

**GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION**  
**SOUTH VILLAGE**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview  
COLETTE SMITH DOUGLAS

By Liza Zapol  
New York, NY  
February 20, 2014

**Oral History Interview with Colette Smith Douglas, February 20, 2014**

Narrator	Colette Smith Douglas
Birthdate	11/19/1926
Birthplace	France
Narrator Age	87
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	Charlton St, NY NY
Date of Interview	Feb 20, 2014, 10 am
Duration of Interview	1 hour, 59 minutes
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	y
Photographs	y
Format Recorded	.Wav 98 khz, 24 bit [1 <sup>st</sup> file] .Wav 48 khz, 24 bit [2 <sup>nd</sup> file]
Archival [Edited]File Names/Size	140220-000 [2 GB]; Douglas_ColetteArchivalOH2.wav [973.1 MB]
MP3 File Name/Size	Douglas_ColetteOralHistory1.mp3; [71.1 MB]  Douglas_ColetteOralHistoryv2.mp3 [67.6 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	4

**Background/ Notes:**

GVSHIP staff member Sheryl Woodruff and Liza Zapol spoke to Colette Douglas on the phone about her memories before the interview- Colette refers to this during the interview. She prefers that the address of her home be kept private.



Colette Smith Douglas at her home, February 20, 2014. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

## **Quotes from Oral History Interview with Colette Smith Douglas**

“Another Depression memory was one fall when we came back from France, my father had come to get us in his car. And I guess he was unloading the suitcases, and this man stopped and said, “May I help you?” And my father said, “Sure.” And he was a guy without work, in a tattered suit, but good manners and whatnot. [00:19:58]

So my dad said, “I’d like to help you.” I’ll never forget this. So he brought him in. He let him take a bath. Gave him a suit, and maybe gave him some money, I don’t know. But he said, “Let me know how you make out.” Well, we never heard from him. But that stuck in my mind.” (Douglas p.6-7)

“So we came back [from France], and I remember we looked for a place to live in the suburbs. Too depressing. So then one day I was looking around in the Village with an agent, and he said, “Well, there’s a house on Charlton Street. The people are leaving. Maybe you can rent it.” So we rented this, falling apart but wonderful. And before we renovated it, we rented the top floor for more than we were paying for the whole house. Can you imagine? I think it was like \$160 a month.”

(Douglas p. 23)

**\*Referencing MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens**

“Every year now, to show you how things have changed, every year besides that Christmas feast they had Digging Day, where everyone would turn out. They would dig up the central lawn, reseed, put up the little fence around it, prune the bushes, clean up everything. Now they hire someone..”

(Douglas p.31)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Colette Smith Douglas

### Early Years

- Born in Normandy, France / 87 years old
  - Family background
  - Mother – French; Father – North American
  - Father worked in advertising for McCann Erickson
  - One sister
- Four children, seven grandchildren
- 1952/53 came to the Village
- 74 MacDougal Street home
  - Well-educated, middle-class tenants lived at MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens in the 1950s
  - Family had a live-in maid
  - Janitor shoveled coal into furnace
  - Kitchen had an icebox
  - Milkman delivered glass bottles

### Great Depression

- People lived in orange crates on Houston Street, just south of our block on MacDougal Street

### WW II

- Mother trained as an air raid warden
- Rations for meat and butter
- No more live-in maid

### Neighborhood

- Little crime (Believes Mafia influence helped control crime)
- Double decker buses [0:55:00.0]
- Christmas carols, Santa Claus sleigh rides, nativity scenes [0:35:04.6]
- Digging Day
- Organ grinder with a pet monkey
- Notable locations
  - Raffetto's on Houston
  - Sheffield Farms
  - Greenwich House
  - Photography Studio on Prince Street

### Education

- Attends Little Red School House on Bleecker
  - Ethnically diverse school
- Italian neighborhood kids went to Catholic schools

- Attends Todd Hunter School
  - Downtown girl vs. an uptown girl
- Boarding school in Connecticut from 1941-43
- College at Vassar, graduates in 1946

#### After college

- France, works at Embassy, marries an American
- 1953 move back to New York, moves to Charlton Street in The Village
  - Poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, in 1918 lived on Charlton St. for a year
  - Italian community
  - Children attend Grace Church School
  - Husband helps stop the Downtown Expressway from being built

#### Notable Village Figures

- Pete Seeger, connection to MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens
- Paul Robeson, rented an apartment one summer in the MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens
- Bob Dylan, lived in the Village for five-years

**General Interview Notes:**

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Zapol:** This is the Greenwich Village Society Oral History Project, the South Village Oral History Project. This is Liza Zapol. It's February 20, 2014, and I'm here at -- Charlton Street. And if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please?

**Douglas:** My name is Colette Smith, my maiden name. Douglas, my married name. I was born in France, in Normandy, because my mother was French, and when she was having a baby she'd go back to be near her mother. And my parents met in World War I [WWI]. My father was an ambulance driver with the Harvard Unit attached to the French Army. And then when America joined, he was with the United States Army. And I'm eighty-seven. Five foot nine. [laughs] And I had four children—one died. I have seven grandchildren. And I've lived in this neighborhood since 1952 or 1953. So that's quite a while. And I may be the oldest person on the block, I don't know.

**Zapol:** Great. So thank you for giving me a sense of your family history. I wanted to ask you some more about that. Can you tell me a story about your mother before even she met her husband?

**Douglas:** She was an only child of her father, who had wanted to be a judge, but he decided he'd rather make some money. So he went into the insurance business, and founded his own company and was very well respected. His brother was in the French Senate. And I suppose that's why he got that job of insuring the French Senate.

And my grandmother was a very saucy lady, very funny. And they lived in Paris. The second apartment they lived in, I remember because we used to spend a couple of weeks there every summer. And they had a house in Normandy which the family still owns, and which was bought in 1882 by my great-great French grandmother. So it's wonderful to have it, but you can imagine it's a headache. And every year it gets to be more of a headache.

And what else can I tell you? Oh, my grandfather was from the south central part of France. In a village called Saint-Genies-d'Olt, where his family lived since the Thirteenth Century or earlier. And his father had been mayor of that village off and on for sixty years.

I can insert a sad story here. My grandfather had four nephews, three of whom were killed in World War I. It gives you an idea of what that war did. It decimated a whole generation.



And you never dared ask people if they had a father or a grandfather, because they probably didn't. I'm exaggerating, probably, but it was really bad. Which makes me think of, for some reason, what's going on in Kiev. All that ridiculous bloodshed. And I wish—no, I better not get into that. [laughs]

**Zapol:** But yes, World War I really did impact the French so strongly.

**Douglas:** And the British.

**Zapol:** And the British, yes.

**Douglas:** And, I suppose, the Germans. [laughs]

**Zapol:** So how did you mother end up, had she been to America before she met— **[0:05:09]**

**Douglas:** No, but she was crazy about *les anglo-saxons*. You know, young people have these ideas. You don't quite know why. So they met through a friend of my mother's that she had known in boarding school. She went to a convent, I guess, in Belgium, a boarding school. And that's a whole other story. But anyway, this friend organized a little party for wounded soldiers in a hospital, and she got my mother to go. And I don't know who got my father to go. But anyway, he wasn't wounded. And they met there, and that's how it happened.

**Zapol:** I'm curious about this to give context for your own connections with France. Because that continues—

**Douglas:** All right. They got married in Paris. I have a little book, the wedding book, somewhere. And then she came here. And they must have had an agreement that she could go back every summer, and not only for just a little visit. Growing up, I went back to France every year from June 'til school started, and in those days it was late September, early October. Why my father agreed to this, I'll never understand.

