

Winifred Nurse (Farnsworth House)

Interviewed by Alex Robinson & Maddie Perett (2005)

My name is Winifred Nurse ... people call me Winnie. I was born in Barbados, the West Indies in 1931. I've lived here over 35 years.

It's very different here from where I was born. Over there you don't get snow or sleet, you don't have to wear coats or boots or gloves. You don't need a fireplace to keep warm. It's warm and sunny ALL YEAR ROUND. We would keep the windows open day and night because it was so warm!

I grew up in the countryside. It was very rural. We had trees, bushes, and lots of land that we worked planting fruits and vegetables. Children could play out on the road, climb trees and pick fruit, play ball and dominoes, We did a lot of fun things. We use to make "dirt balls" — that was like mud pies. We would put some water in the dirt, then make it into a ball and play with the ball.

Where I grew up, everybody was friendly and got along well. They were talkative I lived with my grandmother, who lived on one side of her land, and with my Auntie, who lived on the other side of that land. So I'd stay at my Aunt's in the daytime, doing my chores and playing, then, I would go to my grandmother's to sleep at night. I had lots of brothers and sisters, but I didn't live with them. They lived in a different area with my Mum and Dad. My Aunt and my Grandmother adopted me when I was about a year and a half old, so I grew up as their baby. I didn't get to mix with my family.

My sisters were Doreen, Iris, Birch, Leslie, Sharon, Dolly, Sylvia, My brother s were Leonard and James. My sister Iris was the oldest. She's dead now, but my brother James is still alive. He lives in New York. I probably got into the most mischief because I was the only child around the house.

We had lots of pets when we were young! We had dogs and cats, and they would have puppies and kittens. My grandmother use to have sheep, so they would have little lambs. The goats and the lambs were my biggest friends. They would get in the house and I'd have to chase them out and chase around after them. They use to get excited and try to climb up on my neck and bite my hair. They were like my dolls! We also had pigs later. My grandmother use to breed them to sell.

I went to the primary school that was about two miles from my house. We didn't have buses, so we would walk to school and walk home. We grew up walking everywhere, so it was normal for us to walk. We didn't even walk on the road, we would walk across the field and down through a gully to get there. I went to school through fifth grade, but I knew how to read and write really well. What I'm trying to say is that when you went to school from Kindergarten through the seventh grade, when you got out, you would know how to read, how to write and how to spell. We could spell even though we never saw the dictionary! The teacher would keep it in her desk, and she

would tell us how to spell the word. She'd write the word and the definition of it up on the blackboard so that we could memorize it. Then she'd have us write the word in a sentence so she could tell that we knew what it meant. They use to test you to be sure you were learning it ... and if you didn't, they'd use a strap on your leg. They use to beat the learning into you, so we all learned very well. (laughter)

I'll tell you something else. I left school after grade five, but I knew how to add, read, write, spell, all of it. I was about fourteen when I finished. In those days, we never saw an adding machine or a calculator. When the teacher gave us an arithmetic test, we had to know the answers. We had to figure out the answer in a few seconds. You couldn't count on your fingers or take out paper and figure it out, you had to do it in your head! That education that I had really took me through.

There was a man whose sister lived next door to us. He use to come to visit his sister and bring bags of stuff for her. This man was so funny, but at the time all of us children in the neighborhood thought he was very serious. He would try to chase all the kids. He'd get in the donkey cart and run after us and say he was going to tie us up and carry us down to the market and sell us! Or that he was going to take us away and cut out our hearts or do some magic. There was one boy who was bigger than all the other kids, and this man would say: "Oh, THAT ONE I would get a lot of money for him!" So, everywhere that man went, all the children would scatter and run for cover.

I must've been about 12 years old before I came to know that this man was only kidding. We all thought it was real! When he would come by our house I would run and hide under the bed and keep quiet. I could hear him talking to my grandmother outside, and they'd be talking everyday stuff. So, once I went and peeked out to see what they were doing, and he saw me and he said: "Oh, I've got to get her!" And I would run screaming saying "Don't let him get me!" And I was wondering why my grandmother was so calm. And after he left, you'd think my grandmother or the other kids parents would say something like: "Oh, he's only kidding!" But they never did say anything to stop us from panicking like that, so we though he was for real.

Now I married a guy that I knew when we were young, and he knew exactly who that man was. He said the same thing would happen on his street. All the kids would be terrorized by this man and he was only kidding around! That was terrible. And the things is that he had a niece and a nephew, and he never bothered them, but the rest of us were terrified of him. Oh my, my, that was funny.

I went to England to work when I was in my early twenties. I married and had three of my children over there, and I worked all kinds of jobs over there, and what little education I had from the West Indies, it put me through every job that I ever had. I never got fired from any job; I always had the skills I needed to do them.

My favorite season (here in this country) is Summer and Spring. I like them because the weather is always nice, with trees growing and flowers blooming, everything is nice and

green. You don't have to wear any coats or boots or gloves! You can go out without a lot of fuss.

My favorite kind of music? I like to listen to gospel music. I have so many favorite songs I can't tell you a favorite one. No, I never played an instrument.

The games like dominoes, playing cards or board games I didn't like because I'd prefer to be climbing a tree trying to get the fruit. It was in the Caribbean, so we had all kinds of fruit trees, and we'd go down in the gully and raid the fruit trees. We had apples, cherries, mangoes, pears, gooseberries, all kinds of fruit trees to raid. The people who owned the trees would come down to see what we were doing and they'd chase us off so we wouldn't eat all their fruit. That was fun for me, or, I'd take someone's bike and ride it down the street. Those were the games that I liked.

