

Interview 10

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

Date: July 20, 1993

Place: Montreal

Demographic Information

Gender: male

Age: unknown, approximately 50s or 60s

Country of birth: St. Vincent & the Grenadines

Year of arrival: 1959

Occupation: chemical engineer

Education: engineering degree

Marital Status: divorce and re-married

Children: four, all married

I. BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

I: Who was the first person in your family to come to Canada?

R: I guess I was. Actually when I left I lived in Curacao. I worked at [petro-chemical company] for a number of years and while I was there I got the motivation to--well, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life working in a refinery. I was an operator making sure the product was properly tested and made, controls in place, etc. There were a number of us from various Caribbean islands, St. Kitts, Grenada, and so on, and we all formed the idea that we ought to leave [company] and go out and get some university training. So we began to leave over the years, '57, '58 and I finally got out in '59. I applied to [college in Montreal], got admitted, and just came.

I: What were you planning to study?

R: I came specifically to do chemical engineering. I did a course, you didn't get a degree, you got a certificate and went on to [university in Montreal] for another two years. One of the courses I had to do was drawing, and I realized I was totally hopeless at that. So I decided to give it up and do chemistry and mathematics instead of chemical engineering, and so basically that's what I did.

I: How did you find the money to come here, was it expensive?

R: While I was in Curacao, the whole purpose of the exercise was to save as much money as possible. We lived in what was basically a company town. They did everything for us, housed us, fed us, and that sort of thing. So it wasn't difficult to put something aside. I guess I had about \$1,500, so I paid my air fare, and still had something left for living. By the time I finished paying my school fees and board I had about \$1,000 left.

I: Did you know anybody in Montreal?

R: Yes and no. In the late 50s, the Canadian government had begun to take women from the Caribbean to work as a domestic for families in Canada. So there were a few of those women from St. Vincent that I had known before, so in a way, yes, I knew they were here. But I didn't know anyone else here.

I: What about your friends who left in 57 and 58?

R: OK, some of them went to England to study, a few to the U.S. a number went to Toronto and Vancouver.

I: So why did you choose to go to Montreal?

R: Because it was cheaper. I saw that [university] had a program and I looked through the whole thing and I thought I could probably afford. Especially because it said that you probably would be able to work during the summer. I thought about universities in Nova Scotia. The fact that it was in Canada meant that coming to Montreal was a bit of a lure for me.

I: What did you know about Montreal?

R: Well, just that it was a French city. We studied Canadian geography in high school, and Montreal featured as one of the attractive cities of Canada. It was a question of Montreal and Toronto, and it wasn't that I specifically chose Montreal but it happened that [university] was reasonably inexpensive.

I: Do you have relatives that left St. Vincent and settled elsewhere?

R: Some of them have gone to England, to Trinidad, to the U.S.

I: Tell me about your family.

R: My family is very important to me. We go back to a great-grandfather about 160 years ago, and that is a line that is very important to me. From him my family encompasses all of his progeny. That line goes through my mother. My father's family came from Dominique, and that side of the family I don't know too much about them. My maternal family that is what I consider my whole family.

I: Are you parents alive?

R: No, my mother died about 2 years ago, my father died about 10 years ago. They lived apart, they had children but they didn't live together.

I: Any brothers or sisters?

R: Two sets. My mother's got me when she was a young women, and later she got married, and had a bunch of kids in that marriage. I have a stepfather. My father also got married and he has another set of brothers and sisters. There are seven kids from my mother, and my father had four besides me. (He has 10 half-siblings.) It was a curious situation perhaps, but this is what the Caribbean is all about. Lots of people have children outside of marriage. Its just a part of life, these things happen and there is no stigma attached. I lived with my mother and my mother's family, her other children. When I was eleven I won a scholarship where you go from primary school to high school. I won one of two for the boys. So I left my town and went to Kingston where I went to school, and I was there for about six years. I stayed with a family from Monday to Friday, and go back home on Friday nights.

I: Do you still keep in touch with all your brothers and sisters?

R: Well, on my mother's side, one has died, and on my fathers side two have died. I wasn't in St. Vincent when they died, so I didn't go to the funerals. She had juvenile diabetes when she died.

I: Do you keep in touch?