**Zapol:** Was he a Francophone? Tell me about your father.

**Douglas:** Yes, and he spoke some French. I guess he learned it in school and in college. And yes, I think he admired many things about the French. But he was very mad at de Gaulle, because de Gaulle kept talking disparagingly of *les Anglo-Saxons* again. And that didn't sit very well with

dad being a WWI vet. [laughs]

**Zapol:** So tell me more about your father. Where was he from? Where was his family from?

**Douglas:** Well, his name was George. He was from a Massachusetts family that had been more or less in the same town since the Seventeenth Century. I always like to brag my grandmother Smith—his mother —graduated from Vassar College in 1878, which I think is interesting.

**Zapol:** It is interesting.

**Douglas:** And was, I think, sort of a difficult character. Now you can imagine anybody who had the guts to go to college in 1878 probably had a mind of their own. My cousin's sons still live in cottages. These were sort of wooden cottages right on the beach in Scituate, or North Scituate, Massachusetts. And my grandmother bought those, and they're still owned by my cousin's sons. What is that, cousin once removed? But unfortunately they're all falling on hard times, so I think that's going to be the end of it. So that's too bad.

**Zapol:** Is that where your father grew up? In Scituate?

**Douglas:** He grew up in a place called Medfield. And then I guess they hit a prosperous time, and they moved to Norwood and built a rather—I've seen it—rather important house. And they had a buggy and a horse and a man to look after all that. And he had a wonderful time. The cottages by the sea. And he went to Exeter [Phillips Exeter Academy] and then Dartmouth [College]. And he was doing a post-grad year at Harvard [University], I think in English, when he joined up and went overseas. This won't be of interest to anybody, but his sister Dorothy married a man called Ernest Gruening, who eventually became governor of Alaska, of all places. And I have little cousins and whatnot—but they don't respond much—in Alaska. [00:10:05]

**Zapol:** I see. So they spread from that small town in Massachusetts?

**Douglas:** Well, my father spread. His sister Dorothy spread. The other two stayed close by.

**Zapol:** I see. So there were four of them. And where was your father in the birth order?

**Douglas:** He was next to the last. There was Dorothy, Henry, George, and Laura [phonetic] [00:10:25]. And Dorothy and Laura went to Vassar. I went to Vassar. But do you think I could

persuade my daughters? No, because they were of the vintage that had to go to Princeton [University], Yale [University], anywhere where the boys were. So that's that.

**Zapol:** So tell me about then your father, he studied English?

**Douglas:** I think that was his major, yes. He actually wrote a play based on a novel he admired. I don't remember the name of it. And he went into advertising.

**Zapol:** Right. So was that when he came back to the States after—

**Douglas:** Yes. He moved to New York from the Boston area.

**Zapol:** That was before the war, or after the war?

**Douglas:** Yes.

**Zapol:** So after the war, how did your parents come back from France? And were you born in France before that?

**Douglas:** I was born in France, in Normandy.

**Zapol:** Yes. Was that before they had moved back to America, or they had already moved back?

**Douglas:** Well my father came back after the wedding, and I guess once he found an apartment or whatever my mother came. At first they lived on the Upper West Side, and then they lived on the East Side around 18<sup>th</sup> Street. And then one of them crossed on a transatlantic liner and met a couple, I think I have this right, who owned 76 MacDougal Street. So they moved in. First they lived on Sullivan Street over Jimmy Kelly's, which was a famous nightclub. Then they moved to MacDougal Street. And eventually the owners of MacDougal Street, I think it was some kind of tragedy, like the wife killed herself. So my father bought from them. And now my son lives there. And what else?

**Zapol:** So you were saying so they moved, your mother followed. And you were born in France in one of the summers that she went back, or she went back, you said—

**Douglas:** I was born in November, and so I always tell people I crossed the Atlantic three times before I was one. I came in November or December and I went back in June, and then I went

back to New York in the fall before my birthday. And I think I crossed thirty-seven times. A lot of times.

**Zapol:** Wow, yes. There's a strong connection. So why did your parents end up in this neighborhood? The man introduced them—

**Douglas:** Yes. They met him, or my father met him. I forget, I don't know.

**Zapol:** But what was this neighborhood like at that time?

**Douglas:** Well at that time there was still the elevated that was coming down Sixth Avenue and then went east on 3<sup>rd</sup> [Street], I think it was. Can you imagine the difference? I still have a feeling of darkness above my head. So I guess that was sort of brave to move somewhere. And this [MacDougal-Sullivan] Gardens that they moved into was a development, really. I have a whole pamphlet on it, but I couldn't find it. So it was really forward thinking. And a lovely group of people moved in. Some of them are still—well, not the original people moved in. It was 74 MacDougal. There's a grandson living. And as I mentioned to someone before, a good friend of mine who grew up on Sullivan on the Gardens, she's still there. She's my age.

**Zapol:** So you said it was a wonderful community. Who were those people who were living there at that time?

**Douglas:** Well there were lawyers. There was Louis Houser, a doctor. There was Whitney North Seymour. I don't know if he was head of the bar, but he was an important lawyer. And there was an artist. And I think we had a musician. On Sunday mornings you could hear him playing the piano from his top floor apartment on the warm days. He had the windows open. Oh, we had another doctor, I think she was a psychiatrist of all things, Winifred Smith [phonetic] [00:15:40]. Another Smith, nothing to do with me. Well it was a mixture, I would say, of well-educated, middle-class, but not big money. Now, except for my son [laughs], and others, it's Anna Wintour. At one point we had Gere [Richard Gere], the actor. He left.

Which brings me to my thought. If you ever see the head of the Society [Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation], I think we need to have a statue to Pete Seeger. And I'd also like to see one to, now I'm going to have a senior moment—Paul Robeson. [00:16:32]

It would be nice to have one of them in Washington Square instead of NYU [New York

University]. I heard a good thing on the radio. You know the 92nd Street Y? They have interesting people. And this man, I think he's a writer for the New Yorker. He really let NYU have it.

**Zapol:** Oh, really?

**Douglas:** Oh, he socked it to them.

**Zapol:** Well I'm curious, as we go into more of your stories, how you became aware of the students in the area, the folk scene, Paul Robeson, the theater scene.

**Douglas:** Oh, well Paul Robeson spent a summer in the Gardens. He rented an apartment.

**Zapol:** Is that right?

**Douglas:** Yeah. And Bob Dylan lived there for five years. Is that the right name?

**Zapol:** Yes, Bob Dylan, the singer.

**Douglas:** And let's see—you don't want to hear all this trivia.

**Zapol:** Well, I'm interested in your in your particular memories. So can you tell me a story about what your family life was like in that house when you grew up?

**Douglas:** My son lives in the whole house. When I was growing up—and I had a sister, so it's mother, father, two children, and a maid. [laughs] Well, the maid lived in this shoebox of a so-called bedroom, sort of in the kitchen, but it was separate. She had a washbasin. She had to use our bathroom. We only had one bathroom. We lived on two floors. Plus my sister had one room on the third floor. And I mean the comparison is, as I just said, my son lives in the whole house. When I tell people how we lived, they think, oh. They wouldn't live that way now. Sharing the bathroom? [laughs] And only one bathroom—which brings me to the big Depression. You want to talk about that? Well, I do have a memory of the big Depression, and that was that people lived in shelters made of orange crates on Houston Street, just south of our block on MacDougal Street. I mean they were there for months and months, and they actually lived there. Imagine in this weather? And you'd see a little fire going occasionally.

Another Depression memory was one fall when we came back from France, my father

had come to get us in his car. And I guess he was unloading the suitcases, and this man stopped and said, “May I help you?” And my father said, “Sure.” And he was a guy without work, in a tattered suit, but good manners and whatnot. [00:19:58]

So my dad said, “I’d like to help you.” I’ll never forget this. So he brought him in. He let him take a bath. Gave him a suit, and maybe gave him some money, I don’t know. But he said, “Let me know how you make out.” Well, we never heard from him. But that stuck in my mind.

I’m trying to think of what else about Depression. I wanted ice skating lessons. There was a special sort of afternoon ice-skating club. And, “No, we can’t afford that.” Whereas my children—not that I’ve spoiled them, because I’m sort of strict. But if I thought it was something that would be good for them, they got it. The difference.

