

Interview 1

Ethnic Group: Caribbean (St. Vincent & the Grenadines)

Date: June 8, 1993

Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: male

Age: late 40's

Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines

Occupation: electro-technologist ("Jack of all Trades")

Year of arrival: 1984

Interviewer Comments:

Interview took place in Bob's neat Cote de Neige apartment. We were alone and on a time frame. We finished the last part of the interview over the phone later that day. He said at the end that he had enjoyed the interview and gave me the name of someone else to interview. A lot of the information he gave me about his family relationships doesn't seem to add up. I had a problem understanding his accent sometimes.

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: Who was the first of your family to come to Canada, when and why?

R: My girlfriend came to Canada first... in the 1970s.

I: Why?

R: She had her sisters here.

I: Was she sponsored through her family?

R: Yeah...

I: Did she sponsor you to come?

R: Yeah...

I: How did you become a Canadian citizen?

R: You get sponsored, become a landed immigrant and after three years you become a citizen... I had no relatives.

I: What was her occupation before she left?

R: She was just out of high school.

I: Why did she come and why did you want to come?

R: Her family was here and then I came to join her.

I: Was there something in the Canadian experience that you came for?

R: I didn't know much about Canada when I came to meet her. Home was okay. She said she prefer me to come... She was not coming... Somebody had to move.

I: What did they know about Canada before they came, and you?

R: Their family history is a long one, They have a lot of people in Canada. For me, I'd known Canada through geography, Hudson Bay, C.N.,... We got codfish from Newfoundland; then, we're Commonwealth countries; then, in terms of projects, too... they put up embassies for a particular reason, they would lobby for things: before we would buy planes from Britain now we [buy] from Canada, we've become friendly countries after time... We purchase from deHavilland, so then you would hear the news, then Canada would not purchase much things from us--they will offset it with an aid package...and there's an imbalance of trade. So I've known a bit about Canada. We do purchase things.

I: But did that affect how excited you were to come here?

R: No, I came from a seafaring background and we travel a lot, in different parts of the world...some of the Isles in St. Vincent and the Grenadines are very seafaring, American liners would look for seamen. So I'd known guys who were on the riverboats in Canada and some international liners too... We had to learn North America in geography, it's a must. Our system was based on Britain, one book was North America and you'd learn about the Indians, Montreal being French,...

I: Do you have relatives that left St. Vincent and the Grenadines but settled elsewhere, or are they still in St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

R: Most are there but I have one sister in Britain, she's pursuing a nursing career. And one sister that joined her husband in the States recently. I have one brother and three sisters at home.

I: Tell me about your experiences when you first arrived. Did you have any problems integrating into the greater Montreal community? What were the initial challenges?

R: It's difficult here to integrate, language would be a barrier, job,...if you have an accent,...In the U.S. English is much faster I've seen some of my friends integrate much faster. Or in Toronto...

I: Why would they integrate faster there?

R: It's more English and people understand your accent more because they mix more...

I: You say that because of the French community in Montreal?

R: That's part but also in Toronto there are a lot more people from the Caribbean, so maybe you hear my accent and it wouldn't be strange to you. There's more people in the business sector, more representation in government...

I: Did you have any problems integrating into your community of Caribbeans from St. Vincent? Any differences between you and the group initially?

R: No, when I came the first thing I asked for was 'Is there a national association?'

I: Who did you ask?

R: I asked a friend that came for a visit here. My girlfriend told him I was here. He came over and I asked him what is it like and the very next meeting I was taken there and I addressed them for ten minutes, brought them up to date about what's going on and they listened intently. Thereafter they gave me the schedule for meetings,...

I: How strong are the community networks for you? So because of your girlfriend you tapped in right away?

