



Berkshire Historical Society at Herman Melville's Arrowhead
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Invisible Community Project
in partnership with
Housatonic Heritage Oral History

Emma Caesar
Recorded: March 3, 1998
0:00:00 to 0:21:40

- Elaine Gunn:** This is Elaine Gunn speaking. Today's date is March 3rd, 1998. I'm at Willowood [sp] residential facility with Mrs. Emma Caesar, who has consented to be interviewed. Thank you, Emma, so much for letting me come to do this. I'd like to ask you a little bit about your family background. Can you give me the names of your parents?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes. They are Clifford H. Potter [sp] and Grace E. Potter [sp] of Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** Do you know where they were born?
- Emma Caesar:** My mother, Grace Potter, was born in Stephentown, New York. My father, Clifford H. Potter, was born in Boston, Mass.
- 0:01:06
- Elaine Gunn:** Do you know why they came to Massachusetts? Any idea? Might they have come to get jobs and go to work or something?
- Emma Caesar:** Maybe they came for work. My father's mother died when my father was a young boy, and he came to Pittsfield and settled as a state child, and he was settled and brought up in Pittsfield as a state child.
- Elaine Gunn:** Then he met your mother?
- Emma Caesar:** Then he met my mother, and then they married. She was from Stephentown, New York. They married in Pittsfield.
- 0:02:00
- Elaine Gunn:** You were born where?
- Emma Caesar:** I was born in Pittsfield, at St. Luke's Hospital in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** So you've lived in Pittsfield all of your life?
- Emma Caesar:** All of my life, I've lived in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** Do you have any brothers or sisters?

- Emma Caesar:** No, I have no brothers or no sisters. I *am* the only child.
- Elaine Gunn:** Are your parents deceased?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, my parents are deceased. Both of them are.
- Elaine Gunn:** And they lived, for many years, all of *your* life, in Pittsfield?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, my parents lived all of their life in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have anybody living with you when you were growing up?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, my uncle George [sp], who was a sickly man, lived with my mother. My mother took care of him, and my father consented that he live with them.
- 0:03:01
- Elaine Gunn:** Were you ever married?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, I was married.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have any children?
- Emma Caesar:** No children.
- Elaine Gunn:** What was your spouse's name?
- Emma Caesar:** Mr. Lawrence [?] Caesar, of Dalton, Mass.
- Elaine Gunn:** What was his occupation?
- Emma Caesar:** He was a winder at a GE.
- Elaine Gunn:** Oh, the General Electric Company, yes. How did you meet? Do you remember?
- Emma Caesar:** I met Lawrence—I knew Lawrence when I was very young, and my mother and father were very, very close friends to his beloved mother.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did he live in Pittsfield or did he live in another town?
- Emma Caesar:** He lived in Dalton, Mass. He was I believe born there, and he died there.
- Elaine Gunn:** What is your church affiliation?

0:03:59

- Emma Caesar:** My church affiliation is with the Second Congregational Church in Pittsfield, and then after, I became a member of Christian Assembly Church in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** What are some your church memories, of gatherings that you had going to either church or both churches, especially growing up? Do you remember some things that you went church—some special—maybe like [0:04:34 tomfun?] weddings, or family reunions or picnics at the church? Anything comes to mind?
- Emma Caesar:** I was always in the choir, and I was very faithful to the choir, and I always sang. My affiliation at the Second Congregational Church is singing. And we had picnics and did a lot of activities.
- 0:05:02 In the Christian Assembly Church, I did a lot of singing in cantatas, and in—mostly cantatas—and they were very, very good, and very, very well attended.
- Elaine Gunn:** I'll bet.
- Emma Caesar:** Even one night, we had 475 one night, and Saturday night we had 450.
- Elaine Gunn:** Oh, wow.
- Emma Caesar:** So we had a lot of—big productions.
- Elaine Gunn:** Religion has played a very big role in your life.
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, it's my only role, that I have. The only role.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you belong to any other civic organizations? For instance, were you active in like the NAACP or any of the things like that, the years when they had a chapter here?
- Emma Caesar:** I was active a little while, with the NAACP, but not too much.
- 0:06:04 My activities has always been involved with church.
- Elaine Gunn:** Now where did you go to school?
- Emma Caesar:** I went to school at Bartlett School in Pittsfield, and Tucker School, and then on to Pittsfield High School.
- Elaine Gunn:** Now, Bartlett School, was that near where your family lived?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, that was right in the vicinity of where we lived.
- Elaine Gunn:** So you walked to school?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes.