**Zapol:** What was your father doing at that time?

**Douglas:** He was in the advertising business, yes. And he ended up, I think, as the vice president in charge of the overseas.

**Zapol:** What company did he work for?

**Douglas:** McCann Erickson was the name of it. It’s now something else.

**Zapol:** And was he up on Madison Avenue? Or where was he?

**Douglas:** At first he was at, is it Madison Square? Is there a building with a sort of pointed top there? And then it was Rockefeller Center. And looking out his window he could see all of the Rockettes resting on rooftops. [laughs] That was nice. But he liked that business. And after the war they send him overseas to reconnect with the Paris branch, which was wonderful because my mother and he lived there for a year, which meant my mother could spend a lot of time with her parents, who were still alive. Let’s see, what else do I know? You know, I have vague memories of the guy who had the oral history [Joseph Gould]. I think I actually saw him. I peered in to one of those. So I was aware of all that going on, but I can’t say I was ever a part of it at all, no.

**Zapol:** You were telling me about your family life. You described the apartment. What did the apartment look like? What was your favorite place in the apartment, in the house?

**Douglas:** Well, you came in the front door, and in those days we left the first door unlocked. So

sometimes, speaking of students, or just revelers, they'd come in and use that little entrance hall as a you-know-what. So then we had to lock the outside door. But let's see. You'd come in. The kitchen was on the right. And it was not kitchens that women have today—or some women. We had an icebox with ice. I remember the guy coming in with a big block of ice, and a potato sack on his shoulder. I remember the milkman with a wagon and a horse, and those glass bottles.

**Zapol:** How often would they come, the milk and the ice? You know, those kind of things?

**Douglas:** I don't remember that. But the ground floor was the kitchen and then a pantry and the dining room. And then French doors onto the garden. So it was a wonderful place to grow up. On the next floor were my shoebox bedroom, living room, and my parents' bedroom and the communal bathroom. [laughs] Can you imagine? The whole family, plus the help?

**Zapol:** And what about the furniture, the way it was furnished? Or wallpaper, lights, things like that?

**Douglas:** Well this table was there. And what else? These three chairs were there. It was mostly French antiques, brought over, I guess. And I don't remember any wallpaper. It was paint. Which makes me mention the bookcases, because eventually, when my parents retired to Normandy, they rented that duplex. And at one point the tenants, I can't remember why they left or whether they were asked to leave, they took all the bookcases with them. Can you imagine? I mean some people, the number of crooks in this world! Where was I? Oh yes, and there's a staircase, of course, that went all the way to the top floor. And there was a little inside staircase to get from the ground floor to the next floor, but it was more like a ladder, which I fell off backward from when I was little. [00:25:45]

**Zapol:** So it was very steep?

**Douglas:** Yes. But it was nice not to have to go to the communal hall to get up to the next—

**Zapol:** When you said it was like a ladder, so you think someone built it not to code, or as an afterthought or something?

**Douglas:** Well I always knew it, saw it there. I don't know where it came from. But it was not a proper stair. But it was not a ladder. It was more than a ladder, less than a stair.

**Zapol:** What happened when you fell down it? How old were you?

**Douglas:** I fell backwards. And I've never quite understood why I fell backwards. But I didn't go to a doctor. I remember blood. I didn't see a doctor, but in those days you didn't just rush off to the doctor at the slightest— Maybe I had a seizure or something, who knows? But I remember it.

**Zapol:** I can understand why. It sounds like quite a fall. And who lived upstairs from you, in the other external stairs?

**Douglas:** Oh, a lot of different people. We had an architect at one point, Auger Town [phonetic] [00:27:00] Why do I remember that? And another point we had—I'm not going to remember her name. She was a refugee from Holland. She eventually went back to Holland. And let's see, at one point the next generation started moving in on the top floors. My nephew lived there. My son lived on the third floor for a while before he moved down. And we were burgled once, because people would ring the doorbell, and then the upstairs tenant would buzz them in without going to check. And they took my mother's jewelry. I remember that. I don't know if they were ever caught.

**Zapol:** Around how old were you then?

**Douglas:** Well, that was probably before I went away to school. So I was probably eleven or something like that.

**Zapol:** Was there crime in the neighborhood?

**Douglas:** Sort of little, petty, but my theory was that we were under the protection of the Mafia, protecting the whole area.

**Zapol:** How did you know that?

**Douglas:** I may be thinking backwards, you know? Now the area is beginning to crumble about being safe. I don't know if you've read there's been a rape here and a rape there. And for years I never heard of anything like that. Little petty thievery.

**Zapol:** Did you have a sense of the Mafia being around when you were a child?

**Douglas:** Not when I was little, but then you grow up and you read stuff. So then you look back



and you think, well, maybe I may be imagining it. But then the neighborhoods changed. There's still a lot of old Italian families here, but a lot of them, as I think I said to you or someone, they've prospered, bought in New Jersey, and living comfortably and doing very well. But until fairly recently we had a butcher here, DeCicco was their name. They were on just south of Houston on MacDougal. He remembers when his father had the butcher shop across the street from my parents, and he would deliver meat to my mother. I always liked him. [00:30:11]

**Zapol:** So tell me about the Italian part of your neighborhood. What was it like?

**Douglas:** Well it was wonderful. We still have Raffetto's on Houston. A marvelous place. And there used to be quite a few Italian restaurants. There was one right over on Thompson, which I think is closed. What was the name? I can't remember. But the neighborhood's changed. It draws in people from all over.

**Zapol:** Tell me a story about the Italian children and the non-Italian children.

**Douglas:** Oh. Well I can't say that there was much interplay, as far as I know. I went to Little Red School House [& Elisabeth Irwin High School] [LREI] on Bleecker. And most of the Italian kids went to the Catholic schools. And those schools, I think, were wonderful. I admire the Catholic schools all through the city. They seem to give the kids something solid, some discipline and maybe some aspirations. Anyway, I'm all for them. But to get back to Pete Seeger and the Gardens, I remember that Pete Seeger's wife [Toshi Seeger]—who I hear is no longer with us, and he's gone, too—used to come over with her brother Homare [Allen Homare Ohta] and play in the afternoon, hang out in the Gardens.

**Zapol:** These are the MacDougal Gardens?

**Douglas:** Yes, yes.

**Zapol:** The MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens.

**Douglas:** And well, I guess we thought the little Italian kids were sort of tough. Our lives didn't cross.

**Zapol:** What sort of games would you play?

**Douglas:** Tap on the icebox.

**Zapol:** What's that?

**Douglas:** [singing] 'Draw a magic circle, and sign it with a dot.' And beyond that, I don't remember. And then we'd play the game where one person hides, and then if you find them, you hide with them. I don't know what that's called. Hopscotch. And then we'd build things with—we had a big block box, these big wooden blocks and boards. So we'd make ramps and bicycle over the ramps. And you had to pay a leaf to go. And when we got older we played touch football with the grownups. And what's that deck game with the ring?

**Zapol:** Oh like a ring toss.

**Douglas:** Yeah, with a net. And then badminton. And every Christmas we had Christmas carols. In the later years, they had a Santa that would ride across from the MacDougal Street houses to the roof of the Sullivan Street houses. But he got stuck too much in the trees, so they abandoned that.

**Zapol:** What do you mean, there was a Santa that would ride across?

**Douglas:** Well they had these wires, and then there was Santa in the sled with, I don't know if there were deer. And then they'd get pulled across. And at one point they'd pull a string that opened a box or something, and candies would come pouring out. And then we had a nativity scene for a long time. And candles in the windows, how dangerous. I have lovely memories of that. [00:34:55]

**Zapol:** Who are some of your closest friends in the neighborhood? And tell me a story about them.

**Douglas:** Well my great friend, who still lives there, is Alden Cohen [phonetic] [00:35:10]. And she's still in great shape. She cooks up a storm. She was a literary agent for a while. She worked for, oh god, I can't remember.

