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<sup>4</sup> Can't quite make out the name

Interviewer: All of these names are familiar to me.

Participant: [????], I'm half Italian.

Interviewer: Um, from...

Participant: My folks, my dad was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 19.., aw shucks, man he always [??] was born in the 1800's... My grandmother wanted to go back to Europe. So, she begged her husband to go back to Europe. They already had a food stand and everything, and doing, you know, business, business in Milwaukee. They took the two boys back, well the two and the two sisters. And, the other guy was over in Europe. So, when they went back, the war broke out.

Interviewer: Who was in Europe?

Participant: Um, my other uncle.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Let me tell you about them... their name is spelled different too. So anyway when the war broke out, before the war broke out, Mussolini's side had taken over. "No Americans in my country! No! Not so whatever." So, they separated the family, sent them to the US, the two brothers Noah and Victor, Victor's my father. That's on his side. So, he moved here, and...

Interviewer: Moved where?

Participant: To, uh, they moved to New York first, and then came to Chicago... well, Hammond, Indiana.

Interviewer: Oh I know where Hammond, I'm fr....

Participant: They had an uncle up there that owned an ice cream plant. Okay? Now prohibition is going on, broke out, and my dad became a bootlegger with the ice cream maker, his uncle.

Interviewer: And, this is still in Chicago? Or Hammond?

Participant: Hammond. But, the story goes that they put the five gallon ice cream and loaded it up with whiskey. Now I'm gonna stop that right there with my father, okay? But my mom met him in Chicago. She was married to a Benny Flannigan before that, from Mississippi. So, that's how I came around and they met together and, um...

Interviewer: So, um...

Participant: They couldn't marry though, back then. It was illegal to mixed marry with a white, a caucasian.

Interviewer: So her first husband was white?

Participant: Black. Her second husband never was her husband. They couldn't...

Interviewer: They couldn't marry...

Participant: Because of the laws.

Interviewer: Gotcha.

Participant: And I was born before those laws were broken. But, he was always there, and took care of me and stuff. So, I was his only child and my mother's only child. How I got here is another story. I was getting in trouble when I was around, oh, 12 years old, I started getting in a lot of trouble in Chicago. And, I had a problem with identity, self-identity, too. I didn't know what I was. I was very light complected, people thought I was white, they would call me "hookies"...

Interviewer: How did your mom identify herself? Like, so, in your household...

Participant: My mother was black.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: She was about, like, your complexion. But her hair was wavy, she's got that mixture of West Indies. So, anyway, she told me a lot of history about my, my folks. And my mother always went down South to visit her people, so I had the history of everybody. They were coal miners, they worked in the salt mines and a lot of different things and then split up. The Elliots were very smart. The Elliots still think they better than anybody. *I went to school down there*, I was sent down to Alabama, my uncle and cousin came up to pick me up and took me down there when I was like in the 6th grade.

Interviewer: So, did your family intermarry with the Elliots? Like was there, was there any....

Participant: The Elliots is my mother, but she's, I never had that name. I had the name of Flannigan. I changed my name to my dad's name.

Interviewer: Okay, because I thought that Elliot's, is that name of the enslav...they took their last name. Okay, that's what you told me, okay.

Participant: All these people took the last names...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: [???], okay? So, where am I? See, I'm splitting it. It's almost like 4 or 5 stories I'm telling it, so it branches off.

Interviewer: So, who were the first to come to Longtown in your mom's family? Was it her mother?

Participant: Smiths.

Interviewer: Okay, and...

Participant: Ivy Smith and Cleo Smith.

Interviewer: Okay, and that was who to your mom again?



Participant: They came to Indiana first. That's my mother's sister, Smith.

Interviewer: Okay, and what...

Participant: She was married, like my mother, okay?

Interviewer: And when did they come about?

Participant: Um, about 19.... now wait a minute, the Smiths came up here in about 1830's or something like that, about 1830's. They...

Interviewer: Smith is a familiar name I've seen.

Participant: Right, the Smith Road. So anyways, they built a house over here and they had some children up here. But then, they moved. The family split up. And, the Cottman side of this family live up in Portland, um, my great-great-great-great uncle by the name of, aw shucks I wanna say Abraham but it's not, but thats, uh...

Interviewer: Abraham Cottman? Cuz I know he's kin to Ricky Cottman...

Participant: Yeah, but this is a Smith.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, okay.

Participant: But they live up there, the Smith married into the Cottman family.

Interviewer: In Cabin Creek?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: The other black settlement in Randolph County.

Participant: Right, they met with them, and that's how become kin to them

Interviewer: Gotchyou.

Participant: The Enis's follow the Smith's up here to Union City, later years.