- Elaine Gunn:** What about your school, childhood memories? Anything that you can remember about school, going to school in Pittsfield, especially Tucker School or Bartlett School?
- Emma Caesar:** Bartlett School. Looked like I've always been an active child, even in the schools, and then I was very active in high school—very, very active, and on a lot of committees.
- 0:07:10
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have a lot of school mates that you played games with at school, or after school, when you went home?
- Emma Caesar:** I just played with them all. No particular—I played with them all.
- Elaine Gunn:** Black children, white children?
- Emma Caesar:** Black and white.
- Elaine Gunn:** They were all your friends?
- Emma Caesar:** They were all my friends. I saw no color.
- Elaine Gunn:** And you graduated from Pittsfield—
- Emma Caesar:** Pittsfield High School, in 1952.
- Elaine Gunn:** Was that a special time, graduating from Pittsfield High? Did you go to your prom, for instance?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, I went to my prom, and I had a nice time.
- Elaine Gunn:** Do you remember who your date was?
- 0:08:00
- Emma Caesar:** His name was Ollie Gowans [sp].
- Elaine Gunn:** Was he a student at Pittsfield High also?
- Emma Caesar:** No, he was out of high school. He was from Philadelphia. I asked him, and he took me.
- Elaine Gunn:** Wonderful. Were there other young Black people who were in your class who also went to your prom?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, Eleanor Persep [?]. She was my best friend, and she went to the prom, and she was very active in high school. Very active.
- Elaine Gunn:** What are some of the jobs that you held throughout your life?

Emma Caesar: Oh, I was a licensed practical nurse, and then I came down to be a nurse aide. And I worked in a factory, and that's about all.

0:09:00

Elaine Gunn: Now, when you were an LPN, which hospital did you work in? Do you remember?

Emma Caesar: I worked at Berkshire Medical Center when I was an LPN.

Elaine Gunn: That's in—?

Emma Caesar: Pittsfield.

Elaine Gunn: And the factory that you worked at, do you remember that?

Emma Caesar: The factory? No, I can't remember that. A pajama factory.

Elaine Gunn: Oh! I didn't know there was a pajama—was that in Pittsfield?

Emma Caesar: Yes.

Elaine Gunn: How did you like nursing?

Emma Caesar: I loved nursing. That was my calling. I loved it.

Elaine Gunn: You liked being around people, helping people?

Emma Caesar: Yes, I liked helping people. I always wanted to help people.

Elaine Gunn: Yes.

Emma Caesar: It made me forget my troubles when I helped others.

Elaine Gunn: Yes. Wonderful. Do you remember any of the kinds of games you played when you were a child?

Emma Caesar: Hopscotch.

0:10:00

Elaine Gunn: Fun game. [laughs] Did you jump rope?

Emma Caesar: Yes, jumped rope.

Elaine Gunn: What about jacks? Did you play any jacks?

Emma Caesar: I played jacks! [laughs]

Elaine Gunn: Those were fun. And did you play dodgeball? [laughs]

Emma Caesar: Yes, dodgeball. [laughs]