R: Yes, I would consider myself very close to them. In fact I just talked to my sister two days ago. When my mother was ill, things got even more cemented between us, because I had to stay with my sister when my mother was ill, and after we got closer. I usually call my one sister and get news of all the others from her. One of my brothers lives just outside of Montreal, and I call him too.

I: How often do you see him?

R: About twice a month, he lives just down the street.

I: Others?

R: One lives in England, and I saw him last time I was there. Two live in St. Vincent. On my mother's side, there are three, two brothers and a sister in St. Vincent, and the others are abroad.

I: How often do you see your brother in New York?

R: That's a curious situation, I have only seen him once in all the years since he came. I went there and had a hell of a time finding him but I did, and I try to call him, and he has my phone number, but he has not kept in touch with anybody. I can't find him. My sister tells me that he is in touch with his son but isn't in touch with any of the rest of us.

I: When you first arrived here, what were your first impressions?

R: Exciting, it was in September, and it was cold and there was a very curious situation, in that I didn't have a visa. All I had was a letter of acceptance from the school. As a British subject, I didn't need a visa but I did have an X-ray picture. I came to Dorval and I gave the immigration people what I had and he said, "So sorry, this is a year and a half old and you will have to go get a new one." And this was a big deal for me because in the Caribbean it was such a thing to get an X-ray picture, it took days and days. And he told me, I'll never forget, to go down to St. George's hospital in the city and he put me in a cab and I went down and saw the nuns, they were the nursing sisters in the hospital, and so I took my shirt off got the X-ray and I'm really tense because it might take me a week or so to get this X-ray and what are they going to do with me in the meantime. After all that, she told me just go back to the airport and we will phone the results to the immigration people and I went back and sure enough, they phoned and everything was okay, and they allowed me to come into the country.

I: Once you started living here, did you have any problems? Any culture shock?

R: Yes, oh my god, I got here on Thursday and on Sunday I dressed in my best clothes and went for a walk on St. Catherine's street. I was going east walking along the store, it seemed like every eye on the street was looking, and it got so intense that I panicked and went back to where I was staying. Now I don't believe that anybody actually was looking at me, they were going about their business, but being in a strange country where every else was white, I just felt that I was only the only person on the street that looked black. I was more self-conscious...

I: How did you meet up with other Vincentians?

R: There were some people, those ladies I was telling you about, and I knew two guys who were going to [university], and there was another guy who was just living here and working, and another, a fourth person who was living--four men--and a number of these women on the domestic scheme. Every Thursday we would gather at the Swiss Chalet on St. Matthews and we would gather there and that was basically the way we got together.

I: How did you meet that first person? How did you know where to go?

R: I don't know, you happened to be from St. Vincent, and I guess there must have been other Caribbeans and they told me that these were off on Thursdays and to go along and find them. I can't really remember the details.

I: How did you locate your first residence after the Y?

R: They didn't have the facilities to entertain, etc. so there was a friend of mine, a guy who was in my math class. And he told me that his aunt who was living on Park Avenue had a room, cause I think that she had two children gone to university, and so she had an extra room and if I was interested I could get it, and that is how I got out of the Y.

I: How much contact have you had with Vincentians over the years, and how much with non-Vincentians?

R: I have had tremendous contacts with Vincentians. I was quite active in the St. Vincent Association planning committee. That was started up and I was instrumental in starting up the association. That was 1965. Not necessarily that I see Vincentians only from the association but they have my phone number and they are in touch with me.

I: What about church? Are you an active church member?

R: No, I go once in a while, but I couldn't say I'm active.

I: What about your friends, then? Would you say they are mostly Vincentians, most Caribbeans, mostly others?

R: I would say mostly West Indians. You just meet them, you get to know each other, at dances, association functions, through other people?

I: Have you ever been a member of non-Caribbean associations like political parties, or Rotary club or anything like that?

R: Yes, at university I was a staunch NDP member but I kind of grew out of that. I was a member of several associations, Toastmasters, Rotary club, I am a Mason.

I: How do you get a membership in a Masonic order? Does someone have to approach you?

R: (Pause) Basically, that is how it is. I have been in that since 1985. In the NDP I made some friends. I met a number of very interesting people, one was a professor at the University of Calgary.

I: Have you sponsored any of your relatives to immigrant here?

R: Yes, that brother in Montreal I was telling you about.

I: How many times have you been back to St. Vincent since you came?