Interviewer: How's that name spelled?

Participant: E-N-I-S

Interviewer: Okay, I haven't seen that one yet.

Participant: Alright, but you've seen that name too...

Interviewer: I haven't seen Enis!

Participant: They lived up, they live up in Union City. They split apart, they was a conflict with the Elliot's and the.. and them. Cuz the Elliot's, remember I told you, had money and they had farms, they were poor, they were lowlives. So, when I come up here, I was taught that. That I was better than them. The Montgomery's are my family too. But, we don't have those [???]. They lived up in the city. They broke out to Fort Wayne.

Interviewer: And I probably haven't came across some of these names because my research kind of stops at the Civil War. So, I'm only looking between about 1820 and the latest is 1870, so a lot of this part is after what I've found out so far, so...

Participant: Right, right, so you probably don't know any of this either. Right after the Civil War...

Interviewer: So, I'm still trying to figure out where did these families go?

Participant: Okay, now I'm telling you, the one's down at there, one part of this family stopped in Kentucky. See, and Kentucky was like a waiting station to cross the river. Some went to Louisville, okay? Some, one of the Elliots went to Louisville and the other ones went over to Orange County, came into the settlement there. Did I tell you what it was called?

Interviewer: Little Africa.

Participant: Yeah, they have a nice school there and everything that's been restored and stuff.

*With the Black Expo, they're usually there.*

Interviewer: Do you know, Little Africa, never mind... okay.

Participant: What? Tell me something.

Interviewer: Oh no no no no no, I was gonna ask... I was trying to recollect the name of the settlement, but it was Little Africa.

Participant: Well they called it that. They just cleaned the cemetery and a Boy Scout troop, I just took a Boy Scout troop down and we cleaned it up. Cleaned the cemetery up and stuff to get the identities of people and stuff...

Interviewer: So, did your mom...

Participant: Uh, my uh, we also had a kin, a kin lady that taught school. Her name was Leora Brown.

Interviewer: Leora Brown.

Participant: Right. That's some of my relatives...

Interviewer: Taught school where?

Participant: Around that county, Orange County.

Interviewer: Okay, around Orange County.

Participant: At that settlement. [????] school. Leora. So you've heard of her name?

Interviewer: No.

Participant: Okay, she's, she's an interesting...

Interviewer: Because, because I'm way back.

Participant: This is way back, this is in the 1800's. The people, the Smith's people...

Interviewer: Okay, so if it was in Jade County then it would have been out of...

Participant: No no no no, this was down there. They wandered up here. All these people stopped somewhere and then came down, because some places would not allow....

Interviewer: That's important to know.

Participant: Black's to come in and then they moved them on, so these different settlements like Snow Hill and all that stuff, it's opened up because they wouldn't allow them. After displace got so filled up, they didn't allow people here.

Interviewer: Who didn't allow people here?

Participant: Darke County [???].

Interviewer: And how did... do you know how it...

Participant: Have you ever heard of self-racism? Within communities [?????]. *Oh, they didn't want to claim me when I come here. It was, very standoffish.*

Interviewer: That is very, very interesting. And I'm trying to figure out, like, those type of documents of course don't exist anymore for the time period I'm looking at, but when I hear people speak of Longtown I only hear, I hear the good things.

Participant: Yeah, you don't hear about what happened here though. There was people excluded from [????????].

Interviewer: So, did it make a difference in Cabin Creek and Greenville, or was it in all three settlements the same type of...

Participant: It was...

Interviewer: Was one more...

Participant: No, no. There was all [???]. There was, uh, different things. The Greenville place over there, they, that place, settlement was there back when I first moved here. I went over there

and there was, like a bunch of, row of, uh, they wanna hide this. Like, a row of... the fellow that was there can tell you about Greenville.

Interviewer: Who?

Participant: The guy who was here taking the pictures and stuff. Remember, the black guy who was here?

Interviewer: I wasn't... just right now? I wasn't paying attention! I'm sorry.

Participant: He lived in Greenville. He came from North Carolina. But, he's not a part of the family but he knows everybody because he went to school here.

Interviewer: Can you introduce me to him when we're done?

Participant: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, show me who he is? That is...

Participant: Yeah, cuz he didn't know I was [??] everybody around here but he always went over to my Cleo, the Smith's house. But, it never dawned on him who I was. So, I didn't tell him until afterwards. Way afterwards. I kept it hid.

Interviewer: Because I know Greenville is becoming one of the most, like according to census records, Greenville had the highest, the largest amount of black property owners. Like, the owned the most land of any Indiana county.

Participant: Right, and Ohio too.

