



Interviewee: Annette Aggett

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

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I'm from Mauritius. I came over here in 1968 and now I'm retired. In Mauritius, my father was in the army and every now and then when he returned home, we didn't know who he was. We had a poor life; there was not much work, so mum had to do some part-time jobs. She had about three jobs working for white people, cleaning their houses. On Saturdays I used to help her. I would bring the clothes

home and do some ironing and washing and things like that. I have four brothers and one sister. We all lived in a little mud hut. We'd been living there a few years when there was a big cyclone and everything disappeared. So the government started building council houses and we moved into a two roomed house with all the children too! There was only one school. We started school at the age of five; that's in the infants' school and then we moved on to the primary school. We started secondary school at twelve.

I carried on at school until I was 19 because there were no jobs, nothing. In England they were calling for nurses so I applied and I got a job in Somerset. My family did not mind because there were no jobs, nothing. My sister came here first; she was nursing and my brothers were still at school in Mauritius. To come over here, we didn't have any money – nothing for the fare. Mum was working for some French people and they gave her some money; 2,000 rupees - lots of money. So when we come over here, we just worked and then sent the money to mum and she repaid her friends. We continued sending money home to mum and to give to the little ones as well. I did that for years and years until we got married. Even when we were married, we were still doing it.



Typical house for local people in Mauritius



Annette (right) in Mauritius with her mother, sister and younger brother

Looking back on my childhood, we had a very hard life. We used to grow sweet potatoes and leave some in the ground until the season was over. Depending how many tubers there were, we cut them in half or into three pieces and then planted them in the ground for the next crop. We did this early in the morning. Sweet potatoes were our staple diet at times when we had no money to buy rice. If there were none we went to bed hungry. It was very hard. When we were at school, we had to pay the school fees as well and we had to pay for the books and all. We would teach the little ones when we came home from school at 4

o'clock. We couldn't go out – father was very strict – we didn't go out at all. We just went to school and came home and taught the younger ones. I am the eldest.

In September 1968, it was very cold, and I caught the plane over to England - just this small dress on, nothing; no coat, nothing. It was freezing! When I reached the airport, I didn't know where to go. I just took my purse and I gave it to someone. I said, "Somerset?" like that, and they took me to the station. Then there was a guard and he just took my purse and got my ticket. He gave my purse back to me and put me on the train and I travelled down to Taunton. When I reached there, I showed them the address of the hospital and they called the matron who sent transport for me.

My sister had come to England before me. She was working at Harperbury Hospital already - she went straight there; and me, I went to Somerset. After I arrived in Somerset, she came over to see me.

At the hospital the warden showed me to my room. I was lucky really because there were some Mauritian people already there so the next day they put me on a ward where there was a Mauritian girl - she's called Nicole - so she helped me a lot; what to do here, what to do there. Then after 1970 I changed hospitals. I went to Exminster hospital in Devon and I continued my training to become a State Enrolled Mental Nurse.

One day a staff nurse came from another ward to give the medication because there was no one available with qualifications. He is now my husband. He told his friend that he quite liked me but he did not like my legs. His friend told me later what he said. I was thin in those days and the staff in my previous hospital called me Twiggy!

I left in 1970 to come to Harperbury and then he followed me, so we got a room in St Albans - Granville Road - and we lived there until 1977. In 1973 we got married in Exmouth Devon. It was easier at that time to go there than to try to accommodate my husband's family here. My future sister-in-law arranged the reception. We just went down to see the priest. A friend from the wages office at Harperbury gave me away; he also made the wedding cake. My sister came down for the wedding and she was my bridesmaid. And we came back here and we just carried on working here until I got pregnant in 1974. I just had to leave work then and go for the baby (Claire). And then when she was about three years (old), I went back to nursing at Cell Barnes hospital and, like Harperbury, it was for mentally handicapped people. I worked there until my son was born in 1979. I left again for three years. I then returned part time for a while then went back to work full time on nights. I carried on there for twenty years; on nights, always on nights, because of the children, always on nights.

I feel I'm part of this country now. I've been here for so long - for many years now. Since the age of twenty-one, I have been here. When we used to go back home for holidays, I would say to my husband, "I want to go back home!" I wanted to come back.
He said, "This is your country!"
I said, "No, I just want to go back home."



*Annette's wedding day, Exmouth 1974.
Her sister was one of the bridesmaids*

In 1981 my mother became seriously ill with complications due to her diabetes. My sister and I went back to Mauritius to see her. We stayed for two weeks and she died about a month after we came back. I have not been back since.

In Mauritius we speak Creole which is a French patois and is the common language for all the races living on the island but it was developed by the African slaves who were brought to the island. Although English is the official language it is only generally spoken in school.

Most Creoles like me have French names that were given to their ancestors. Mine, "Quinquet", comes from the man that developed the oil lamp that to this day is called a Quinquet. Some of my friend's names are also come from objects or animals. I have a friend called Pagnier which means basket in English and another which means Shark. These names were given to us by the slave traders or the land owners who bought us.

When I arrived here I didn't understand anybody and I kept saying, "Yes, Yes" in response to what they were saying. Everything was, "Yes". During nurses' training I had no help and was left to do the best I could in interpreting what was said to me; you just had to do it. I think, probably, after a while you get used to the English accents, especially down in Somerset there. Then after a while you get used to the accent and then you just go from there.

When I used to go to parties at my sister-in-law's in Exmouth, everybody would be English; you didn't see black people at all. They would put on that record, 'Brown Girl in the Ring la la la'...and I would go into the centre of the room and my sister-in-law and all would make a ring around me and then they would come and join me in the middle! Every time I go down there, they put that song on. We were all very happy - dancing and everything.

I've got lots of friends in St Albans so when I don't have things to do, I just go and visit them. Most of us are retired now. I like going shopping in the St Albans area and the town.

About Mauritian food for sale in a Fleetville store. I buy a lot of Mauritian food I can't buy elsewhere in an Asian store in Fleetville. I buy curry in large packets...nice curry powders; they smell nice, just like home and they've got all the chillies, pickled chillies. They've got all these... like naan bread and they've got salted fish. Most of our food is with salted fish. There is a recipe called Rougai. You fry your onions and garlic and then you put tomatoes in...it's like a salsa. You soak the salted fish for about half an hour first. Then you fry it and add it to the onions and tomatoes. You always have Rougai with rice. And then we always have curry as well...the (Mauritian) curry powder is different.