**Zapol:** Tell me a story about you as children.

**Douglas:** Well, we had some adventures. Little Red School House, at recess we'd go play on the

roof of the building. And we had blocks, again. And she and I built a house out of these blocks. And the boys, mischievous creatures, destroyed our house. So we were very upset, and we just left. We just left the building and went home. She lived on Sullivan, I lived on MacDougal. We didn't have far to go. My mother was not pleased to see me. But that school was different. The punishment was we couldn't come back to school for a few days. That was the punishment, rather than staying after school. And then we both went to a school uptown called the Todhunter School. Did I tell you about that?

**Zapol:** Yes. I'm interested to hear more about Little Red, too.

**Douglas:** Well, Little Red was wonderful. We learned how to dance like the American Indian [making noise and tapping hand over mouth] woo-hoo-hoo-hoo. And we learned folk songs. And I guess we learned to read. I don't know how, because I don't remember being taught. I just remember trying to read the billboards. The little words, like 'it,' 'to,' and then developed from there.

**Zapol:** Seeing the billboards in the city?

**Douglas:** The advertising. Well, when my father would take us somewhere over the weekend for the day to a picnic or something, we'd pass a lot of billboards. We used to, anyway. So as far as I know that's how I learned to read, because I don't remember anybody teaching me.

**Zapol:** Elisabeth Irwin, it had a different kind of philosophy than other schools.

**Douglas:** Oh yes. And the student body was, you know, we had a mixed group of children,

**Zapol:** When you say 'mixed,' what do you mean?

**Douglas:** Well we had Black kids. We had Jewish kids. I don't know if we had any Latinos. I'm going to have to go to the—

**Zapol:** Okay. Let's pause for a second. Let me let you off the hook.

**[interruption]**

**Douglas:** You know, 'We're All for the Unions.' And learn the songs.

**Zapol:** At Little Red?

**Douglas:** I can't think where else I would have learned it.

**Zapol:** Can you sing a union song that you remember?

**Douglas:** [singing] 'There once was a union maid. She never was afraid of goons and ginks and company finks, and the deputy sheriff who made the raid. But married life ain't hard, when you've got a union card.' And then I've forgotten the rest.

**Zapol:** What did you think of that? Were your parents involved in—

**Douglas:** Not in the union. My father was a Democrat. I think that was all from the school, I guess. I don't remember people being violently involved with anything. But I do remember thinking unions were a good thing. I may not think so now, but then I thought so. I may think so now. I'm not saying.

**Zapol:** And you also said that Little Red was involved in social questions.

**Douglas:** Yes.

**Zapol:** In what way was it involved in social questions? Or how was that shown?

**Douglas:** It's hard to describe because it was not anybody lecturing anything in particular, it was just a feeling that, you know, good feelings, being nice to people, and be tolerant. All the good stuff.

**Zapol:** What kind of school trips did you take?

**Douglas:** Oh, school trips. Well the one I remember is, I think I told somebody, was to the Jack Frost Sugar Factory, which I think was in Brooklyn or Queens or someplace. And I'm trying to remember, was it on the way back from there that I got lost going around a—you know, those ways out of stores. What do you call that? [00:40:12]

**Zapol:** A revolving door.

**Douglas:** Revolving door, yes. And I probably went on revolving, and the others climbed on the bus and left. [laughs] I'm not sure of all that, but I have a vague recollection. And where else did

we go? Well that's the one that comes to mind. But that sort of thing. The school I subsequently went to, it never would have occurred to them to take the kids to a sugar factory. I mean they would have thought, weird.

But what else about Little Red? Well I suppose I think the variety of the children that went there, the parents. My dad was in advertising, but somebody else's was a painter, and somebody else was something else. I've very good memories. Well, I have the high school here now.

**Zapol:** Right, LREI [Little Red Schoolhouse High School Elisabeth Irwin High School].

**Douglas:** And rumor is, as I told someone, that long, long ago, the basement of this house was used as a sort of extra dining room, or as a dining room. Pretty primitive. When we moved in, there were holes in the ceiling and in the kitchen, holes in the floor.

Would you like some ginger ale or V-8 juice?

**Zapol:** I'm fine. Would you like something?

**Douglas:** I'm thirsty.

**Zapol:** Okay, let's just pause for a second.

[interruption]

**Zapol:** Well I'm curious about, do you have a story about local politics when you were growing up?

**Douglas:** Well my husband was, if my memory serves me, head of Planning Board Number 2 for a while.

**Zapol:** Now we haven't talked about your husband and coming here yet. So maybe we should do that before we get into this.

**Douglas:** Okay.

**Zapol:** What about local politics over at MacDougal Street? Do you remember anything about that? Or your parents were—

**Douglas:** As far as I know, they weren't involved at all.

**Zapol:** And they were Democrats, but they were just not involved?

**Douglas:** Yes, my mother was involved. She was an air raid warden during the War.

**Zapol:** During World War II?

**Douglas:** Yes. So she'd go off to meetings occasionally.

**Zapol:** What did that mean?

**Douglas:** We thought it was a big joke.

**Zapol:** What would that mean, to be an air raid warden?

**Douglas:** Well I suppose once a week or whenever they told you to go, you had to go make sure people blacked out with curtains on their windows. And I suppose if there had been an air raid they would have had some job. But the thought of my mother being an air raid warden was hysterical.

**Zapol:** Why?

**Douglas:** Well, she spoke English perfectly, but with a delicious little accent. And the thought of that pounding the pavements during an air raid, it was just crazy.

**Zapol:** What about other stories of the war, of World War II, in that neighborhood?

**Douglas:** Oh, having to do with the neighborhood? Aside from hiding, covering windows, and then the restrictions on—you know, we had rations.

**Zapol:** What were some of the rations you remember?

**Douglas:** Well, I guess meat and butter. I obviously didn't suffer from it or I'd remember it better. But that's the trouble when you're that far from the war, unless you lose your brother or your father or whatever. Now you'd have to say "or your aunt." You know, life goes on. I do remember, though, when I was away at school, they closed the school for a whole month because they didn't have enough fuel to heat the building. But that has nothing to do with this

neighborhood.

**Zapol:** But you were at school at that time, then. You were at boarding school during the war?

**Douglas:** I was at boarding school from [19]41, [194]2, [194]3, in Connecticut. And we ate. I don't remember suffering from hunger or anything. The war was far away, far away. Although I did know people who died. And of course we had to worry the whole time about my grandparents, what's happening to them?

Oh, I have a wonderful letter. My parents had tenants on the third floor. His name was Will Roland. He was Benny Goodman's [Benjamin David Goodman] manager, if my memory serves. And during the war, he was head of entertaining the troops overseas. So as soon as my mother's, where her house was, was liberated, he got there four days later and sat right down and wrote this three-page letter, what he found. Which I found a wonderful thing to have. [00:46:00]

**Zapol:** So he had been in Greenwich Village, but he went to France—

**Douglas:** During the war, after the [19]44, June 6<sup>th</sup> [D-Day]. He was sent over there to find what he could do to entertain the troops. And so he was able to go to the house right after the Germans left the village. Because the Germans lived in our house, the officers, the *commandant*. And rumor is Göring had lunch there, and that there was a Nazi flag flying down the front. I don't believe a word of it, and I won't until you show me a picture. But it's a wonderful story, or a bad story. Anyway, it has nothing to do with the South Village.

**Zapol:** But this man who was Benny Goodman's manager, what sort of music did you listen to? Did you listen to jazz? Did you have a sense of jazz happening in—

**Douglas:** No, I listened more to folk songs and Pete Seeger. And I don't know if I listened then to Pete Seeger. I don't know when he started. What did I listen to? Well, there wasn't the mania there is now. You can't go anywhere without your ear things and listening to something. I just thought more, I think. What did I listen to? I remember at one point I listened to French Charles Trenet, and [Edith] Piaf. But that's after the war. So I don't remember what I listened to. Probably folk songs.