Interviewer: Yeah, on both sides.

Participant. On both sides. Now, my folks own land in Ohio. [??]. They have a small [??] farm there.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: So, anyway....

Interviewer: You were telling me about the row of houses, or the row of something at the...

Participant: The row of house, [????], see I don't know the name of the street, might, uh... hold on for a sec.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: They came up here to pig farms and everything, and to work with horses and stuff.

My folks on the Smith side, they came to farm here. To work for, um... **[AUDIO JUMPS AT 19:17]** talking about races, and that's why they sent me down South. Tell you a story. She told me "boy, you don't know nothing. We went up here in Chicago, you think you're white," and all this kind of stuff. She just let me have it. She says "I'm sending you down South to learn something," just before the Civil Rights Law was actually wrote. When I went to school down there, they asked me what school did I want, white or black? So I had to sign a freedom of choice thing saying I wanted to go to the white school, or the black school in Randolph Co... not... in Franklin County, Alabama. New to me, but I had been going to school with whites so I wanted to go with blacks, so I picked that. Lord have mercy. They started... The women loved me. "Oooh, your hair!" "Ooh your hair is so nice!" "And your skin!" Oh God there was a... them girls was all over me. It made, it made the brothers mad at me! You know, and stuff. It was something else. So, two years of that and I had my little puppy love there and stuff and I went back to Chicago and I hated it. I was in an upper grade, so in the 8th grade you have to take the US constitution test of the state and the federal, to graduate out of the 8th grade and go into high school. If you don't pass that, you stay in...

Interviewer: It was kinda the same for us in high school.

Participant: Right, this was in high school, but the 8th grade to get into high school.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: And Illinois is strict on that. So, I had to come back up here and then I left here and I went down to Metropolis, Illinois, to another black settlement down there. I went to school, I went to the Job Corps down there.

Interviewer: We have one in Joliet, Illinois where I'm from, the Job Corps.

Participant: Right, this was a conservation corps. This was like a CC camp, you ever heard of CC camps?

Interviewer: No.

Participant: Okay, during the Depression, the [??] service had CC camps. That's who planted all those trees. Well, I was in one of those, there was only 200 of us. And, uh, we had skilled trades there. Like heavy equipment, you know, running machinery, union painting. It was run by the union.

Interviewer: So, did you learn any of that from any of the farming skills...

Participant: No, the farming skills I learned from my relatives.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Okay. All that stuff, that carpentry work I learned from the Elliots.

Interviewer: And... okay wow! Carpentry and what else?

Participant: The Elliots are carpenters. And, they are also miners for iron, and in Carbon Hill, Alabama. That's another place down there. Carbon Hill is in that same settlement that everybody mixed in. That's where the double-first cousin and, uh, my, it's my mother's aunt and double-first cousin. And I said, "that's strange." I said, "that's brothers and sisters!" And she

said, “Mhmm, [???].” So anyway, there’s a whole separate family there. They grew up into Boston, Massachusetts and stuff, and here.

Interviewer: There’s a lot of migrating, a lot of movement.

Participant: They’re moving all the time, because at one time during the 1800’s, they had to move because they were, they were shifted from one town to another one because of the headhunters coming after them, or trying to put them back in slavery. So, they was always running and that’s why they went to Kentucky, because of the woods, the forest. And they come up through Orange County, that’s Hoosier National Forest. Makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: They can hide. They come here to hide because the state lines.

Interviewer: And even the... what do you mean by that?

Participant: Okay, if somebody was after, let’s say the Clements who lived over here, and there was an escaped slave or something come up through here, they would help them out through the Underground Railroad, okay? Lynn, Indiana, you ever been through Lynn and all that? Fountain City?

Interviewer: I’ve been to the Levi Coffin house and stuff there.

Participant: Alright, that’s the Underground Railroad, comes up from Cincinnati. And they also took the canal up there, the Erie Canal. And so,

Interviewer: I’ve read that.

Participant: Right, they come up through *Pickaway* and stuff, that’s where that other settlement is, called, uh, Rossfield.

Interviewer: So they would come here and the Clements would send them, where?



Participant: The Clements were here. They had money, they come up here with some money. His master give him money. Just like the Anderson's and the Elliots, too, had money too. They all migrated up this way, and the Smiths. Okay? That's still in the 1800's. So, I've taken, what I've been told, the history that I've been talking to, what I have written and what I have went into ancestry.com and all that that we do, I got it more and more in-depth, I got it printed out.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant: Okay, up to, um, with the Cottmans, the Smiths, the Elliots. There's no Elliots up here no more. They're buried at another black cemetery that's called Snell Cemetery.

