



**Berkshire Historical Society at Herman Melville's Arrowhead**  
780 Holmes Rd, Pittsfield, MA 01201 | [berkshirehistory.org](http://berkshirehistory.org)

**Invisible Community Project**  
in partnership with  
**Housatonic Heritage Oral History**

**Frances Duval**  
**Recorded: February 17, 1998**  
**0:00:00 to 0:58:03**

---

- Elaine Gunn:** My name is [0:00:07 Elaine Gunn], and I'm with Mrs. Frances Duval of Pittsfield. And Mrs. Duval has consented to be a part of our oral history project, oral history for the Invisible Community. I will now begin the interview. Fran, I'd like to ask you who your parents were and where they were born.
- Francis Duval:** My mother was Estella Grant from Lenox, and my father was John Persip, and he was born on South Mountain Road in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:** You know why they came to Massachusetts or where they came from?
- Frances Duval:** I really don't know where their ancestors came from. Because my grandmother was born here also, in Cummington.
- 0:01:00
- Elaine Gunn:** Both grandparents born in this area?
- Frances Duval:** Yes.
- Elaine Gunn:** Do you remember when your parents came to Berkshire County?
- Frances Duval:** They've always been here.
- Elaine Gunn:** They've always been here. And prior to that, your grandparents were here, too.
- Frances Duval:** Right.
- Elaine Gunn:** So you don't know the history of where they came from to Berkshire County.

**Frances Duval:** Nope. I don't.

**Elaine Gunn:** Do you remember their names?

**Frances Duval:** I believe my grandmother's name was Hamilton.

**Elaine Gunn:** That maternal? Your father's mother or mother's mother?

**Frances Duval:** That was my father's mother. My grandmother in Lenox I believe came from Long Island.

0:02:02

**Elaine Gunn:** May I ask you when you were born?

**Frances Duval:** I was born on New Year's Eve, 1916.

**Elaine Gunn:** In?

**Frances Duval:** In Pittsfield.

**Elaine Gunn:** Pittsfield. You've lived here all of your life.

**Frances Duval:** Yes, I've lived here all of my life.

**Elaine Gunn:** Your brothers and sisters?

**Frances Duval:** They were all born right here in Pittsfield.

**Elaine Gunn:** How many siblings do you have?

**Frances Duval:** I had ten brothers and sisters.

**Elaine Gunn:** And they were or are here?

**Frances Duval:** Well, the first one, I don't remember the name. I don't think they even had a chance to name it. There was Raymond, Elliott, Mildred, Maddie, Ranford, Edward, Roland.

0:03:02

And I missed Elma. She's before Edward. Roland, and Edith. And a baby died that was named Hope.

**Elaine Gunn:** Did any of them leave the area to live? Or did they all live here in Pittsfield? [0:03:20].

**Frances Duval:** Well, no, Raymond left Pittsfield and moved Long Island way, and Elliott moved to Long Island, and then he moved to California. And that's where he passed.

- Elaine Gunn:** How many of them are still living?
- Frances Duval:** There are only three of us living. Mildred, myself, and Edith.
- Elaine Gunn:** And your sisters still live here?
- Frances Duval:** In the area.
- Elaine Gunn:** Why did Elliott leave?
- Frances Duval:** He got married, and he moved to Long Island. And then, they just decided to go out to California.
- 0:04:03 I don't know if it was his choice or his wife's choice. But he was there until he got killed out there.
- Elaine Gunn:** Were any of your brothers in the military?
- Frances Duval:** Roland. Roland was in the military.
- Elaine Gunn:** Besides your siblings, did anybody else live with you when you were growing up? Sometimes that...
- Frances Duval:** Oh, I don't know where they [0:04:32], but we did have a roommate. I don't even remember his name, I'm sorry. I don't remember his name. Only thing I remember, he used to buy us a barrel of candy a month.
- Elaine Gunn:** Children used to love that.
- Frances Duval:** We did at that time. But then, we all lost our teeth by the time we were about 20. [Laugh]
- 0:05:01 We thought it was great at the time.
- Elaine Gunn:** Where did you live in Pittsfield? The family, growing up.
- Frances Duval:** We first lived down on Pomeroy Avenue. Then, we moved to Dewey Avenue. From Dewey Avenue, we moved to Onota Street. From Onota Street, we moved to Robbins Avenue. And then, West Street.
- Elaine Gunn:** You lived in various places.
- Frances Duval:** Yeah. But mostly always on West side.
- Elaine Gunn:** How long have your parents been deceased?

**Frances Duval:** I believe my mother passed in '85. And my father, '87?  
0:06:01 No, that was too soon. My mother must've been—I guess I could go upstairs and get [0:06:07].

**Elaine Gunn:** I thought it was some years before.

**Frances Duval:** It was. It was. Yeah, she died quite a few years—I can't remember exactly the date, and I should because I just looked at it.