**Zapol:** Because you were talking about jazz, or this manager.

**Douglas:** Oh yeah, but I do have a jazz memory. Now was this during the war, after the war? I don't know. But my sister had an Australian friend. I guess she had met him on a boat. This must have been after the war. And I remember one day he arrived and he said, "Now that I've heard Benny Goodman, I can die." And he'd probably been to that famous concert, was it at Carnegie Hall? You're too young to know all that. And that stuck in my mind, oh, he's heard Benny Goodman. But music, music, music. My mother used to listen to those concerts on the weekends, the radio. So I heard a lot of that.

**Zapol:** She would play radio at home?

**Douglas:** Yes. Yes, I can still see her preparing dinner. Because when the war came, we no longer had a maid. And they disappeared forever. [laughs]

**Zapol:** Tell me about boundaries in the neighborhood. Were there certain places that you could go as a child and certain places you couldn't go?

**Douglas:** No. I don't remember having any boundaries.

**Zapol:** You mentioned something to Sheryl [Woodruff] about Houston being—

**Douglas:** Oh, it wasn't a boundary. It was just that we didn't know anybody. And you know now it's full of shops and this and that, restaurants. I guess mostly it was that we didn't know anyone. Although I've discovered recently there was a carpenter called Mr. Kochi [phonetic] [00:51:00]. And I still have a piece of furniture that my father ordered from him. It was a bureau, but the middle drawer would pull down, flip out, so it was my desk. And I still have that out in Long Island. And recently I came across a bill from Mr. Kochi, and guess where he lived? West on Charlton Street.

**Zapol:** Oh really.

**Douglas:** So I must go there and see. I think it's like 100 or 101. It probably no longer exists. But, at the time, you know, I thought he probably lived on MacDougal, but he didn't. He lived on Charlton, Mr. Kochi. [00:51:00]

**Zapol:** South on MacDougal Street, were there also people like you? Or was it more Italian? South of Houston?



**Douglas:** Oh, it was all Italian, yes. Church, everything, absolutely. And a close, wonderful neighborhood, I think. I didn't know anyone. I just remember on the Houston Street border of the MacDougal Street Gardens, that was all Italian families. And sometimes on a nice spring night you'd hear, "Syl-via! Oh, Syl-via! Come home. Your mom wants you." The Sylvia call.

**Zapol:** [laughs] The particulars, just the one for Sylvia?

**Douglas:** Yeah, it was Sylvia.

**Zapol:** And how did your mother, so she socialized with the other people that were in the area there?

**Douglas:** The next door family, that was a great friend. And yes, they played bridge with the Nortons. But I can't say she made a million friends there. I mean she didn't make enemies, but it was different. It's just when they would eventually vacation out on Long Island, and you know the country club set, the women in Bermuda shorts. Not my mother's style. [laughs]

**Zapol:** And did they accept her as a French woman, or not as much?

**Douglas:** Well they never got to know her. She had a few friends, but I don't know why. Whereas my dad, he played tennis and golf and croquet. But nothing negative necessarily. My mother had friends uptown. She had her French group. And then she had an American uptown group.

**Zapol:** I see. So then you went to the school, your middle school, or after Little Red, you went to this other school.

**Douglas:** Todhunter School. Mrs. Roosevelt [Eleanor Roosevelt] was involved, and Marion Dickerman, who was one of the ladies in Val-Kill Cottage. And that was a fine school. It was in a brownstone, in the east 80s. And I went up there with my friend Alden, who still lives on Sullivan Street, in the age of the double decker bus. And the buses came all the way into the Washington Square.

**Zapol:** Oh, really?

**Douglas:** Before they blocked it all off. And the dispatcher's name was John. He was this big,

lovely man. And so we'd always want to ride up on top, especially when it was the open, good weather, and you had the open [top]. And what we did all the way up, when we could, we'd pick leaves from the trees as we went by. And then when the bus stopped, we'd drop it on the people coming on the bus. Anyway, that was fun. [00:55.00]

**Zapol:** You would get into trouble, the two of you.

**Douglas:** We didn't ever get into trouble, no. But that was a whole new world, you know. All the other little girls were mostly uptown girls.

**Zapol:** And how did they regard you, as being downtown girls? What did that mean?

**Douglas:** Well I think envious, because a lot of them had nannies who followed their every move. And they hated that, and they thought we were so free. We'd go up and down on the bus or even the subway. Wow, liberation! There was one uptown girl who actually lived on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, in one of those wonderful houses with her mother, father, and her grandmother.

**Zapol:** What was her background?

**Douglas:** I have no idea. It was all very well to do and proper. She married actually a clothes designer. I think his name was Philip Hulitar? Does that mean anything? Mary Gerstenberg was her name. That was quite a house. I guess West 9<sup>th</sup> Street, just off Fifth [Avenue].

**Zapol:** Did you ever bring your friends home with you from school?

**Douglas:** Oh, my birthday parties. One year I got two Shirley Temple dolls, and they cost \$10 apiece. Speaking of Shirley Temple, she's gone.

**Zapol:** What was your birthday party like? What did you do for your birthday party?

**Douglas:** Well, we played 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey.' And then we had a special game where you take a, I don't know if they still do it—oh no, because now people don't have birthday parties at home. They rent a place for it. The ironing board. And you blindfold the child, and then you put a grownup at either end of the ironing board. And then you slowly tell them they're going for an airplane ride. And you raised the board. I don't know why the kid didn't fall off. And then you'd have a nice little supper or whatever. Ice cream, cake, and 'Pin the Tail on the Donkey'. In

those days, the child whose pin came the closest to the tail won the prize. Nowadays everybody has to win. That's so unrealistic. Everybody doesn't win, and the sooner you learn it, the better off you'll be. I'm sounding like an old curmudgeon. No, there's so much I think is nutty today. But then that's what everybody always thinks, I guess. What do you think? Do you think children should all get prizes?

**Zapol:** I think it's changed a lot, as you say. I think it's changed a lot so that everyone should feel okay trying to make everybody happy. But that's not really always possible, is it?

**Douglas:** No. The thing is there will be bad times and good times, and you just learn to cope with the bad ones and enjoy the good ones.

**Zapol:** Yeah. Were there any difficult moments for your family during that period?

**Douglas:** Well the war, I think, for my mother. That went on from 1939 until [1945], was it? That's a long time. And she was probably feeling guilt-ridden about it, having gone so far away and all.

**Zapol:** How did you have a sense of her worry about the war? How did you know that she was worried about it?

**Douglas:** Well it was nothing overt. And I guess she was really rather good about that. You know, not making us feel too sad. There again it may be me imposing rear views.

**Zapol:** Right. So you then went to boarding school. Why did you go to boarding school at that point?

**Douglas:** I'm not sure. I was probably a pain in the neck. And then I think my mother's uptown friends probably convinced her that boarding school was the thing to do. She'd been to boarding school. Her mother had been to boarding school. I cried for a whole year, because I was a momma's girl. But I did all right. [laughs] Yeah, I couldn't imagine why I was sent away. I mean I was just flabbergasted. [01:00:22]

**Zapol:** And did your sister, your sister was still here?

**Douglas:** She was four and a half years older. So I guess she was already at Barnard [College].

**Zapol:** And had she gone to boarding school?

**Douglas:** You want to hear my sister's history? I was four and a half years younger, but just the year I was going to be born, she was sent to my grandparents for the whole winter. And she actually had a lovely time. But still, she was only five or so, four and a half or five. And then when she was nine, she was sent to a convent in England. Nine years old. First communion. And then when she was fifteen, she was sent to a boarding school in France, where I was going to go, only the war intervened. So I never got sent there. But you know, I must say today a mother would never do that, I don't think.

**Zapol:** It seems like a long way to send a child.

**Douglas:** Well, and when the baby sister is about to arrive, you banish the other one? It would never happen, I don't think.