R: Yeah because through the national association I hooked up with most of the people. My girlfriend is in her little group and the national association--you have a dance, etc. I met guys that taught me, and people I went to primary school with. My girlfriend wouldn't pick up on those things. Because of the islands of St. Vincent and the Grenadines you find that I move, go to school in one place,...so sometimes my girlfriend don't have track of me. I moved--lived there for a couple of years and then move back... so there's some people that I met when you're separate. There are people who are locked in here who come out only on these occasions. In the Caribbean you're always outside. Here if I go to work and come back you don't see me. In the Caribbean you see people all the time. The houses are open...Here I don't see the people in my own building.

I: Did you ever take advantage of a job-bank, housing service, or support group offered by the Montreal or Afro-Caribbean community?

R: No.

I: How did you locate your first residence?

R: I moved in with my girlfriend.

I: How much contact do you have with other group members, outside of kin? (church, association, neighbourhood)

R: Through the association. We have a lot of contact with the Montreal association of Caribbean islands, the umbrella group. There are people with a church background so they may invite you to their groups so you're exposed to other groups. St. Vincent and the Grenadines group has other groups like cricket and net-ball so you hear about other events also. When we meet for the Montreal Council of Caribbean Associations meetings there's about seven countries represented, grouped together so you meet people all the time once you're active. I jumped in pretty early. But outside that I don't know guys in this neighbourhood.

I: Are you a member of any 'Canadian' associations, clubs, like Rotary, political parties,...

R: No.

I: Do you have contact with other (non-ethnic) Canadians, how?

R: You have to take into context if we go to a Rotary Club or,... language is a deterrent. My girlfriend grew up in a Rotary home so I had a bit of a guilt so you take out the phonebook but you don't get far... The main reason? Language.

I: Even the English clubs?

R: No then it's okay,...but... I went to city meetings but I didn't follow [Interviewer's note: those would be French mainly]. So then you gotta go around looking for specifics.

I: Did you ever have any experiences with government programmes for French language or job training?

R: I was asking for French courses but they won't give it to me. Manpower [government ministry] is paying for other courses.

I: What were they offering?

R: Electronics,...but I've already done that.

I: How many times have you visited family in St. Vincent and the Grenadines? How much contact do you have with them?

R: Once every two years.

I: Do you write otherwise?

R: No, I use the telephone.

I: Do you consider sponsoring any of your relatives to immigrate to Canada?

R: No, they don't want to come and I'm the last in the family. I spoke to my one brother but he doesn't want to come. Sometimes I want to see him, this telephone will kill me. My sisters there established a business and are married, they won't come. My other sister is married too, in England. My parents are dead.

I: Do you ever consider going back or going elsewhere?

R: Yes. I would move back if it's necessary.

I: What reason would make it necessary?

R: I can go back and join the business. I live with my brother there, I have a little business and he takes care of it. If there was ever any major expansion I would go. Get a little old and I would need more sun, but I have an obligation to see my kids through school and Canada is all they know. Once they're born here it's a different concept. So I have to stick with them here until they reach adult level. It's easy for me to go back but not them, they'd miss their friends, the winter, skiing,...We grew up in a different environment. I grew up in the sea, playing cricket. I long for it sometimes. At first when I came here I would switch the channel all day but there's no cricket coming. I gradually looked at the hockey and tried to understand it and American football... When you can't get what you want, you absorb it gradually.

I: Who makes up your family, today?

R: My wife and kids.

I: How many kids do you have?

R: [laugh] I have two. The rest don't live with me.

I: How old are they?

R: Eleven and nine.

I: Gender?

R: Two girls.

I: Who do you live with in your household?

R: My wife.

I: Your wife and your kids?

R: Yes.

II. RELATION WITH SPOUSE

I: When did you get married, and how old were you both?

R: I was twenty, and her too.

I: How well did you know each other and for how long?

R: From primary school.

I: Is this the woman who was your girlfriend when you came to Canada?

R: Yes. But I had kids before.

I: They're in St. Vincent?

R: One. But they're mainly in Toronto and the United States. They come in summer and they come and go when they feel like but they will go back to their mom.

I: What were your occupations at the time you got married?

R: She was a nurse.

I: How many years of schooling did you have?

R: I was a social worker at the time.

I: Is your marriage like that of your parents? Better or worse?