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:06:21] your father was quite elderly [0:06:23]...

**Frances Duval:** '97. My mother was [0:06:27] 60-something.

**Elaine Gunn:** You've been married.

**Frances Duval:** Yes.

**Elaine Gunn:** And your children?

**Frances Duval:** I have a son and a daughter. Leon and Francis. [0:06:49].  
[Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** Yes.

**Frances Duval:** She never lied to me. And Leon lives in Boston. We call her Sis, but her name's Francis.  
0:07:03 She lives in Amherst.

**Elaine Gunn:** And grandchildren?

**Frances Duval:** I have two grandchildren, Tyra Fisher, that would be married name, and Eddie.

**Elaine Gunn:** Do they live in this area?

**Frances Duval:** No, Eddie just moved to California about a month ago. And Tyra lives in Albany. And Tyra has two children, Tatiana and [0:07:40 Liasia?]. And Eddie has one little girl, Kiara.

**Elaine Gunn:** You're a widow?

**Frances Duval:** No, I was divorced before I became a widow.

**Elaine Gunn:** But your ex-husband...

**Frances Duval:** He's dead now.

0:08:00

**Elaine Gunn:** And your church affiliation?

**Frances Duval:** Baptist.

**Elaine Gunn:** Your whole family, I think?

**Frances Duval:** As far as I can remember. We're all Baptist. Yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:** Do you remember any memories about church gatherings growing up?

**Frances Duval:** Well, yeah, there were a lot of church gatherings. Suppers. And they had a recreation room, and we used to put on little plays and things in the recreation room. We had circus, talent shows, things like that.

**Elaine Gunn:** And all of the children participated?

**Frances Duval:** Not all of us, but we showed up, anyway.

**Elaine Gunn:** Did your father do any catering for those affairs? He was a caterer.

**Frances Duval:** He wasn't a caterer until later in life.

0:09:03

He was the janitor of the baptist church, custodian, when it was on North Street. And then, he stayed with them on South Street for a few years.

**Elaine Gunn:** Which is where it is now.

**Frances Duval:** Where it is now. He was also the custodian at the museum for several years, until he started catering. He loved baseball and sports.

**Elaine Gunn:** Would you talk a little bit about—wasn't he an umpire?

**Frances Duval:** He was an umpire for quite a few years around town. Most all of Black ball. He used to play up at Clapp Park, Wahconah Park, different parks around.

0:10:06

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:10:07].

**Frances Duval:** [Laugh] Yes, but it was funny because every other time he went out to play baseball or something, he'd come home

with a broken leg, a broken thumb, a broken nose. And I could hear mother say, "Oh my God, Johnny's hurt again."  
[Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** And your mother was a homemaker?

**Frances Duval:** Yes. Until Dad started catering, and then she did waitress work with us and all. Well, when he was in the hospital, she had to go out to work. And she worked for a while.

**Elaine Gunn:** But I remember her being at home.

**Frances Duval:** Yes.

**Elaine Gunn:** And at that time, most Black women were out working.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, really?

0:11:03

**Elaine Gunn:** Yeah. Being at home, that was not a luxury that many could afford.

**Frances Duval:** Well, she had so many of us to keep track of, I think she had to stay home most of the time. [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:11:12] that we had.

**Frances Duval:** No.

**Elaine Gunn:** Has religion played a tremendous part in your life?

**Frances Duval:** No, I can't say it has because I was always working. I would go to church when I could. I still participate in whatever they have to do. But I don't go constantly. And it's only because I got out of going when I had parties to serve and stuff.

**Elaine Gunn:** Because you were a caterer, too.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. And then, I went over to the Shaker Village, and I'd run the cafeteria over there for seven years.

0:12:05  
And I didn't get out to go anywhere. That's one reason why I finally decided to give it up. Because I felt I was losing contact with everyone and everything.

**Elaine Gunn:** That's right, being a caterer, you'd work holidays and special occasions.

**Frances Duval:** Well, this is a—yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:** Now, where did you go to school?

**Frances Duval:** I started at Bartlett, which is on Onota Street. And then, from there, I went to Tucker. And then, I quit. [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** Do you know why?

**Frances Duval:** Yeah, first off, I didn't like school. I hated it with a passion.

**Elaine Gunn:** What were some of the things that you remember?

0:13:02

**Frances Duval:** I remember that I had to stand in the hall most of the time, because I'd be going down the hall grinning, and there was one teacher that, every time she saw a smile on my face, she wouldn't even let me in the classroom. She says, "I know you're up to some [0:13:15 devilment?]," and she'd send me out in the hall. So I guess I didn't like standing in the hall as much as I did. [Laugh] [0:13:24 Fred Dillard?] always got me to laughing just before I'd go into geography class. And that teacher'd be standing right at the door, looking at me. But the main reason for quitting, Gladys Dillard was leaving Pittsfield, and the lady she worked for had a friend, Mrs. Whitney, who wanted somebody to do some work. And Gladys asked me if I would go, and I said, "Oh, well, school starts in two weeks."

