



Phyllis Lockwood.

After the Civil War, former slaves still did not have complete freedom, and the majority remained bound to the land of their former owners. Around the 1880s the southern states began to pass laws that prohibited blacks to vote or to enter public places where whites went, laws that

were declared to be unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The number of lynchings of blacks rose, and to many people there only seemed to be a future if you moved to the North. Between 1910 and 1920 more than 500,000 African Americans moved north to seek new jobs, mainly to some of the major cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and New York. Huge numbers settled in Harlem, that became the center for the singers, musicians, and writers who used their African American culture in their work. But discrimination was found everywhere.

🎧 *Listen to Phyllis Lockwood talking about her childhood in the 1930s and 40s.*

C 22

Tapescript

Listen to Phyllis Lockwood talking about her childhood in the 1930s and 40s.

Listen and take notes. Workbook page 22.

Interviewer: Um, you lived yourself in New Jersey, is that correct?

Phyllis: Yes.

Interviewer: And did you grow up in New Jersey?

Phyllis: Yes, I did um, in the city, in a very nice middle class neighborhood, ah and the color of our skins were not mentioned very much. We were just kids in the neighborhood, and it wasn't until we started growing up and running into different classes of whites that we noticed they were making a difference.

Interviewer: Now do you know whether or not, ah, your grandparents whether they grew up in the south or were they slaves themselves before you moved up to New Jersey, they moved the family north?

Phyllis: The, our family, was never in the south. My Dad came originally as a little boy, came from Virginia and he lived in Elizabeth which is in New Jersey, a town in New Jersey. Ah, my mother lived in the Jersey shore, down at the shore and her, they met and married and lived in New Jersey, the upper part of New Jersey. And they had five children there, and ah, all I can, all I can remember is we were all different colors. My grandpa looks like he was white, my mother looked like she was white but they weren't, and we never questioned it. It didn't seem important to us. Dad was a brown man. He looked ... he was in the Navy and ah and black men weren't allowed to go to the Navy except to be cooks. And I still have that picture of my Dad, ah in his Naval uniform. I don't think he ever got out of the United States, but he told us tales that how he sailed around the seas. But, he was in a very prejudiced time, the second world war, ... the first world war. He was in the first world war in the nineteen ... the

early nineteen hundreds.

Interviewer: Did your parents have any dreams for their children? Were they happy with where they were bringing you up, or did they want to see you become professional people, move to another place?

Phyllis: No, my family didn't have dreams like that. They knew that we were all going to make it out of, make something of ourselves. That's the way we were taught at home. We were taught pride and honesty ... and an honest day's work. No matter what you did was fine. If you scrubbed the floor or taught in a classroom, this was fine as long as it was honest.

Interviewer: Ah, while you were growing up and going to school, did you notice anything different between you and the white children around you? I mean, was there any big difference between the black kids and the white kids?

Phyllis: There weren't too many black kids, but the white kids seemed poor because I'd, we used to always come home and say let's, ah can we take some food or clothing to the poor kids? And my mother would tell us we were poor too. And we would go, and there was a Catholic church where you would go and you would get bread, and I was wondering why were those kids getting bread every night, could we go and get some bread, too ... and my mother said no, we have enough at home, but we were poor, too.

Interviewer: Did you notice any difference in school, the way you were treated in classes?

Phyllis: In the lower school, when I first went to school, no. I maybe I was too young to notice, but as I got to the part where they were teaching you um, how to survive in the world, I remember Home Economics, ah that ah I was going to clean someone's house or be a maid. And my best girlfriend would be the person that I would work for. And ah, I kinda wondered why I couldn't wash the glasses. And why did I always have to wash the garbage pans ah I didn't realize until later that's where they thought that I would be ... in someone's kitchen.

Interviewer: What about your self image, the way you felt about yourself?

Phyllis: I felt that I, I had very inferiority complex about my physical self. I did not realize that I looked okay, and no matter what anyone else thought, I was okay. It took me many, many years to get that way and just recently my children saw, was looking through old pictures of mine and they said, "Is this you when you were younger?" And

I said, "yup." They said, "there's nothing wrong with you." But I didn't know because ... your ... beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and if you're not taught that you are beautiful, you'll never know it.

Interviewer: Did it bother you that your hair was curly?

Phyllis: It wasn't curly. It was nappy. That's what it was called ... nappy. Um, it did bother me because you were supposed to have straight hair because that was good hair. That's what it was called, good hair, and ah, we didn't know why it was called good hair. But, we got straightening combs and curling irons and marcel irons to fix our hair so that it looked like good hair.

Interviewer: How about the names that you were labeled?

Phyllis: Ah, not too many. As the time went along, there was a time we were called Negroes, colored people, um and, of course the very negative, nigger ah, which wasn't acceptable then or now. Um, also Afro-Americans finally came. We're being called Afro-Americans now which I think is very unfair because I have been making the mistake of exactly what people of other races have been doing, looking at someone's skin and saying they're Afro-Americans. They've corrected me. They're Dutch, they're French, they're Africans which has nothing to do with Afro-Americans because these are people of a country that own their country and run their country. Afro-Americans are, the definition would be a slave that came from Africa. And you just don't call everyone a slave when they're not.

Interviewer: Phyllis, you graduated from high school and then did you get a job?

Phyllis: No, I wasn't able to get a job in any of the corporations so I took a job living in on 5th Avenue in New York with some very wealthy people, taking care of their children and cleaning. Ah, I would have one day off a week, but when my day came for me to have the day to myself, I didn't realize that the day wasn't mine. I had to wait until the children got fed, and the lady got out of bed, and I said this wasn't fair. And I packed my clothes and quit the job. And on the way home on the train I ran into a reporter and he asked me ah why was I, was I leaving home or going home? I said I'm going home. I just had a job and it was my day off, explained to him and she wanted me to stay until 12 or one o'clock on my day off. And he said, "Would you mind if I get you a job?" I said, "No, not at all." I got off the train and

he took me into the telephone company and he took me to personnel and asked them to have me fill out an application. And the lady tested me by asking me to spell Susquehanna and Frielandheissen, and I couldn't spell either one of those. And she said I wasn't qualified for the job. And I said, "Well I'd never even saw those names before." And the reporter said, "We'll ask her to spell something very simple like telephone." I spelled telephone, and she must have known that there was something gonna happen with this reporter there. And I got the job, and I stayed on that job with the telephone company as a pay-roll clerk until I got married and had my first daughter.