Interviewer: I've never heard of that one, I've heard of Alexanders, Clements, and Bass.

Participant: Snell, Snell is at Union City.

Interviewer: Okay

Participant: Outside of Union City at the Ohio side.

Interviewer: Okay. I'll have to remember that one because this is my first time hearing of it...

Participant: I'm telling you, it was a segregation with black folks here. When I came here, they were fighting each other.

Interviewer: Every time I go to Randolph County, I have yet, I have yet to see any black people there.

Participant: Oh, yeah. The Klan was here heavy too. Where I'm living at in Lafayette, there's something else. Celeste!

Interviewer: Okay, so before we... I just wanna ask you one more question, then we can pause it.

Participant: Okay. I was gonna have her to just, help... she doesn't know about some of the stuff that's here and some of the conflicts they had here and stuff, I was telling her the bad side of the

stuff too. And Mike knows about that black settlement in Greenville, what I was telling you about. and Mike knew the name of the street and everything. It's not there, 'cause when I first moved here and everything the people were still living here, they were picking tomatoes. But that was the settlement then. There was another one in Celina, Ohio, too, another settlement up there. They were picking crops here, they used to grow asparagus, all kinds of stuff.

Participant #2: And she knows about Anna-lise, right?

Interviewer: Mhm

Participant #2: Okay, and have you read the Blood and Sinew?

Interviewer: Yeah, I have.

Participant #2: You have. Okay.

Participant: Anyway, what I've told you, some of it's in that book. Yeah...

Participant #2: Well this... okay. I gave him fodder for this because this is very interesting to [??]. Okay? I owe you 20 bucks. I told Rowan to check, to tell you this book is 20 bucks. I'll give it to you [??]. Okay, here's the deal.

Participant: Well, I have to pay him through a card.

Participant #2: Okay.

Participant: I can mail him a check.

Participant #2: You can mail him a check.

Participant: I'll mail him a check.

Participant #2: okay. So here's the deal. When I was young, probably about 10 years old, maybe, I don't have much to go on here yet. So my grandmothers takes me into the town that I live in,

which was in Illinois. And there's several members of the family there, some talking to each other, some not. All of them melangien, all of them very fair-skinned.

Interviewer: Hey, can I have your name? I'm sorry...

Participant #2: Celeste Jordan Poke

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant #2: SO, she takes me over to this couple's house. They must have been 90 [??]. So, if I was 10, so... they were old. My grandmother wasn't as old as they were, okay? And she felt it was very important for me to meet them, and all she said was "these people were very important." And I didn't... there was a weight to the way she said it, and I was thinking "oh, well these are some people that she knew back in Arkansas where she was from. So, I wasn't really thinking too much about it, except that I knew who they were. The son's name, the gentleman's name was Percy Baker. [????] but I don't remember [???].

Interviewer: And where was this at?

Participant #2: This was in Glencoe, Illinois.

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant #2: Now, since this period of time, back when I was a child, I found out that in Lake Forest, in Northern parts of Illinois, there were Underground Railroad stops there! That was a revelation to me because we had never heard that before. So, anyway, I had said to Rick, looking at the census one of the things you always can see is the other families that lived in the row houses next to the family, you know? And I had come across the Bakers several times there, and I said "hmm, I wonder if this was his family, his parents, that I'm looking at, that I'm looking at the 1850 or 1860 census, okay? So now, there are pictures that my family has of people, like

picnicking in the grass together. But, they're fully dressed and they're 18th century clothes. And they're all sitting around, in this like picnic spot. I'm like, why the heck would they, in their fancy clothes, be sitting on a picnic, you know, table cloth, all sitting together there.

Interviewer: And this is in Illinois?

Participant #2: This is, I don't know really, okay?

Interviewer: Okay.

Participant #2: So, I'm thinking, hmm this is interesting. So, are they near a settlement? And so they all gathered together at the settlement to take a picture that had some kind of reference to them, you know? But, in seeing this, I had seen something else about this and I said, well, maybe my grandmother was trying to say....

Interviewer: Can I see the title?

[ mumbling]

Participant #2: And so I said, well maybe this was his children. Maybe, these are the descendants of the Bakers that brought families there, and I do know that my family has Quaker roots. In fact, one of my grandmother's sisters went to Earlham College very early on. She graduated from a school called Southland College that was in Arkansas.

Interviewer: So, when did your family come to this area?

Participant #2: Well, this is the question. Whether there's some kind of connection between my family coming from Virginia and crossing over and coming to Chicago. The story I have is that they came to Chicago to work for *Polen* in the 1880's. But that, when I asked my older cousin, well, how did they get.... **[AUDIO CLIP ENDS]**