Elaine Gunn: I think those are universal things—

- Emma Caesar:** Yes! [laughs]
- Elaine Gunn:** —that children all over the country, the world, play. Fun games, yes. And you played with children in your neighborhood?
- Emma Caesar:** Mhmm. Children in the neighborhood, I played with. Hide and go seek.
- Elaine Gunn:** Hide and go seek, yes. What street did you live on in Pittsfield when you were growing up?
- Emma Caesar:** Lived on Markowitz [sp] Place, in Pittsfield. West Union Street. And on Otis Street [sp].
- Elaine Gunn:** You remember all of that.
- Emma Caesar:** You do?
- Elaine Gunn:** You were remembering that!
- 0:11:00
- Sometimes children learn little rhymes when they're growing up. Did you learn any rhymes? Can you remember any rhymes that you learned? Of course I know we all learned rhymes when we were playing games. Eeny meeny tipsy teeny, apple jack, and things like that.
- Emma Caesar:** Yes. I'm trying to—I don't know how—I don't remember how—
- Elaine Gunn:** It's hard to remember those. Yes, it's hard to remember those, I know. Did you have chores to do? Now, you were an only child. Did you have chores to do when you were in your home growing up? Your mother and dad would say you have to do certain things?
- Emma Caesar:** Not really.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have to keep your own room clean, for instance?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have to wash dishes at all?
- Emma Caesar:** Yeah, a little bit. My mother and father were so crazy about me that they were absolutely supportive.
- Elaine Gunn:** I'm sure they were, being an only child.
- 0:12:01
- I remember your parents well, going to the affairs, the dances, the Eastern Stars and the Masons. Can you think of any lessons, any valuable lessons that you learned from your parents, such

as, oh, how to treat other people, how to treat older people, and that kind of thing?

Emma Caesar: Yes, I learned that from my parents, to try to be good to people, and try to always treat them with respect. My mother and father tried to drill that into me.

Elaine Gunn: Did you ever have the need to be disciplined? Did your mother or father ever discipline you?

Emma Caesar: Yes, but not too much, because they were so crazy about me that I really got away with [laughs] everything.

Elaine Gunn: Happens when you're an only child!

0:13:01 Do you remember any stories you might have heard when you were growing up? Any stories about things that happened around Pittsfield or—?

Emma Caesar: Any stories? I can't think of any.

Elaine Gunn: What were some of the kinds of recreation that you were involved in, especially in high school and beyond, after high school, with what girls and boys do after, in Pittsfield, for fun?

Emma Caesar: Well, what Eleanor Persep and I did for fun was go to the girls' clubs and play sports, particularly basketball. Were basketball champions, and that's what we did. We went to Boston, and we were the champions, and got an award for it.

0:14:03

Elaine Gunn: Were there little dances and parties? Did you go house to house with parties?

Emma Caesar: Yes, there always was parties in the neighborhood, the Mooreheads [sp] and different ones. Jaspers [sp]. We always would go to parties. The Lewises [sp]. Emma Lewis [sp].

Elaine Gunn: Yes, yes. Now, did you ever work outside the house, like some children worked after school at little jobs and things like that?

Emma Caesar: I only worked in the hospital.

Elaine Gunn: Did you learn any crafts at home? Did you learn to do anything at home?

Emma Caesar: No.

Elaine Gunn: I bet your mother was a good cook.

Emma Caesar: Yes, she was.

0:15:00

Elaine Gunn: Do you have any of her favorite recipes that you remember? Did you just like food in general, or did you—?

Emma Caesar: Just liked food in general. Meat and potatoes, and like that.

Elaine Gunn: Yes, yes, yes. So you don't remember any of your mother's or your grandmother's favorite recipes?

Emma Caesar: No. My grandmother liked succotash. She made very, very good succotash. My grandmother was noted for that.

Elaine Gunn: This was your father's mother?

Emma Caesar: My mother's mother.

Elaine Gunn: And she was—they all came from Stephentown you said?

Emma Caesar: Yeah, Stephentown, New York.

Elaine Gunn: Succotash is still very good, when someone makes it really well. [0:15:48] Delicious.

Emma Caesar: Never have it nowadays.

Elaine Gunn: Not much. I have a—[0:15:53] has a relative who makes it once a year for the family reunion and it's delicious.

Emma Caesar: Oh! Hmm.

Elaine Gunn: What are your hobbies? Did you have some hobbies or do you still have some?