0:14:01

She said, "Well, maybe she could find somebody in that two weeks if you could fill in." So I went there to fill in, and the lady asked me if I'd stay. And I said, "I don't know, I'd have to ask mother." So I went home to ask mother if I could stay, and she said, "Well, if that's what you want." Because years ago, they didn't think it was quite necessary to have the education you need to have today.

**Elaine Gunn:** Schools were not very encouraging either. Some of the schools were not very encouraging.

**Frances Duval:** No. So I just quit, and I stayed there for eight years. And then, I found out they weren't paying me anything compared to other people, so I left there. Where did I go? I guess I went doing day's work. And then, I started working with my father when he started catering. And of course, he had a restaurant on West Street.

**Elaine Gunn:** I didn't know that, tell me about the restaurant.

0:15:06

**Frances Duval:** He had a restaurant, which was [0:15:09] four or five, the Busy Bee, Berkshire, and Johnny's Restaurant, they were all on West Street. And dad had a small restaurant. And gangrene had set in his leg after he had it two or three years from one of the breaks that he had had. And mother couldn't run the restaurant, so she had to close it.

**Elaine Gunn:** What year was that? Before the War?

**Frances Duval:** Yes, because he wanted the boys both to quit school and help in the restaurant. And I remember my brother Elliott crying because he did not want to quit school. And he was crying. And he did quit.

0:16:06

And so did Raymond. But Raymond didn't hang around too long after he quit school. He got [0:16:15]. [Laugh] But after Elliott got married, he went back to school. And he had a pretty good job when he passed.

**Elaine Gunn:** This is the one in California.

**Frances Duval:** Yes. I believe he was working for the state. Well, he had a good job in Long Island, also. Because Bobbi was a good pusher for him. She was a nurse. So it worked out very well for them.

**Elaine Gunn:** Did you find it difficult to get these jobs in Pittsfield that were really [0:17:00]?

0:17:00

**Frances Duval:** I hardly ever applied for a job in my life. Somebody would call me, and that's how I went to all the jobs I ever had. Through somebody just calling me and asking me if I'd go and work for these people. That's one thing. I wouldn't even know how to write a résumé.

**Elaine Gunn:** A résumé is what they do now. [Laugh]

**Frances Duval:** I really wouldn't know how to write a résumé because I never really—all of my jobs were just sort of handed to me.

**Elaine Gunn:** Pretty good fortune.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:17:44] you stayed in the catering business, and word of mouth, I think...

**Frances Duval:** Right, right, right. The only reason I'm not doing catering more or less is because the young people of today don't bother because they can buy everything, all platters, all fixed.

0:18:04 And the ones I used to work for practically all had passed.

**Elaine Gunn:** That was while you were growing up, and we all knew [0:18:18].

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I enjoyed it.

**Elaine Gunn:** Yeah. Well, obviously, I remember [0:18:30].

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yeah. Yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:** Remember the kinds of games you played as a child?

**Frances Duval:** Well, of course, we played with dolls. We had a few of them, [0:18:46]. We called ourselves operating on the job. Slit her right down the middle. [Laugh] And the neighbor's daughter went home crying.

0:19:00

**Elaine Gunn:** Oh, dear.

**Frances Duval:** But we used to play a lot of games. And my uncle Dewey played the piano. And Cousin Ned [0:19:14] played the violin. And Saturday nights, they would come over, and we'd take the dining room table, put it out on the porch, and we'd dance. Sunday nights, Dewey would come back, and we'd sing. And Grandma [0:19:34], we used to go to her house. We used to play musical chairs a lot. But she could think of more games for us to play. All kinds of games. Just stuff in the house, she would pull it out.

**Elaine Gunn:** And this was in Pittsfield?

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. She lived on Pomeroy Avenue. And we used to love to go there.

0:20:03

**Elaine Gunn:** At the time, were there organizations that had affairs, and dances, and whatnot?

**Frances Duval:** Yeah, there was a woman, Mrs. McFadden, I believe her name was. She used to put on all kinds of things at the Grange Hall opposite the post office. Talent shows, and what's-his-name weddings.

**Elaine Gunn:** Tom Thumb.

**Frances Duval:** Tom Thumb weddings and that sort of thing. Because I remember my father was the bride one time. And [0:20:35 Hickey Williams's] father was the groom. There was a riot. Oh, gosh, that was a riot. Because my father couldn't find any lady's shoes to fit him. He had to wear sneakers. And my mother used to make all these paper dresses for these weddings. And we had a lot of good times.

0:21:01

**Elaine Gunn:** So it was a very active Black community.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yeah, it seemed like there was something for us to do all the time. And when we weren't out doing something, there was somebody at the house. Our house was always full. Always. Yeah. There was somebody there all the time. Couldn't wait to get home from work, you didn't know who was going to show up next.