R: Probably about four times in the 70s, all together about 10 times.

I: How often do you speak with your family in St. Vincent?

R: I would say about every two or three weeks.

I: Have you ever considered moving back to St. Vincent?

R: Yeah, I've discussed it a number of times. Maybe all the glamour has gone out of coming to North America. I have achieved as much as I ever thought I could achieve, and I have great friends in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, people I grew up, people who are asking me to come back and make some contribution to that community. Maybe one day I will.

I: So do you think you will go back?

R: We always say that but then we only go back when they take us out foot first. I have a cousin who lived in England for 30 years, and he went back and when I saw him he was begging me to come back, and get involved in some business with him. I have him on hold now.

I: Did you ever consider moving elsewhere?

R: I have thought about it, but I would like to get to the West Indies where it is nice and warm. Why go to Florida?

II. RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE

I: What year did you get married?

R: The first time, 1961.

I: Was she from St. Vincent?

R: No she happened to be from Montreal, a black and Canadian Indian woman. We had one daughter. She went to Toronto to do Urban Planning, and now she lives in Toronto, married, and has one child.

I: How many children do you have in total?

R: One, two, three, plus that daughter. Those happened in the West Indies and they are all living in the States now. New Jersey, New York, they come to see me or I go to see them?

I: Who lives in the household now?

R: Just me and my wife. We started to live together in 1981. She is a Vincentian. I knew her from my childhood. She was a lot younger than I was, and then she went to England and I was in England in 1976 and I saw her then, and I went back to England in 1978 and saw her again, and then she moved to Canada in 1980. She is a nurse, RN, she still works as a nurse.

I: Do you think that your relationship with your wife is affected by living here?

R: In a number of ways. Women in the West Indies are a lot more

economically dependent upon their men. Because of that they are much more subjugated to their men and they have to put up with a lot more nonsense from their men. That is a very serious... and the most important difference is the lessening of economic dependence on a man. Back home she might have been working but the nature of the society there is such that women put up with a lot more guff than they do here.

I: Would you have given her 'a lot more guff' there than here?

R: Probably. Well, here you are forced to help with housework and things like that. Back in the islands you could always find someone to come in and clean the house for a little money, for next to nothing. Very small wages. Here you can't get that kind of help so when both people work it is not a question of coming home and sitting down and saying where's my supper. She is working too. It's a totally different...

I: Do you think that there would be a difference in the closeness, the talking side of marriage, here and there?

R: I think in the islands it is still a male dominated society, and this may sound like hell, but a lot of guys don't really talk, they just dictate. They get away with a lot, things that would be hard to get away with here. I think you are forced to communicate more here. In the islands, you have all these people around you, and there are no strange people, just family, your friends, you are in and out. Because of the way that one lives in the society, so alone, you are forced to communicate a bit more here. I believe that...

I: Can you give any examples of intermarriage, like are there any kinds of people that your parents would have objected to if you wanted to marry, any unspoken rule about who you can and can't marry in St. Vincent.

R: I don't know, it is very difficult to say in answer to this question. I wish this was off the record, but I'll say it anyway. In St. Vincent you have a number of different groups of Vincentians. You have people we call Bajaians, poor whites who came from England 150 years ago, and who live in St. Vincent. So we still call them Bajaians. Also Portuguese who came after slavery was abolished. They could have come from Madeira, or some part of Portugal. You have Africans whose ancestors came as slaves, and you have the Caribs and some Indians, predominantly black. While in St. Vincent your parents would probably tell you that you don't get mixed up with the Bajaians, whose ancestors were white but there was a lot of inbreeding and lack of education, and so your parents might discourage you from marrying those poor whites. That is, black parents... they tell the children that they ought to marry up in colour, but not to poor whites. If you are brown skinned you should not marry someone darker than yourself. That was a number of years ago. But I believe all of that has changed. As long as the man has a good education, or even the woman has a good education, good reputation, then there are no restrictions. In Montreal people marry whomever they feel comfortable with. I know that there are a lot of women, Vincentian women, black women, that they wouldn't mind a relationship with a white man because a white man would treat them better than a black man. My brother is married to a French Canadian woman. My daughter, the one in Toronto is married to a guy from Chile, so I don't believe that personally I have any problems with people marrying whoever

they want to marry. I don't think my family would have any problems with that.