**Zapol:** How was your relationship with your sister as you were growing up then?

**Douglas:** Well, I think she resented me.

**[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]**

**Douglas:** But I thought she was terrific. Very talented architect, although she never practiced because she got married to a very attractive fellow.

**Zapol:** And then did she go to college after, as well, after going to boarding school?

**Douglas:** Yes. She went to Barnard.

**Zapol:** I see, right, yes.

**Douglas:** But before that I think she took those French exams, the baccalauréat. I think she passed the first one. I can't remember what happened to the second one. But I remember she had to go to Canada to pass it. I guess being French Canada, they did the same exams. Why, after all this time, I don't know.

**Zapol:** And did you have a sense that your parents expected you to go to college?

**Douglas:** Oh, definitely, with my grandmother Smith graduating from Vassar. And all my

friends went to college. The funny thing, there were eight of us about the same age in the Gardens. Let's see, Colette, Alden, Margaret [Colt], and Barbara [Hale]: four of us went to Vassar. Well, Vassar was the 'it' college.

**Zapol:** So you had a kind of reunion of the neighborhood girls when you went to college?

**Douglas:** Well, I graduated early. Because, among other reasons, we accelerated at Vassar. We did four years in three. And when I went to boarding school, they skipped me a year. I never figured that out. Because when I went to the Mrs. Roosevelt school [Todhunter], they put me back a year without testing me, because I had been to this progressive school.

**Zapol:** Ah, so they kept you with your age group essentially?

**Douglas:** Yes. I did the third grade twice. Skipped the fourth. Did five, six, seven, eight. Skipped the ninth I guess. And did sophomore, junior, senior. And then did college in three years because of the acceleration. So I was nineteen when I graduated, which is about the age my grandchildren start.

**Zapol:** Yes. That's interesting. So what year did you graduate?

**Douglas:** [19]46.

**Zapol:** And then what did you do after you graduated? What did you study at Vassar as well?

**Douglas:** Well, it was called French Reconstruction. They invented it for the times. I wish I had majored in English, although I don't have a great gift in that department. But I think it's a wonderful major. What did you major in?

**Zapol:** I majored in American Studies and theater. So what did you do then after you graduated from Vassar?

**Douglas:** I went immediately to Europe. But I only stayed a brief time. Came back, worked that whole winter for, I think it was for Voice of America, answering letters. Why they put up with me I don't know. I couldn't type. I could write in French, but I'd make terrible spelling mistakes.

**Zapol:** What was Voice of America?

**Douglas:** What is it? Doesn't it still exist?

**Zapol:** You must tell me about it.

**Douglas:** Well, it's the USA's radio transmissions to Europe, I guess to keep them abreast of what was happening everywhere, and here. And it was full of Europeans, refugees, who came here to get away from the war and Hitler, that wretched man.

**Zapol:** So your job was to—

**Douglas:** So then, let's see. Then what happened? Then I went back to France, and through connections got a job at the Embassy. I was hopeless. [00:05:04]

**Zapol:** How so?

**Douglas:** Well, I wasn't a secretary. The only thing I learned was 'Dear Sir.' You know shorthand? No. Well, I didn't either. [laughs] The best thing I did was, my boss would say, “Miss Smith, would you please put a case of Coke in my car?” So I'd go down to the commissary and say, “Please put a case of Coca-Cola in his car.”

**Zapol:** So then how did you meet your husband?

**Douglas:** He was there.

**Zapol:** What did he do?

**Douglas:** Technically, he worked for the Marshall Plan. And he was very smart. And he was in on all sorts of interesting things, like going to Jean Monnet, who was sort of head of the European Plan. But then in [19]52, when the Republicans were elected, he said he didn't want to work for the government anymore under the Republicans. It seems a little extreme. But anyway, so we came back, and I remember we looked for a place to live in the suburbs. Too depressing. So then one day I was looking around in the Village with an agent, and he said, “Well, there's a house on Charlton Street. The people are leaving. Maybe you can rent it.” So we rented this, falling apart but wonderful. And before we renovated it, we rented the top floor for more than we were paying for the whole house. Can you imagine? I think it was like \$160 a month. But of course they had to go right through our part of the house to get up to their apartment. But what a

lucky break. And then eventually we bought it.

**Zapol:** So tell me what Charlton Street looked like at that time, when you first moved here.

**Douglas:** Well, I think ours was one of the first trees.

**Zapol:** This was in 1952? Is that right?

**Douglas:** Well, no. It was, let's see, probably [19]53. I think ours was the first tree—not sure. So it did look different with no trees. And then I guess people have fixed things up, like shutters, and maybe fixing the stoops, and maybe repairing the ironwork. But any big changes? Well, let me think. On that corner, there used to be a garage for, was it actually horses? And that big building didn't exist. I was sad the day it went up because it took a lot of the sunshine.

**Zapol:** At Number Two Charlton? Across the street?

**Douglas:** Yeah, yeah. And I don't know how he snuck that in, but we needed Mr. Whats-his-name.

**Zapol:** [Andrew] Berman. Who were your neighbors when you first moved in here? What was the neighborhood like?

**Douglas:** Well Dick [Richard] Blodgett was already here. Oh, and then a couple next door—only I'm so bad for names. They knew the Thirties. They were already grown up in the Thirties. So that was interesting, the people they knew. They knew some of the artists and whatnot, Dick—I can't remember the last name. And then there was a couple where Blodgett lived. They were in the theater. And their daughter was the gal who played the zither, long red hair. I know her like the back of my hand, but I can't think of the name. And then we had Spencer Klaw across the street. And his wife, who was the first journalist to get up the Empire State Building—oh, you were not born probably, when the airplane— [00:10:00]

**Zapol:** When the zeppelin?

**Douglas:** No, it was not when the zeppelin burned up. But when the airplane went right into the top of the Empire State Building.

**Zapol:** Oh, wow.

**Douglas:** She was the first journalist, I'm told. I wasn't there. And who else lived here? Oh, Richard Jenrette lived here. And he's famous for buying up old places and fixing them up to perfection, furnishing them with just the right things. And he's got a place up the Hudson now that everybody raves about. So he's a good influence.

**Zapol:** What attracted you to this block?

**Douglas:** Well, meeting the agent who said there was a house. I mean, I'd never heard of Charlton Street.

**Zapol:** You didn't grow up that far from here.

**Douglas:** I know, but as I told you I never went south of Houston. So I was surprised to see this, to my mind, more attractive houses than the MacDougal-Sullivan. Because they had been, in the 1840s, I think—this Sloan [phonetic] [00:11:30], what was his name? Anyway, what we would call a developer today, except he was sort of a gentleman developer. They took all the stoops off. Those houses used to look like these. They took all the stoops off, and changed the insides. Well, we changed this. It used to be big sliding doors.

**Zapol:** In this living room here?

**Douglas:** Yeah, sort of halfway.

**Zapol:** You made it into a big room.

**Douglas:** Yes. We had to move this door upstairs, because it was too far this way. So you couldn't really get a sofa in. But I suppose it's not pure.

**Zapol:** What were some of the things you discovered about the house? What are some of the unique things you discovered about this house? What do you think is special about this house?

**Douglas:** Well, what's special? Until we bought it, it was the way it was made originally. Oh, I forgot to tell you that—oh god, I'm having another senior moment. A woman poet.

**Zapol:** Edna St. Vincent Millay.

**Douglas:** Yes, lived here in 1918 with her sister and her mother for a year. When I guess she was



involved with the theater up on MacDougal Street.

**Zapol:** How did you learn that?

**Douglas:** Maybe I read something about her and it said it. But I often thought I should put a plaque. I've had people actually knock on the door and said, "Is this where Edna—" "Yes, it is." Imagine way back then what was it like. Amazing.

Well this whole thing in the hall there, you can obviously see it doesn't date from 1826, is the architect's idea to make—it used to be just one, long closet. And I think it's very clever of him to have made the little bathroom, which is awfully useful, even if you have to go up the steps. I'm always scared. When we had dinner parties, I was worried my guests would break a leg on the way down. And the coat closet, and then the big closet for all sorts of things, my skis.