**Elaine Gunn:** What fun that must've been.

**Frances Duval:** It was. It was. I remember when Sissy was going to high school, I used to come in from work an hour or so after she got home. She'd bring half of the children from school home, move the dining room table, and they'd be dancing away in the dining room.

**Elaine Gunn:** Knew where they were.

**Frances Duval:** I knew where she was. And most every day, she had company. And I never objected to it.

0:22:01

And on Saturdays, I used to let them have a party almost every Saturday night. Because as you say, then you knew where they were.

**Elaine Gunn:** Exactly.

- Frances Duval:** And I'd sit upstairs in the hall. And if two came up to go to the bathroom at the same time, "Sorry, only one at a time.
- Elaine Gunn:** Yeah.
- Frances Duval:** It's only one place in there." I called myself being a chaperone. But I guess they might've been going out the door [0:22:30].
- Elaine Gunn:** [0:22:32].
- Frances Duval:** Oh, yes. In fact, if the kids had more chaperones today, they'd be a lot better off. They really would. Because when we went to parties and stuff, my mother, Ruth Barnabas, Emma Evans, and Aunt Gussie, they all went with us. They all went with us to all the parties we went to.
- 0:23:00 I remember a party I took the kids to in Great Barrington. I believe it was at your house, or your mother's house.
- Elaine Gunn:** On the porch.
- Frances Duval:** Out on the porch.
- Elaine Gunn:** Yeah, sure. Yes, ma'am.
- Frances Duval:** Yeah. I remember you'd had two or three parties down there.
- Elaine Gunn:** Yeah. We had the boys have their [0:23:22]. We got them use the porch [0:23:25].
- Frances Duval:** Yeah. Yeah. I remember taking the kids there.
- Elaine Gunn:** Yep. Very different today.
- Frances Duval:** Oh, really.
- Elaine Gunn:** Did you have any sibling rivalries with your brothers and sisters? [0:23:40].
- Frances Duval:** I loved my family. [Laugh] Well, I used to be fighting. I don't know why. [Laugh] I kind of know why. Because I was always picking up things. And with eight, nine other throwing their books here, and their coat here, and this, that—and I was always picking up.
- 0:24:02 And if they left something, I'd get mad, and I'd start fighting. And Mrs. Evans, who lived upstairs over us, used

to come down, and get me, and take me up to her house. I don't know if she knew who was starting the fights or not. And I don't remember for sure.

**Elaine Gunn:** Winnie's mother?

**Frances Duval:** Winnie's mother. Yeah. I'm really not sure who started them. And of course, mother and dad...

**Elaine Gunn:** They never get to the bottom of it.

**Frances Duval:** No. Mother and dad went shopping every Saturday night. And we'd watch them—we lived down Onota Street, which was right up there, and we'd watch them turn to go down West Union Street. As soon as they turned to go down West Union Street, the boys got the pots and pans out and started making candy. They started cooking. But the trouble was, they would never clean up their mess. And they'd hide the pans under the kitchen sink because mother had a skirt like on it.

0:25:05 And then, I'd offer to stay home from school and clean up since I'd find all these pans.

**Elaine Gunn:** [Laugh] Oh, dear.

**Frances Duval:** I wish I was as ambitious today as I was then.

**Elaine Gunn:** Well, you've done your job. You paid your dues. Your household chores. You mentioned if you stayed home from school sometimes and clean the house. Were they special chores?

**Frances Duval:** I used to like to just stay home and clean. Nothing special. We all had to take turns doing dishes. Edith's the one who would always have to go to the bathroom, and then she'd stay in there, and stay in there, and we'd get mad, and we'd go ahead and do them because we had somewhere we wanted to go. And she still was bad. [Laugh] She still was bad.

0:26:00

**Elaine Gunn:** You remember any poems that you learned from school at all, recitations?

**Frances Duval:** I only remember one that I was supposed to be reciting up at the Christian Center, and it was called Edwards Mission.

And I got up to recite, and, "My mother said"—and I get to laughing again. My mother said when she was small, and they had rally day and all, she was as straight, as straight as could be, and not a nice [0:26:44] girl like me." And I messed the thing up all...

**Elaine Gunn:** You remember everything.

**Frances Duval:** I remember, and I still remember it. I still remember it because I messed it up so bad. And I was so happy to have a part to say.

0:27:01 And then, got up there and got [0:27:05].

**Elaine Gunn:** You mentioned that the Christian Center used to be something else?

**Frances Duval:** [0:27:10 Edwards] Mission. And it was a church. They had church services there and stuff. And during the week, you could take your baby there to be weighed and stuff.