I: How is divorce looked upon in your community?

R: There used to be a lot of that... that was something that was not... a lot of women, a lot of families didn't go through that final stage. If people came to a stage when they couldn't live together any more, divorce might have been an option, but they didn't they just drifted apart, and that was that. There were divorces, but the whole idea was to stay together anyway for the sake of the children. When it got too bad, people would just leave, but not get a divorce. So it wasn't really an option that was exercised among people I was familiar with. Maybe in the upper class. Now we have got quite modern, and it is part of living in a modern society and it is quite prevalent among St. Vincentians. I know one guy who went back to St. Vincent with a Canadian wife and he has divorced three of them now.

I: What would be a concrete reason why people would divorce now?

R: I don't believe that there has been any changes, whereas my parents and grandparents would just stay in the marriage even regardless of let's say male infidelity, 50 years ago. I don't think people would want to stay in a marriage now where that kind of thing is flaunted around. I suppose the key is the economic thing. They talked about the children but the economic thing was that they just couldn't afford it. Lack of economic power of the woman. Now women are working and they can support themselves.

I: I spoke to some women who said that there was some stigma that they were letting their family down. Do you think that a man can divorce easier than a woman can?

R: I think the woman is the caregiver, the one who has the control of the stability of the family. I believe that if the woman for any reason is divorced, if the woman initiated it or not, it is a bit of a letdown and I believe that their self-confidence goes. I believe that is the same in every society. Their mothers would have stayed in the marriage and so the mothers expect that their daughters—"what would be so difficult for you, your father was messing around but I stayed"--but I do think women feel.

III. RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN

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

R: To make sure that there was a good solid education. I believe that is the central part of the whole thing. Second, using that education to advance themselves financially and so on. And having a good relationship with their spouse. Naturally I also wish that they were in good health.

I: How much freedom should a child have?

R: That used to be a point of tremendous discussion with us. Once you give the child a basic meaning, you have to supervise and get certain rules established. A child should be seen and a child should be heard. A child should be allowed to exercise freedom within his age group, can go out and associate with other

children. If he says he will home by midnight that means 12:00 not 12:05, and I think that once you have begun to establish that this comes with responsibility. A child is a growing organism and I don't believe that the parents should be constantly talking with the child and trying to make up his mind for him.

I: Did the mothers of your children ever disagree with you? Any disagreements about obedience?

R: From the reports I got I think that the children were unusually good and the discipline they got in the West Indies--our parents used to discipline us by beating us, that was part of the culture, you did something you got a whack--and I don't believe in that. Any child you talk to them, that is effective. Maybe there are kids who are just terrible but I don't believe in hitting children.

I: Did their mothers hit them?

R: Sure they lost their tempers sometimes and I imagine that you have to spank one or two but not in a regular patterns.

I: Did they have any different aspirations for their future careers, or anything like that?

R: No I think we all agreed. You believe that education is a priority that children must assert themselves. You believe in giving them the opportunity to realize that they can learn by doing.

I: Did your kids receive any kind of formal or informal cultural education?

R: Three of mine were brought up in the West Indies so they didn't need to be taught. But my daughter, no, there was no West Indian indoctrination, just the Black thing. "Black was beautiful" was inculcated, but the West Indian pattern was left alone. Some people think that West Indian kids should go back every summer and see what that rock is all about, where their fathers came from. But I didn't.

I: How and where do you hope your children will meet their potential spouses?

R: They don't have that problem, they are all married. They have got to make up their beds and sleep in them. You can only point them in a general direction. In the case of one she has had her ups and downs, but the down side seems to be getting better.

I: What would a popular reaction be in your community if a child told his parents that he is homosexual?

R: (Pause). I don't know. Shock. Anger. There would be disbelief. And eventually somewhere up the road there would be acceptance. But it is not a condition, something that can be easily accepted. It takes a long time before a parent... Maybe a little easier to accept from a girl, from a guy it would be a long time before his father even tries to understand.

I: How is abortion looked upon in your community?

R: That is being totally unheard of when I was a kid growing up. That isn't to say that it wouldn't be done, but it couldn't be talked about. Women would rather have a baby then have an abortion. I would say 90% would refuse abortion. In Montreal too women don't like it. I've seen a number of young

women with their babies, and abortion is accessible here and accepted, but West Indian women would rather have the baby.