I played mostly with the neighborhood kids. We were all like sisters and brothers. When I was your age we all played together in a group, but most of the time, play was also work. After school we'd have to go out and collect the wood for the stove. We had wood stoves for cooking, so we'd go as a group to pick up kindling and wood. Then we'd have to get the hay for the animals to feed them. We also had to carry our water in from the standpipe because we didn't have running water in the house like you do now. So those were the things that we neighborhood kids did together. And even though it was work, we'd make it fun.

In my house, we didn't have a radio, no electricity, we didn't have gasoline. We didn't even have a clock to see what time it was to get up and go to school! We had candles in the house so we could read. So we really live outdoors. The weather was so good that we spent most of our time outside! If it was someone's birthday, it would come and go and you didn't even know it was your birthday. We didn't have parties or presents. It's just how it was. We were happy anyway.

Our house it was so clean and spotless ... it was so beautiful you could eat off the ground. They would put white spray all over the house to make them look clean and beautiful. Back then there was no stress. We didn't even know what stress was!

We didn't have any rules ... like what time to go to bed, and when to do your homework, and that. No, we already knew that! If it was getting dark, we'd go in the house. It was common sense. When I was young we had to wash the dishes, clean the house, pick up the yard, feed the animals. We had lots of chores.

When I was a teenager I was allowed to go out with my friends on my own. My grandmother and my aunt weren't too strict. I had to go to church with my aunt, but mostly we were allowed to be on our own. As teenagers, we use to like to go to the movies, or to any kind of fairs that came around. We liked to go on excursions into town to see the latest fashions ... you know.

I had long hair when I was a teenager. In school, and the kids would pick on me, and the boy behind me would pull on my long braids, so I would hit them. Then they would wait for me after school and try to punch me. One time I was close to home and one of them was cursing at me. So when the road divided and I had to go one way and they had to go the other way, I looked for the biggest rock and picked it up and threw it at them. Then I ran really fast to get away!

I wasn't sick too much, but I would get colds and allergies and stuff like that. My aunt was sick a lot. She was always getting colds or something. But my grandmother was as tough as anything. I never saw her sick!

Did I ever get in trouble? No. Well, sometimes for fighting. Sometimes kids would try to bully us at school, so you'd throw a brick at them or something. That would cause some problems, but mostly we didn't get in trouble.

The best job I ever had? Well that would have been working at a jewelry store in London. It was putting stones into jewelry ... like brooches, necklaces and bracelets and things like that. That was a very nice paying job. I liked that.

When I was young, we didn't have any big events in our lives. We heard about World War II and other things later, but it didn't really affect us at that time. We didn't really know much about the outside world. We were just enjoying our lives, raiding fruit trees and playing! When I got to be a teenager, I remember that they had to ration some things like rice that was coming from other countries. You couldn't get it without coupons, but that's all I remember about the war.

In 1956's I lived in London. I lived in the West End and I worked in a restaurant at first. It was very different from Barbados because it was cold, and we weren't use to the cold. I went to stay with my older sister — she was 11 years older than me and she was married. She would try to wake me up in the morning to go to work, but I was very laid back from home because we never had to rush to do anything! So I had to learn to rush. She would get so mad, she'd leave without me. Then I'd realize that she was gone and I'd get up and put on my dress and I'd forget to put my coat, and run to the bus stop. Everyone at the bus stop would be shivering and they had their coats on! And there I was no sweater, no coat, I'd be freezing because the temperature was down in the teens. So THAT was an experience for me ... learning to get use to the cold. Oh yes, I'm use to the cold now. It's over 50 years since I left Barbados, so I've adapted.

No, I don't drive. But my husband had a car when our first two children were tots. He took them to a park one time, and we had them in the car. So my husband said put your hands here, and let me show you how to drive. He didn't say anything about any gas pedal or anything ... just about my hands. He didn't know that my foot was on the gas, so all of a sudden the car started taking off with the children and us in it. He screamed "What are you doing!" I had my foot on the pedal and didn't know it. Luckily,

my husband realized right away what had happened, and stopped me, so the kids didn't get hurt. But it was so terrible, I've never experienced anything so scary. So, no, I didn't drive! I travel mostly on the train and the bus, that's how I get around.

Yes, my children live here too. We came to the US from England in 1968. I had three children over there, and the last one was born here. The oldest was twelve and the youngest was three when we came here.

The biggest adventure I've ever had in my life? Oh, going on a cruise! I've been on four different cruises. It's great. You get to see all those little islands in the Caribbean. And the food! When you wake up in the morning, every day you're at a different island. You see different kinds of people, different cultures, different customs and markets. That's the biggest thing that I've done in my life. It's wonderful!

I don't think there's anything I wish I had done in my life that I didn't do. I have a good life. I've never had any trouble with the law, never been in jail. I've been all around the world. My children are doing well, I have four grandchildren. I have a very good life now. Things look forward to? Well, when I wake up and find I didn't die in the night, I have food, clothing, my kids come to see me. I am blessed. I walk everywhere. I can walk from here to Dudley Station, to Jackson Square ... I go everywhere. That gives me great pleasure at my age. And, going to church. I am so happy to have God's guidance! That's the best advice I could give you, too. Seek God and pray for guidance so you'll make good choices in your life. So you won't get together with someone whose not right for you. That will make you happy. I learned this the hard way, so I know what I'm talking about.