R: Different but I come from a strong family background. As far as I can recall my parents were always married, grandparents... At a young age I had the concept... It's relatively the same but the laws here are different. My father was a cool guy. He led a strong family. I call the kids and tell them what is expected of them. I instill those same values down the line, but at home it was more strict. Here, the government has a lot of powers over kids. They can influence kids even to violate the authority at home. Now I tell the kids, you give me any trouble I will deal with you over there. I don't hit them but somehow they get the idea that I can't... They have this feeling that you can only talk. At home it was different. They can act. That was the order of the day. I can remember the time my father gave me lashings, you should be embarrassed, I don't like to do things that the family won't like and most people in the neighbourhood was like that. I was strong. Every Sunday you

have to go to church. You have to go to school--you can't just run away--go to school in a uniform. The school teacher had a lot of authority, coming down the line and maybe the guy meets your parents and tells the parents too so you gotta watch out, watch your tongue. There were some other people who were loose with kids just as well but the majority of people in my time were strict. But now I think things changed because of television,... Kids get a different idea. The British system is more Americanized so I may go home and maybe you can't lash kids anymore, because of the North American influence.

I: How would your marriage be different if you lived in St. Vincent and the Grenadines?

R: It would be less stressful. You go out more with your family, like going out to the beach and things like that, more often, you have more family support. Maybe you get a hydro bill today [in Canada] a cable bill tomorrow. There's not so many bills down there. The cost of living, the pressure is more here. Maybe they have more now though. There, you have a kitchen garden, tomatoes all year round. You can get fish from the sea. At home I always have a little boat. I grew up with a boat as a family tradition. We live on the waterfront. Or I take my uncle's boat and I don't ask him,... I went to Newfoundland and I was very happy. It reminded me of home, the sea, the birds. We can catch fish every morning and there's some that I'm not going to sell. So I take the best for myself and give some to my cousins on my way home. I would give to ten houses, and they would know to come too. And they would do the same. I can ask and they will give it to my wife... Commercially they have guys who sell it on the market. And less stress. If you have a job there's no pressure exerted on you. You would know the manager in a small community. There's no fear that you're going to lose your job. Even if there's a problem there's no fear of 'how am I going to survive?'

I: Can you give examples of 'intermarriage' which is traditionally looked down upon among your group and describe the reactions to it? How has this changed in Canada? (in terms of the taboo groups and reactions)

R: If a miserable person, like if a person is a prostitute, they would think that I can do better. They might choose not to tell me... For me personally maybe it would be that. Basically they would leave me on my own. If a person's character is no good they would not like it but I wouldn't be confronted... So if you wanted to marry someone of a different 'race' or ethnicity it wouldn't matter? No,... In St. Vincent there are pockets of Europeans, they inter- marry every now and then.

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community? Is it different from the attitude in St. Vincent? What are the circumstances that prompt a divorce most commonly?

R: It's easier up here.

I: What can trigger a divorce?

R: Maybe infidelity, maybe violence. But the divorce rate wasn't that high... Here I see people get divorced easy, some place downtown. Then the next

person is living in a closed house like this and you don't have to see the other one. He moved to St. Laurent and you don't know. You can't track the person. At home it's different, you have to live with the person everyday. If we have a national carnival you'll all see each other there. Then the family tree. Just a couple of generations you might be related and the support family might go and talk. And then somebody would come speak with me and maybe she'd come back...

I: Would a spouse be likely to discuss career changes or other major decisions before acting on it? (for both men and women)

R: Yes. If you grew up in the Caribbean you know that.

I: What are your views on the roles of women and men?

R: Equal role. They both contribute equally. She can do anything. I can do anything.

I: Would you have felt the same way if you were still living in St. Vincent?

R: Yes, because of the people I used to be around. Of course my mother never worked, but my generation was different--girls went to school and picking up jobs in the civil service, lawyers,... But during my mother's generation the man was dominant.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

I: Do you want to have more children?