**Zapol:** And what was the sense of this neighborhood at that time? Was this SoHo? Was it SoHo when you moved here? What was it called?

**Douglas:** Well I thought I was in The Village still. But I think it was still basically an Italian community. I mean the last doctor on the block was of Italian heritage. [00:15:14]

**Zapol:** Who was that?

**Douglas:** I don't remember his name.

**Zapol:** I have an Antonio Garbarino at 37 Charlton.

**Douglas:** Oh, well that's him, then.

**Zapol:** Yeah.

**Douglas:** It's funny, because Garbarino was our, how do you say, you know where you buy nails and hammers?

**Zapol:** Hardware store.

**Douglas:** Hardware store. On Bleecker Street. Yeah, he was great. Then he moved to Brooklyn or Queens or someplace, never to be seen again.

**Zapol:** So there were doctors on this street then?

**Douglas:** I think only that one by the time I got here. But I think probably in the early Twentieth Century, yeah.

**Zapol:** It was known as a place for doctors. This street was known as a doctors' street.

**Douglas:** Well that was what I heard. And that may be. I once had the Landmarks [Preservation Commission] [LPC], they came to study the house and the backyard because they were hoping to prove that the barn, or the little building in the back, was part of Aaron Burr's estate. But I think they decided it wasn't. [laughs] I remember those two ladies.

**Zapol:** So it was the Village here. And was it known at that time, among your social group, your friends? How was this area known? Was it known as an interesting place to live, a hip place to live?

**Douglas:** You mean after we moved here? Oh, of course everybody was wildly jealous. Who wouldn't be?

**Zapol:** So in the Fifties and Sixties, this was an area that people wanted to live in?

**Douglas:** Well, I would say it's really in the last thirty years that it's become SoHo. And the people pour down the street to go shopping and stuff. But it's been wonderful. And it's also very convenient. We have the subway here; we have the subway there. We have the bus.

**Zapol:** When you first moved here, where did you go shopping? Where did you go to get your groceries?

**Douglas:** Well, there was a big shopping thing in Washington Square Village. Which, you know, when I was young wasn't any distance at all. And then we had a little market a couple of blocks up here, and they folded and I've never understood why. So now it's not great. You have to go to up on 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Zapol:** The D'Agostino's?

**Douglas:** Well no, it begins with a 'C'?

**Zapol:** It's okay. What about, were there markets? Were there outside markets here?

**Douglas:** No, but growing up Bleecker Street was one big outdoor, with a horse and a wagon and pushcarts. But they've disappeared. I don't see any of those around.

**Zapol:** Is that where your mother or the maid would shop, at the pushcarts?

**Douglas:** Well there was a shop around the corner, Sheffield Farms. And Raffetto's. And then there was a butcher, the father of the guy—

**Zapol:** Across the street?

**Douglas:** Yeah. I don't think we were heavy on fishmongers, even now. I think there's one on Bleecker Street. I don't know, where did she market? Well, there was a store on MacDougal with the sort of everyday stuff. But I don't think there was a great big, you know, like a King Kullen. And we need one here. I think.

**Zapol:** Did you ever run errands for your mother when you were a child?

**Douglas:** Well I might have been sent across the street. But let's see, did I run errands? Did I go to the cleaners? I don't remember. All I had to do was make my bed. Did your mother make you make your bed? [00:20:13]

**Zapol:** Oh yes. Okay, so when you were here, what would you do for leisure in the neighborhood? Would there be any social activities or fun things?

**Douglas:** Well, on Prince Street, just across, down a few steps, there was a wonderful studio. At some point I was interested in photography. I could develop my film, in the days when people used film, develop my film and printing, which was such fun. Unfortunately he folded after a couple of years and went away.

**Zapol:** So he was a photography studio. Was he also a photographer? Or it was just a space for people to come?

**Douglas:** I have no idea. Because all I knew was that he sat behind a desk and you paid him to use one of his little cubicles.

**Zapol:** So when what about your interest in photography? What would you shoot? What kind of pictures would you take?

**Douglas:** Nothing, anything and everything. People. Or Fifth Avenue with all the flags. Nothing I've pursued for years and years and years. I guess I like the printing. Working on getting the shade you want, it's fun.

**Zapol:** What else?

**Douglas:** What else did I do?

**Zapol:** Yeah, in terms of leisure.

**Douglas:** And then my neighbor over here was involved on 8<sup>th</sup> Street with the studio, the famous woman who had a studio?

**Zapol:** [Gertrude Vanderbilt] Whitney.

**Douglas:** Yes. And there was the ceramics, you know, throwing pots. So I threw a few pots, thanks to her. She got me into it. And that was fun. Pedal, pedal, pedal, pedal. Very difficult.

**Zapol:** So was that at the Greenwich House Pottery, or was that at the Whitney Studio?

**Douglas:** It was at the studio, yes. The Greenwich House—my kid, why did they go there? Was it dance? I must be tiring, my mind's going.

**Zapol:** So you did pottery there. And did you enjoy that? Who else was there?

**Douglas:** Oh, yeah, I loved it. Other women. And some of them were good, you know. They could [imitates whirring]. I never got very good at that, but I loved it. You know it's funny, I keep thinking, now what are they going to do with the pots I threw? Or with the cat I made? Or the frog I made? Are they going to throw that all out? It's very hard. I don't now what's going to happen to all that.

**Zapol:** So you raised your children in this house?

**Douglas:** Yes. Well, my son spent his first two years in Paris. They loved him, because I had a fulltime cook, and then I had this wonderful man who'd come to walk him. [laughs] And he was such a nice little boy. They all thought he was great. And then I always had some help. I don't know how women do it without any help. Oh, it's a killer. And how do women have full-time

jobs and raise their children? And cook and market and do the laundry? I mean, it's crazy.

**Zapol:** So how did you do it? Your son was two when you came here.

**Douglas:** And three and a half years later I had twin girls. And then three or four years after that, I had a boy.

**Zapol:** And you had help with them here?

**Douglas:** Yes. And she wasn't the best cook, but she was a body, so I could go out without dragging the whole crew with me. And then in the early years I had my mother on MacDougal. So that was really nice. [00:25:16]

**Zapol:** And where did your children go to daycare or school?

**Douglas:** Well there was the [Greenwich] Free School for pre-kindergarten. It's no longer there, on Thompson and Sullivan.

**Zapol:** I see.

**Douglas:** Anyway, it was very nice. You know, neighborhood kids. Then they all went to Grace Church School, which now has a high school. Then one went to Chapin [the Chapin School], the other went to Spence [the Spence School]. And my son Philip went to Deerfield [the Deerfield Academy], where his father had gone. And he hated it. Don't tell anyone. But anyway, he and his sister went to Princeton. And the twin went to Stanford [University]. And the one who died went to Harvard. So they did all right. But as they keep saying, "But in those days, Mom, it was easy."

**Zapol:** Well you must have done something right.

**Douglas:** I like to think so.

**Zapol:** So what was it like to raise a family on this block? Were there many other families here?

**Douglas:** There were some. I don't think they got very involved, because they had that whole MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens to go to.

**Zapol:** That's where your kids would go to play also?

**Douglas:** Yes.

**Zapol:** So what kind of games would they play there?

**Douglas:** I don't know. I really don't know what they did. There was a sandbox. That was for the little ones, when the cats didn't get there first. It was a great place to grow up. Every year now, to show you how things have changed, every year besides that Christmas feast they had Digging Day, where everyone would turn out. They would dig up the central lawn, reseed, put up the little fence around it, prune the bushes, clean up everything. Now they hire someone. So people like my friend has to pay all this extra money to hire people when it used to be— But you know, I suppose if you can afford to hire, you hire. But it doesn't bring out that nice feeling that everybody joining in. And there would be a wonderful meal with each house providing something. Mary Rower [Mary Calder Rower], who was [Alexander and Louisa] Calder's daughter—she's gone—she used to make the most delicious ham. Best ham I've ever eaten. Terrific. When she died they had a sort of informal ceremony in the gardens. There were 300 people who got up and spoke about her.