**Elaine Gunn:** So it was like a health center, also? Or a children's center?

**Frances Duval:** Well, it was one or two days a week. It's been there a long time.

**Elaine Gunn:** Who operated it? Was it operated by ministers? Or just the neighborhood? The city of Pittsfield?

**Frances Duval:** Must've been the city.

**Elaine Gunn:** It was open to everybody?

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

0:28:02 And it was a good place for us to go if our parents had to go somewhere. They could send us there, and they'd know we'd be there for a couple hours or whatever. It was kind of like a center where you could just go and play games.

**Elaine Gunn:** Sort of a forerunner of what the Christian Center is like now.

**Frances Duval:** Right. Yeah. Of course, years ago, it wasn't that they gave away clothes like they do now. They didn't have the meals there then. Only special—once in a while, they had a special dinner. [0:28:42]. In fact, they had classes there for a while,

too. They had kindergarten there instead of at Tucker School.

0:29:00

They didn't really have nurseries way back then. But they had kindergarten cross there, because I distinctly remember John [0:29:10 Dwyer?] beating me up there. [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:**

Those things will stay in your mind.

**Frances Duval:**

Yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:**

How did white and Black children get along in the neighborhood?

**Frances Duval:**

I never noticed any difference. I never, never did. We all seemed to get along fine. And it seemed like Roland and Edward's friends were all white. Us girls, we mingled mostly with the Black girls. But Edward and Roland, just about all their friends were white.

**Elaine Gunn:**

You mentioned most of your friends were Black. What were some of their names?

**Frances Duval:**

[0:29:54 Greeda Williams], Florence Ford, who became [0:30:03], she's got several children in town still.

0:30:08

**Elaine Gunn:**

You mentioned a Dillard. Were they...

**Frances Duval:**

Oh, Fred Dillard, Marge Dillard, Gladys Dillard, whose sister felt that she was older than us [0:30:23]. Well, she was a little older because she would [0:30:27] out of town and go to New York when we were still kids. But we used to, Fred, Marge, and [0:30:36] and all of us...

[End of Recording]

[Begin Recording]

**Frances Duval:**

...Harry Stallings. They used to meet me on the corner of West Street coming home from work and walk me home. Of course, there was Francis Alberta Pierce.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Were some of them relatives of yours, also? Or were they all friends?

**Frances Duval:**

Evelyn and Myrtle were relatives.

**Elaine Gunn:** Yeah.

**Frances Duval:** But they were down in Lenox. And when I'd go down there, I'd get them in trouble. And they'd send me home. [Laugh] Evelyn probably has told you a dozen times, we were sitting on the porch, had to sit on the porch because I said something bad. Had to sit there the whole day.

0:01:00

**Elaine Gunn:** Whole day. [Laugh] And parents and grandparents meant business in those days.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yeah, they didn't fool around.

**Elaine Gunn:** What values did you learn from your parents and grandparents? Discipline certainly was [0:01:15].

**Frances Duval:** Oh, definitely. You better. I remember one time, we went to Onota Lake, and my brothers, Raymond, Elliott, Mildred, Maddie, and myself, and my mother told us to be home at 6 o'clock for supper. We always ate together. And that is so bad today that even the wives and husbands hardly eat together. They put it in a plate, and they go watch TV.

**Elaine Gunn:** Or they send out for something.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. Yeah. But no, we always ate together. And this night, we were all supposed to be home either 5 or 6 o'clock. Coming home, there was this fellow in town called Francis Steeley.

0:02:03

And he was a little retarded. But he always was carrying snakes around in his pocket. And on the way from the lake, we came through the woods, and he was around. I don't know if he was at the lake or if we met him in the path. But anyway, he called Raymond and Elliott over, pulled up a big rock, and there was a couple snakes. So all the way home, the boys are picking up rocks, and they found a gallon can and were putting snakes in the can. And we kept hollering, "Come on, we're going to be late. Come on, we're going to be late." My mother was at the door with a belt. And every one of us got beat. She was tired when she got through with us. [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** That was it.

- Frances Duval:** We couldn't explain to her, "The boys told us not to leave them."
- 0:03:00 And then, I stayed home one day after that, and I was doing dishes in the kitchen, and there goes a snake under the sink. I run upstairs to Mrs. Evans. She comes down with a broom. She was as scared as I was. And we got rid of that snake. But then, I told on the boys, told my mother and father that the boys had a can of snakes in the [0:03:28]. Well, they were so much [0:03:34]. I don't know, there may still be snakes in that [0:03:37]. [Laugh] So they had to go down and find the can, bury them up on the hill.
- Elaine Gunn:** Oh, dear.
- Frances Duval:** That was one of the bad things, we all got beat the same day. And she didn't fool. My mother didn't fool too much. She mostly took the heel of her shoe.
- 0:04:02 And I said, even today, if these kids got a good spanking and not called child abuse, they'd be better off. I used to hate a scolding though worse than a spanking. I didn't mind getting spanked because as soon as that hurt was gone, it was gone. But once I got scolded, it wouldn't leave me.
- Elaine Gunn:** It'd stay in your mind.
- Frances Duval:** Yeah, it'd stay.
- Elaine Gunn:** How did you discipline your children?
- Frances Duval:** Well, for a while, I hollered at them a lot. And one day, my son said to me, "Mother, if you wouldn't holler so much, and explain why you don't want us to do something, we'd listen." And I thought that was the best lesson I ever had.
- Elaine Gunn:** Yeah, from the son. [Laugh]
- Frances Duval:** Yep. He said, "We'd listen if you would explain why instead of going around hollering."
- 0:05:03 But oh, yeah. I made them be in at a certain time. And one time, Leon didn't come in. I locked him out. That was a lesson because I never used to lock my door. I never locked my door on West Street until that night. And I didn't feel too bad because my mother was right next door, and I figured he'd fall in there and ask them to let him sleep there, which he did. But he stayed over there for almost a