R: No. I made some early mistakes so I try to correct it. Sometimes I find myself wondering when a mother calls and says he's behaving bad, I feel guilty that maybe he's reacting because I'm not around. The mistakes I made, I would like to correct it through him. You lose a grip on them. See, I'm a disciplinarian, so when they come here they have to straighten up.

I: What are the main things that you want for your children?

R: Good education, I want to see them well disciplined. You have time to play sport. It's my word versus your colleagues out there. You must be able to discern right from wrong... You must know you have to face me...In my time nobody ever had to come to us to complain about me. I seen guys harassing girls, the guy would go overboard but I knew when to stop. Because if the girl come and say to my father, then it's the end of me. I don't know how I would face my father in that... I would like to instill that in them.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: A lot. Once he's responsible...responsibility, accountability,... I like to give kids freedom because I knew what is from a very tender age. I lived on the first floor--I could go out at any hour of the night. My father never told me to come home early... I know when to come back, I have my key I go into the first floor--my father never tried to pen me upstairs with my mother. As a boy he put me downstairs so I would have more freedom. The girls--not on the first floor, they were safer in the room upstairs [laugh], and they would stay at home at night. I like to pass that on to the kids, so you have to

know responsibility.

I: Does your spouse have different aspirations for your children? How so? And are your disciplining practices different?

R: No, we do try to get a central command. Basically she would like the same outlook for the kids. They think that I will beat them one day. I always threaten them, I'll break a hand or foot or something. I don't hit kids. I will say nobody look at the TV and then I will go outside and come back in to see if they put it on. I will test to see if you're violating.

I: Do your kids play the same games or sing the same songs that your family did in St. Vincent as kids?

R: No. The ones born here, they're more into Canadian, they go to school here so they catch what the children do. Maybe if they get bigger and they start mixing with other new arrivals from St. Vincent and the Grenadines they may pick up on something. If you mix with the wider community of people from the other Caribbean Isles then there's some things you're going to catch culturally. For now, they're in school and there's more Canadian kids they're with.

I: Do your children receive any informal cultural education about their culture? Where would they learn what they know about it?

R: From me. I will tell them and they will not believe. The kids that are not living with me, they have a pet, a cat, and they think it's the world. I told them I had many cats, the mother, and we'd give them away. They think it's a big achievement to have a pet. I say I always had two dogs, three cats and when I went to Montreal I had to give them away because they breed fast. They say do you have a photo, I say no, so they don't believe I had a small farm with sheep.

I: In terms of your community, do children approach their parents about personal things, or would they go somewhere else? Like would your daughters talk to their mother about sex before marriage?

R: They'll have to face me. I will give you the good, the bad,... I can't stop you but I can tell you what you get into. I'll go through my family history, nobody ever come in pregnant, in my family line, so I have to give you the family history. We spoke about sex and I said there's a right time for these things... But if you so desire then you see me...

I: Is that common in your community?

R: I don't think so but I like to go head on because I'm seeking to correct. I don't think my mother would have spoken with my sisters, that plain, you know, saying I'll get you birth control. I don't think my mother would have wanted them to have sex in the first place. That's how people get pregnant sometimes, not having the right preventive methods.

I: What would a popular reaction be in your community if a child told their parents that they are homosexual?

R: Well in my time growing up you couldn't say you were a homosexual. It was looked on as wrong and the guy would hide. We say he's a girl,

womanish and some guys usually walk like a woman. Sometimes if he get a chance he'd go play with the girls but he wants to protect his character so he wouldn't go to guys like that. He would have to steal a chance... When you're in a small community, you have to be careful about things like that. Now with all these TV programmes I think guys are listening and getting very open. Here in Montreal, people wouldn't be surprised. They're quite aware now. Even at home it's picking up... Remember the church had a strong influence on the Isles in those days. We had church schools.

I: Do you think that your parents would have hoped for the same things for your children that you and your spouse hope for?

R: They'd want to see the best for them, a considerable amount of love. We pass that on in the family. I treat them equal, my kids, like my parents. When they died they left everything equally. One wasn't exalted above the other. With my kids I'll do the same in marriage or out. I would not name anyone after me.