0:16:02

Emma Caesar: My mother always tried to cultivate me with hobbies, but I never did sewing or mending or nothing. I never did anything like that. My hobbies seem to have been sports.

Elaine Gunn: You were involved in sports for how long? Like through school or—?

Emma Caesar: All through high school.

Elaine Gunn: Interesting. So you don't knit or crochet or anything?

Emma Caesar: I don't knit or crochet.

Elaine Gunn: Did your mother or grandmother do any of those things?

Emma Caesar: No.

- Elaine Gunn:** Do you have any other memories of Berkshire County, living here, and growing up here? Anything at all that comes to mind about growing up, since you spent your entire life in Berkshire County?
- 0:17:01
- Emma Caesar:** I don't have any memories.
- Elaine Gunn:** Even just growing up here, anything else other than what we've talked about?
- Emma Caesar:** Church picnics. Me singing in glee clubs and choirs was always such a wonderful experience. And taking the leading role in them was wonderful.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you do any traveling outside of Berkshire County?
- Emma Caesar:** Yes. I only went to Bermuda. I took my mother, as my guest, to Bermuda, and paid for her fare, and we had a wonderful time. We stayed on the ship. We went by cruise, and the cruise was our hotel.
- Elaine Gunn:** That must have been wonderful.
- Emma Caesar:** Yes, it was wonderful. It was wonderful.
- 0:18:00
- And then I took my mother to New York to see *Hello, Dolly!* And we stayed in a hotel in New York, and we toured New York.
- Elaine Gunn:** She must have enjoyed that so much.
- Emma Caesar:** She did. She did. I wanted to take her to Bermuda before she died, because that's what she wished for.
- Elaine Gunn:** And you did.
- Emma Caesar:** And I did. And we went to Canada, Quebec and Toronto, and Montreal.
- Elaine Gunn:** You've done some wonderful things.
- Emma Caesar:** I've tried to do things. We traveled.
- Elaine Gunn:** Wonderful. Absolutely. What a wonderful memory to have.
- Emma Caesar:** Yes!
- Elaine Gunn:** Yes, absolutely. Wow. And your father was deceased at this time?

Emma Caesar: No, my father was living. He's the one that gave us his blessings to go, and he knew that we went. And Eleanor Persep drove us to New York to get—and gave us a Bon Voyage party in New York.

0:19:03

Elaine Gunn: Wow! That must have been wonderful.

Emma Caesar: Yeah. They had champagne and everything.

Elaine Gunn: What a wonderful memory, Emma. That's great. [laughs] That sounds delightful. Well, anything else you can tell me? This is the end, but anything else you can think of that sounds—? Sometimes these things just come. Good memory.

Emma Caesar: No, as far as I know, that's it.

Elaine Gunn: How long have you been here?

Emma Caesar: I've been here four years. Four years.

Elaine Gunn: Now, you retired? Were you still working and then began having a problem and then—?

Emma Caesar: Yeah, retired. With the kidneys. Kidney problem. And with mental illness. But thank god, god has helped me, and the mental illness is gone.

0:20:02

Elaine Gunn: Wonderful. Wonderful blessing.

Emma Caesar: Yes, wonderful blessings. I've got wonderful blessings [0:20:09].

Elaine Gunn: Terrific. Well, this has been very nice. I thank you so much for letting me interview you, and I would like to take a picture of you, if that's all right.

Emma Caesar: Yes.

Elaine Gunn: It will go with this oral history project. That's what this is about.

Emma Caesar: Yes.

Elaine Gunn: This will go in the archives. People from years to come will be able to hear you and see your picture.

Emma Caesar: Yes. That'd be wonderful.

Elaine Gunn: All right! Well, I thank you again. This has been wonderful. Thank you. I'm going to turn it off. [audio cuts out] Emma, I failed to ask you when you were born. Would you mind telling me that info, please, when you were born?

Emma Caesar: I was born in Pittsfield August 30th, 19-hundred-and-33.

0:21:05

Elaine Gunn: Thank you very much.

Emma Caesar: Thank you.

0:21:40 *Recording ends*