week. And Charlie Turbo was rooming at the house at the time, and I was washing my car, which I don't do often, but I was then. And Charlie Turbo said, "Leon, why don't you get out there and help your mother wash her car?" He said, "She's mad at me." He says, "Well, you better get out there and help her wash her car."

0:06:02

So he came out, and I said, "You ready to talk?" "About what?" I said, "Well, I think, if you're going to live under my roof, you're going to go by my rules. Otherwise, you're going to have to find someplace else. Because you're not going to be coming in the house every time I go to work and get some new clothes. You're going to take them all and be gone. So you can think about it. And if you can decide to go by my rules, you can come back and stay. But as soon as you mess up, you're gone." And it was only that one time, I seemed to have to do it. And I think it hurt me more than it did him.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Yeah, it sure did, but you have to say it. I suspect that children value those lessons.

0:07:04

**Frances Duval:**

Mm-hmm. Because now, he'll say, "You know, I often think of things that you did." And I said, "I often think of things that you did, too."

**Elaine Gunn:**

I do, too. I do, too. You remember any stories you heard growing up? Stories about anything, people, what was happening around in the city of Pittsfield?

**Frances Duval:**

Might've been gossip. [Laugh] You need to live here to tell you stories about some of the things that I used to do on the job. One job we had, this Scottie who just died, Scottie Cesar, Catherine Cesar's husband's [0:08:00 dad?], he used to meet Liz and I going to work on Monday mornings or whatever morning.

0:08:07

And we'd stop and have a drink in some bar, and then we'd go on to work. And Liz and I worked the same place. Liz did the ironing, and I did the cleaning. And the lady's son wouldn't do anything for his mother, but he'd do anything for me. And I'd say to him, "Dave, I'm getting old now. How about you clean in the oven? It's too much for me. How about you mop in the kitchen floor?" One day, we got to work, and his mother said, "Francis, will you ask Dave

to shovel the path?" So I got in there. "Dave, what's wrong with you? How come you haven't shoveled this path? You know I'm too old to be plowing through this snow." "OK, Francis, whatever you say." And Liz would be in the other room, dying laughing.

0:09:04

And the dog would come sliding across the kitchen floor, and I tried to get the dog out of there two or three times. He'd go out one door and come in the other. And I took him, gave him a kick. So we never knew where the dog went. He never came back. [Laugh] He never came back. And then, we were working for Norman Rockwell when he had first built his studio in Stockbridge. And they had a dog. But I never liked a dog in my kitchen, and especially if I was cooking. I didn't want any dogs. And I would tell people, "Would you please put the dog in the other room?" "Oh, he'll be all right." "OK." The dog came in the kitchen, and we're cooking. And I put him out one door. He looked, he'd come in the other door.

0:10:00

Well, finally, I gave him a kick. And when I gave him a kick, he came in the other door growling at me. I said, "Oh, gee, Liz, what's going to happen?" [Laugh] And Liz says, "You stop kicking these dogs, or you're going to be in big trouble." Those were some of the things that happened.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Now, you said you did cook in various houses, and you also catered a lot. Know any of your favorite recipes for meals?

**Frances Duval:**

No, because half the time, I didn't know what I put it in it. [Laugh] They were always different.

**Elaine Gunn:**

What about your mother's, your grandmother's?

**Frances Duval:**

My mother didn't cook very much. My mother's favorite thing when my father wasn't home—my father did all the cooking, even at home. After work, he'd come home and cook. And if my mother was stuck with us, we got biscuit-looking crackers.

0:11:05

**Elaine Gunn:**

Milk crackers?

**Frances Duval:**

Milk crackers and milk or creamed eggs on toast. Or cream chipped beef. And those were some of the things that she

would make for us. But I didn't have any real special recipes myself.

**Elaine Gunn:** You cooked so many different things.

**Frances Duval:** Right. Yeah. And a lot of times, people would have their own suggestions, and you just come home, look in the book, and find it.

**Elaine Gunn:** So you started working outside the home very early. Did you have to, as some children do, contribute to the family finances?