I: What aspects of your culture do you want to see instilled in your children?

R: I would like to see them learn more of their dance. I grew up knowing about African dance and they would not. History--they don't know much about their roots either. I picked it up after schooling. In our British system I learnt about Drake,... After school I was able to read a lot about African seaway, where I possibly came from looking at the map, our aboriginal peoples are the same as here... That aspect I would like them to know, their history,...

IV. RELATION TO PARENTS

I: How often do married people visit their parents and in-laws, in general in your community, and in your case specifically?

R: My mother's in the Caribbean [? unclear; she's dead].

I: In-laws then?

R: I don't visit that often, on occasion. They call all the time. Perhaps they drop by, maybe informal too. For the summer we go to a lot of picnics together. Four, five times, we meet at functions. But they do more calling on the phone. Christmas is a must. Easter, and other functions like 'Independence function.'

I: What is one's responsibility to one's parents after marriage? Would you feel obligated to visit often, send money?

R: Call them often, visit them.

I: With your kids?

R: Yes. Some of my kids would have lived there. It would have been an open house... Since I was married to the ladies before [? unclear] most likely the kids would have been with her, cause these women like to move on with their lives and sometimes you get stuck with a kid and if my mother would

have been around to help... You want somewhere to live [for them] because his mother went to the United States, study for three years and my mother wasn't around to take care... I would call... They would like to know that I'm happy.

I: Would your parents have helped your family out financially?

R: Yes.

I: Did your parents have a role in taking care of their parents? Were things different then and now?

R: Yes, my mother took care of her mother.

I: Do grandparents live separately from the family?

R: Yes, but when they get very old sometimes if it's long distance, you bring them in the house until they die. Because of their experience and wisdom, you listen to them, basically that's how it used to be... Shame on anybody that walks out on their parents.

I: Your in-laws do they live nearby?

R: No.

V. RELATION TO OTHER RELATIVES

I: Are there some members of your family who take responsibility for keeping everybody else together?

R: Sometimes my wife.

I: And in St. Vincent?

R: When I'm home I usually organize all the parties. I'm traditionally a family man. My brothers and sisters not so. I spoke extensively with my mum asking her who we are related to, where we come from. We came from other Caribbean islands. I went over there to see so I know a lot of relatives from other isles. I trace it, how did this name come about,...

I: Do your relatives expect you to help them and in what way?

R: If needed yes. If I go home my sister don't allow me to spend. If I go out with my brother he picks up the tab. He says you're just holiday-ing here. If they can't do it, I will do it. If they were down I would do everything...

I: Is this different for the male and female spouses?

R: Wives are usually the nursing type. If my mother was alive and old and had to come over here my wife would have to take care of her. They're a more caring type.

I: You mentioned that you get together with your family at Christmas and Easter, what other events bring your extended family together? (Death, wedding, birth...)

R: We used to have a lot of traditional weddings but I got married in

Canada. There's a lot of things my kids would miss out on too. St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a plural state so some islands have an African culture and the marriage ceremony would be different.

I: How?

R: A lot of drums and the family would get together the days before and have a meeting, bring flags, cook,... Both families would cook around the house, people would bring things, the community would come out, strong family support. You'd know your relatives and what kind of family you're getting into. It don't cost you an arm and a leg. Your relatives will bring a sheep or a goat, chicken, rum,...

I: What would you say are the main attitudes of your group toward the family?

R: Strong family. Because they themselves grew up in a strong family. Things were stricter there. We grew up under the British system... People wouldn't tolerate what they witness here... [in terms of disobedience]

I: How are single mothers looked upon?

R: Oh, there are a lot of single mothers at home.

I: They have a strong network with the rest of their family?

R: Yes, babysitters, no problem. A child is brought up at home... If a guy whistles, it was seen as rude. If an older person walks by and you don't stop, you disrespect the person. I knew about it, but it was phasing out at the time and a man dashed at me because he figured I wouldn't stop. He complained to my mother. My mother explained to me that some guys won't give it up.