I: What aspects of the culture would you like to see passed on to the next generation in Montreal?

R: Sometimes I don't even know what is meant by West Indian culture. The oral history is lost, the games and events in our community are largely lost, TV takes it place. A festival where people spontaneously recite poems and put on plays etc. that would keep the community spirit alive, and it's all forgotten. We used to be able to teach our children about the Caribbean nation, the nation of the Carib people, and they were doing a lot of things. There was a lot of activity in that nation. And then the white man came and lot of things were changed. The legacy of slavery and what this did to us. We need to be reminded of what this means to us. Being Black we need to know where we came from.

IV. RELATIONS WITH PARENTS

I: Wife's family?

R: Parents are dead but sisters in law are alive and we hear from them.

I: Children visiting?

R: At least once a year, they come to visit and whenever I am nearby I go to see them.

I: Family reunions?

R: No regular get together at holidays. When my mother was alive all the children would gather with her but here because people live so far away we don't get together. We just see my brother, he has a boy, 11, and a girl, 9.

I: What responsibility do children have toward their parents when they are adult?

R: You don't own your kids, they have their responsibilities, and they ought to find some time to visit with the old folks. And you just leave it up to them?

I: Did your parents take care of their parents?

R: No, my mothers parents were diabetics and they died early. Her grandfather was blind and she had to lead him around when she was a child, but taking care, not really. She was orphaned when she was 13 and the older ones had to help the younger.

V. RELATIONS WITH EXTENDED FAMILY

I: Kin-keeper?

R: Well, I try to do this, but I tell my brother that he ought to call but he doesn't do it, he claims he is busy. I am in touch with all the descendants of my great-grandfather. There is one cousin in the States and we are starting to plan a reunion in 1994.

I: If there were problems in the family, would you expect help or would you give help.

R: If they are in a position to do so, they have a tendency to believe that those of us who live in North America are rich, and money is no object. So if they get in problems I imagine that they would expect us to help. But as you know, money doesn't grow on trees, and they might think about asking for help but in fact they never have asked for it.

I: Are there any events in the family that would bring everyone in the family together?

R: No, my mother was ill a long time and we could have planned it, but she looked like she was going to die. She called me after my mother died and I tried to get a flight but I almost didn't. Other brothers couldn't get there but I was there and my sister.

I: Vincentian attitudes toward the family?

R: The family was a central part of our existence when we were kids, but I don't know if that happens now. I would say we have very [incomplete transcription]

VI. IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT LIFE IN CANADA

I: How many people from St. Vincent living in Canada?

R: I don't think anybody really knows. National association says it is about the pop of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is about 150,000. But we say that there is really about 250,000 but almost half live abroad. About 20,000 living in Canada, perhaps 5,000 in Montreal.

I: Did you come to Montreal hoping to join a diverse community or a transplanted Caribbean?

R: Neither.

I: Are Vincentians doing well in Canada?

R: Well, many of us got university educations and those who wanted to were able to do that. There was a time when anybody could get a good job and with those jobs we got good houses. Those were the good times. Recently times have been tough for a lot of people, a lot of young women come from St. Vincent, and they are having it rough. There are no jobs for them, and they can't get medical coverage. Some have done well and are still doing well, but not everyone.

I: Vincentians' view of other ethnic groups?

R: I don't think there are any problems. We are not naive enough to believe that there aren't racial problems, we know that. Look, don't carry these problems on our shoulders. We know they are there but we don't have to live in hatred or animosity toward others, and there is good will within the Caribbean groups. We aren't better than any other group.

I: How would life be different in St. Vincent?

R: I don't know but my friends who started out like me but stayed there, the

only employer was the government, and some people left, others stayed in the civil service. I would have become a senior person in the government. If I had gone back after I got my degree I would have had some good job but not so challenging as here. My friends have all done very well so I guess I would have been in the same position.

I: Does it seem that Canada is changing?

R: Yes, we were at the bottom of the heap when I came. We didn't have a place to live. It was a struggle. Going into a hotel was a problem. There was a confirmation in Kingston and we arrived to be told we didn't have a booking. I have been denied apartments, and nightclubs entrance. All this has changed. Those are no longer problems. During the good times, Expo 67, and so on, these problems went away. Now we have to worry about employment. There is a hardening of the racial situation especially with the French.