**Frances Duval:** I always did. My first job was doing dishes after school at [0:11:57 Prinson?] Walker's house.

0:12:00 Prinson Walker had a shop on South Street, and my aunt Minnie worked for them. And she hated to do dishes. I don't know if she paid me or they paid me. But I got \$.50 a week, and I walked from Robbins Avenue to the monument in South Street, that George Street, right across—every day after school. and I got \$.50 a week, and I'd give my mother a quarter. Everything I made, I gave her half until I got married. And when I went to pay her when I got married, she said, "No, you're going to need it."

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:12:41].

**Frances Duval:** And then, when I went to get my divorce, until this day, I often wondered where my mother got the money. I asked her if she could loan me \$40 because the lawyer wouldn't start my divorce without a down payment.

0:13:00 And I asked her if she could loan me \$40, and she said, "I'll give it to you tomorrow." Until this day, I have always wondered where she got the \$40.

**Elaine Gunn:** The nest egg that she probably had.

**Frances Duval:** She might've been saving the little quarters that I had given her all that time.

**Elaine Gunn:** They always [0:13:21]. Always something for a rainy day.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. But I would've loved to know what she had to sacrifice to give it to me, although I paid her back. But I probably paid her back in quarters, too. [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** You have any hobbies?

**Frances Duval:** Dancing. I used to love to dance. I still like to dance, but my ankles won't let me do too much dancing. And I used to like to sing, but my voice—I'm not a man, I'm not a boy, but my voice changed.

0:14:02 I got an awful cold one year, and after that, I couldn't carry a tune.

**Elaine Gunn:** Something in your bronchial tubes?

**Frances Duval:** Right. I always wanted to play an instrument. John Crocket loaned me his saxophone to practice on. Then, didn't I fall and broke my tooth?

**Elaine Gunn:** Oh, dear.

**Frances Duval:** And I had to give him his saxophone back. I think he was about ready to sell it. And then, I would've loved to play the piano, but I always worked. You could never say to me, "Francis, you've got to practice or come on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday," because I never knew what day I had to go to work. So I never had time to develop.

0:15:04

**Elaine Gunn:** To develop it.

**Frances Duval:** I enjoyed being in NAACP because we had some very nice affairs.

**Elaine Gunn:** Lovely affairs.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. We had NAACP [0:15:20].

**Elaine Gunn:** Was that the only specific organization...

**Frances Duval:** Yeah, it was really the biggest one. I used to belong to the group, there was five of us girls, and we called ourselves the After-5 Girls. But we found out every time we wanted to give something, we were supposed to donate so much money to some organization, which was never [0:15:50] around at the time. And if you didn't say you were going to donate the money—and we were just getting started [0:15:59].

- 0:16:00                    How can you give when you really haven't got it to give?  
So that didn't last too long.
- Elaine Gunn:**            One last question, any other special memories that you  
have of being born and raised in Pittsfield, living here your  
whole life?
- Frances Duval:**        I've never wanted to live anywhere else. I never have. I've  
been. I've been on cruises, I've traveled a lot. But I never  
had any desire to live anywhere else.
- Elaine Gunn:**            You have any other memories of just living here? You have  
a wide array of friends.
- Frances Duval:**        Well, I think years ago, when the Globetrotters and the  
different bands and stuff were around, it was so much fun  
to be able to go to all those affairs, that I enjoyed it.
- 0:17:06                    I enjoyed the people so far. Haven't had any fights with  
anybody that I know of.
- Elaine Gunn:**            I remember Moe talking about going to showboat.
- Frances Duval:**        Oh. I missed one dance at showboat, and I cried like a baby  
because I was carrying Leon. And I tried on about three or  
four outfits, and I couldn't stand the looks of myself. So I  
said to Big Leon, "Well, you go on. I'm not going." And so,  
I didn't go. That was the only showboat dance I ever  
missed. Of course, there were groups from Troy and  
Albany. I went to a tremendous amount of affairs in  
Albany, Schenectady, Troy, because there were three or  
four different groups over there I knew.
- 0:18:03                    In fact, for a long time, I said I knew more people in  
Albany than I did in Pittsfield.
- Elaine Gunn:**            I remember the big bands used to come to Albany when I  
was a teenager.
- Frances Duval:**        Right. Yeah.
- Elaine Gunn:**            [0:18:18], Jimmie Lunceford.
- Frances Duval:**        Well, a lot of them came right to showboat. And then, The  
Bubble Room was a nice place, too. Right here in town.  
But it didn't last too long. I don't know why. That was a  
nice place to give affairs.

**Elaine Gunn:** Well, is there anything else you think you can add? Any other memories?

**Frances Duval:** [Laugh] I don't know. I'll think of other things.

0:19:05

**Elaine Gunn:** So you feel you've had a rich life in Pittsfield?

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. As far as I'm concerned, I've enjoyed living here. And my kids. They were always gone. Every place Sissy went, she wanted to move to. She was much different than I. I think something happened to me. Or as Leon gets older, he may be the only one to come back here. I doubt very much. Oh, I don't know. [0:19:48]. It's a little scary.