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent are there living in Canada and Montreal?

R: Montreal maybe 15,000. Toronto, a lot. I don't know if it totals 50,000.

I: Would you say your ethnic group is doing well in Canada? In what way and what are some problems you perceive?

R: They're a visible minority so they face racism, unemployment, problems to access the system like courses, loans, it's always a problem. We do a lot of work on our own. Sometime we need assistance from government and they don't come up with it, but there's a lot of other groups that get money for everything... We look after a lot of areas in our community and we participate... Sometimes maybe they deal with a big name, but we do a lot. We're having a symposium for the community coming up...

I: What would your life be like had you stayed in St. Vincent?

R: It would have been excellent. I was a civil servant at home. I would have gone into politics but my father never wanted that so I could only back up from the sidelines but the major parties wanted to throw me in. I worked

hard in my community. Even if you don't get the seat if the party wins then you're in for a good deal, not only because of the seat,... I see my old friends in politics and they say, 'Boy if you were here,' because I was ahead of them...

[Remainder of interview was conducted by telephone later the same day.]

I: Was the thinking before migration based on the understanding that you or your relatives would join the Canadian community or would you join a transplanted St. Vincent & the Grenadines community?

R: Both. Here it's easy to integrate. In St. Vincent & the Grenadines if a Canadian came he'd be checked out and the police would visit him and make sure he's guarded. Minorities are protected, like the Scottish there,.. We have lots of tourism as well.

I: What do you think about other ethnic groups in Canada and Montreal? Do you have any problems with specific groups? (such as French Quebecois, Black Caribbeans from other Islands, Blacks from other countries especially those from French colonies, white immigrant groups, refugee status groups...)

R: There's no problem. If there was a problem then we'd discuss it and try to deal with it. The most problem [he can think of] is racism in the police and they meet about it with the police. Sometimes we ask for someone from Immigration to explain something, like access to the system for unemployed, regarding discrimination, and also deportation...

I: Does it seem to you that Canada is changing over time? In what ways?

R: Montreal was more peaceful when I came. Now there's shootings in our community; we deal with the police. I'm asked for my i.d. sometimes by police. In Ville Lasalle it was quiet.

I: What are traditional cultural practices that you observe for yourself and your family? (in terms of religion, cultural foods...)

R: We observe August Monday which is when the slaves were freed--Emancipation Day. Easter Monday is traditional and in St. Vincent & the Grenadines we get off work for Good Friday as well. At home we're more active in the church. Here we're more isolated, especially in winter.

I: What kind of newspapers do you read? Any 'ethnic' ones?

R: Gazette because it's English. I order two weekly papers from home and I receive other Afro-Caribbean bulletins. Sometimes I read the Financial Post.

I: Who belongs to your ethnic community? Is there anyone not from St. Vincent and the Grenadines that is accepted among you, or anyone St. Vincent & the Grenadines that is not accepted by the group, and why?

R: No everyone is accepted. The law of our association is that people who marry in can join or anyone as long as they have an interest.

I: Who do you look toward for leadership of your community?

Internationally, nationally, locally,...

R: Anyone with charisma, good character.

I: But can you name any?

R: Maybe Martin Luther King... We look toward our own rank and file.

I: How important is it to you that the community of St. Vincentians in Montreal stay associated? Do you envision a time in the future in Montreal when the community will be assimilated within a larger community of people? With whom and why?

R: Only the old people and new arrivals participate. The kids that are born here quickly assimilate. Soca-Calypso, they don't listen to it as much. You can tell them one thing, but the TV,... The older people come to functions but the young ones go to bars. When they're older and get rejected, they'll join more.

I: What is your personal identity? How do you want to be perceived by others, among members of your own community, and by the larger society? (in terms of the groups you belong to and your personal character).

R: Canadian, from St. Vincent & the Grenadines. I have dual citizenship. I support the Canadian government in policy and I do the same at home. I'm a visible minority, African-Canadian.