**Elaine Gunn:** And she's still in Amherst?

**Frances Duval:** Yeah, she's in Amherst. And she had to retire a couple of months ago.

0:20:03

She had that bout with cancer.

**Elaine Gunn:** Oh, dear.

**Frances Duval:** They found a spot on her brain. So she just got through going through that. It's a little worry.

**Elaine Gunn:** What a worry.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah, it's a worry.

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:20:22]. But you're well.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, I'm fine. I want to stay that way.

**Elaine Gunn:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Frances Duval:** I like being well. [Laugh] I love being well.

**Elaine Gunn:** Don't we all, yeah. I'll share some of those memories with you, especially your family told me. When your parents were living, your home was always an open home.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, yes.

**Elaine Gunn:** For everybody.

**Frances Duval:** Yes, it was. Yes.

**Elaine Gunn:** Always after dances.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. Well, when I lived on West Street, too, after every dance—in fact, that's the one thing I feel bad about.

0:21:07 Every New Year's, when we had a New Year's Eve dance, and everybody came back to the house, now, you can't let everybody in. You can only let the people you know. And that's sad.

**Elaine Gunn:** That has changed.

**Frances Duval:** That has changed terribly. Yeah. Because as I say, until I moved here—I moved next door at first. And until I moved on this street, I never locked my doors. Never locked my doors. And I would be away for a weekend, and come home, and find a note, "Thanks for the weekend's lodging." Where I had friends...

**Elaine Gunn:** People would come in, spend the weekend, and leave?

0:22:01

**Frances Duval:** And leave, and leave me a note, "Thanks for the weekend's lodging." And of course, Sissy, when she was in Long Island, she was in a lot of plays and stuff because she was hanging around with Stanley Green and that group. And they brought one of their plays to the museum called Out of the Frying Pan. And 29 of them stayed at the house. Well, my attic—I had the attic fixed up like a dormitory, and there was room for 11 to sleep in the outer part of the attic. And then, there was a room in the attic. And a couple of people could sleep in there.

**Elaine Gunn:** And this was on West Street?

**Frances Duval:** That was on West Street. And then, I had twin beds in Leon's room, double bed in Sissy's room, my room, couches. And it was a bad night. And one of the cars broke down coming from New York.

0:23:07 And they had the address. And they finally got to the house, and we stayed up until about 4 o'clock waiting for them, and they didn't show. Finally, I went on to bed. When I came down in the morning, there were five people sleeping on the dining room floor. They had gotten to the house finally, just walked in, and laid down, and went to sleep. The reason they knew the house was because the

other car, they were traveling with them, was there. So I guess they figured the door was unlocked. You could do something like that years ago. Somebody would shoot you if they walked in and found these people sleeping on the floor today.

**Elaine Gunn:** And now, for you living alone...

0:24:00

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. Well, that's why I finally stopped taking in roomers. I did take in roomers for a while. But I had two bad experiences, so I didn't think it was worth it.

**Elaine Gunn:** But it's nice to have your sister.

**Frances Duval:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

**Elaine Gunn:** And [0:24:20]'s not too far away.

**Frances Duval:** No, she's not far away.

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:24:25].

**Frances Duval:** Oh, right.

**Elaine Gunn:** [0:24:32]. Liz—I forget about Liz Bradley.

**Frances Duval:** Oh, right. She lives in the [0:24:41]. Liz Tomlinson.

**Elaine Gunn:** Oh, is that her name? Oh, I'm sorry, I [0:24:52].

**Frances Duval:** She had [0:24:54].

**Elaine Gunn:** Oh, really?

**Frances Duval:** Her telephone number's 442-9784.

0:25:05

**Elaine Gunn:** What a memory.

**Frances Duval:** [Laugh]

**Elaine Gunn:** Phone numbers? Wow.

**Frances Duval:** My father and my brother Elliott were working on Lake Buel, when he tripped and fell, running to the lake for a swim and got a compound fracture. And he was in the

hospital. The doctor set his leg wrong. He was in the hospital. They had to reset his leg, and he was in the hospital for a year. At when my mother had to go out and find a job.

**Elaine Gunn:**

It was after that that he opened a restaurant on West...

0:26:00

**Frances Duval:**

And then, when he got better, he had opened up a restaurant on West Street. I don't remember exactly how many years he had it. He probably only had it about two years. Then, gangrene set in his leg, and he had to give it up.

**Elaine Gunn:**

Well, Lake Buel...

**Elaine Gunn:**

Thank you, Fran, for this wonderful interview. Today's date is February 17, 1998. Mrs. Francis Duval is an active, vibrant, outgoing 81-year-old who lives alone and thoroughly enjoys life.

0:58:03

*Recording ends*