**Zapol:** And your son decided to live in that house. How did that happen?

**Douglas:** Well he started living there. I guess he was a student, when he went to law school at NYU, the dreaded NYU. And then he got married. One thing led to another. By then my sister was dead. My brother-in-law, he said, “Either double his rent or make him buy it.” So we decided he'd buy it. Which of course involved a huge mortgage and other things I won't go into. And that's the best thing he ever did, because those houses are going for enormous amounts of money. He'll always have money to retire on just by selling it, things staying the same. So it's nice to have him there. And next door, the house is still in the family, the grandson, who lives in the ground floor apartment and runs the house for his grandmother, who lives up in Rockland County—there's another story—on the same land that was given to her umpteen ancestor, with I think originally 1,000 acres. Now they have one left. [00:30:57]

**Zapol:** This is your close friend?

**Douglas:** From next door. Well, it was another friend.

**Zapol:** I see. And what is their name? What is their family name?

**Douglas:** What's her name? Ann Sickels was her original name. And then she became Ann—oh, don't ask me to remember. Isn't it terrible? I know it's in there.

**Zapol:** It's fine.

**Douglas:** Her second husband was Mathews. And interesting thing there was both her husbands had lost legs in the war, one leg. Vernon Eagle—I knew I had it up here—is the first one. And the second one was Troup Mathews. Who grew up—amazing—I think in Loire, because his father [was] somehow a commercial representative there? Well, never mind. So he spoke perfect French, in spite of losing a leg.

Those poor guys, though. I'm so against wars. God, I hope we don't interfere with Kiev. Let the Europeans figure that one out. And how would we let Russia go in there—well I shouldn't go into that.

**Zapol:** Let's talk about this area right here again a little more.

**Douglas:** My problem is I don't know much about it.

**Zapol:** Well what had been some of the local struggles in this neighborhood?

**Douglas:** Well, the Trump Building. That didn't work out too well.

**Zapol:** How did the area become historically designated? Was your husband involved in that?

**Douglas:** No. Well, I think because this is the single most biggest collection of houses dating back to the early Nineteenth Century. Because the ones on MacDougal-Sullivan, that's the 1840s. This is the 1820s. Did you see the picture of the mansion on the walls in the bathroom?

**Zapol:** I did, yes.

**Douglas:** I never saw it. I first heard it was down at the corner two blocks that way. But then I heard it was over here somewhere. And of course the whole riverbank was pushed out. So the river was much closer. There's a place a couple of blocks down, it's a bar-restaurant. And it still has those things that they tied ropes around when, what do they call it? Metal things shaped like this, and then you'd wind your rope around it to moor the boat? It has one of those right in front of the restaurant, which one would think meant that the river was a whole lot closer, a whole lot

closer. What was the name? 'E' something.

**Zapol:** So there is this sense of change, of change of the landscape itself.

**Douglas:** Yes, yes. And there used to be a hill over here, where this mansion stood. So they had a view across the river. And I guess they leveled it to put all these avenues through. Oh, and then of course you know that Sixth Avenue didn't come all the way down here until when? [00:35:10]

**Zapol:** Until fairly recently, yeah. I think they widened Sixth Avenue, and they needed it also for the subway. I think was a part of it, but right. So you were talking about some of the local struggles, the Trump Building, and have you been involved in any of those struggles?

**Douglas:** Not that I remember. I'm trying to think. Well I used to work for some outfit. I don't even remember the name of it. But it had a membership, and they would send me lists of people that wanted to be members. And I had to send out the literature. So I did do that for a while.

**Zapol:** Community work?

**Douglas:** Well maybe it's the predecessor to Greenwich Village Society for [Historic Preservation]. Gosh, I just don't remember. I did that for a while. And I used to go to Planning Board [Greenwich Village Community Planning Board] occasionally when my husband was involved.

**Zapol:** How was he involved?

**Douglas:** Well, I like to think he was a great help in stopping the downtown expressway. Which would have been a disaster, because some of the approach roads would have come almost as far as here.

**Zapol:** In what way was he involved?

**Douglas:** I think he was head of the Planning Board for a while. But you can check that out easily. And it was what's his name, the famous—

**Zapol:** Moses.

**Douglas:** Robert Moses, pushing for it. Well you see what it did to the Cross Bronx



[Expressway]. Absolutely killed those neighborhoods. And I admit Canal Street is a disaster, but it would have just substituted one disaster for another. And look what's happened since that got stopped—that whole SoHo has developed. Made a lot of people happy.

**Zapol:** What do you think about the changes in the neighborhood now, about SoHo?

**Douglas:** Well, I'm making fun of it, but I really don't have anything against it. It's just labeling things. And they allowed that terrible apartment house to go up, or hotel or whatever it is. Although I must say, when I have to find a cab after I put my car back in the garage, which I haven't done in six months, I can find a cab because they come to that hotel. So I'm grateful for that. [pause] It's not the most convenient place for shopping. I think if you're up on lower Fifth Avenue, Citarella. That was the name of the shop.

**Zapol:** On 12<sup>th</sup> Street, yeah.

**Douglas:** Yeah. If I had a Citarella around the corner, I'd be a very happy camper. I keep hoping somebody will do something. People say, "Well, just order in." I like to see what I'm buying.

So how's your neighborhood? Good for shopping?

**Zapol:** It is, yeah. It's not bad for shopping. But it's changing, you know.

**Douglas:** What's happening?

**Zapol:** Well there are actually more grocery stores are coming to the area. So it's changing. But yeah, I'm interested in, as we draw this interview to a close, if there are some things that I haven't asked you about the neighborhood, stories that you recall that you would like to share.

**Douglas:** Stories, stories, stories. I probably have some. Well, what I liked in the early days was it was sort of a discovery in the making. You know, now people who come here, they know what they're going to get, and they know what they want. [00:45:26]

**Zapol:** What do you mean when you say 'a discovery in the making'?

**Douglas:** I mean people would move onto this street. They wouldn't know who was here or what was out there on Prince Street, the shops or the restaurants. Now it's got a sort of reputation, which is a different reason for coming here. I came because it was near my family. And others

come, it can't be the cheap rents, although I think mine are cheap. In other words they're coming, they're not making the neighborhood. They're coming into what they think the neighborhood is already. That's not a bad conclusion on my part. [laughs]

**Zapol:** And what are your hopes for the future of this neighborhood?

**Douglas:** Well I hope it doesn't turn too grandiose and expensive, but it's bound to. I mean how many private houses are there in Manhattan? Or in all of New York? 3,000 is the figure that sticks, but I don't know what the limits are.

**Zapol:** Yeah, I don't know.

**Douglas:** Well of course when you've lived in a place this long, you hope someone in your family will move in. But who knows? They've already got their house, although I think they should sell that.

**Zapol:** Your son?

**Douglas:** Yeah, sell that and move in here. Absolutely.

**Zapol:** Why?

**Douglas:** Well because I think those houses go for more, so they could afford to move in here where there's an income.

**Zapol:** Have you always had tenants upstairs here? And so who have been some of your tenants over time? Have the kind of people that have lived upstairs changed over time?

**Douglas:** Well we didn't rent out that, just a matter of a few years. We had one very nice couple, except he had a drinking problem.

**Zapol:** So it's only been a few years that you've rented upstairs?

**Douglas:** Yes, a couple of years. And we lived on the bottom three, the dining room, kitchen.

**Zapol:** Now when you walk in these neighborhoods that you've lived in much of your life, are there particular memories that come to mind when you're walking by certain places? What kind of images come to mind when you think about the past on this street or on MacDougal Street?

**Douglas:** Well I told you about the Depression, the houses made of orange crates.

**Zapol:** On Houston.

**Douglas:** And I told you about the organ grinder with the monkey.

**Zapol:** No, what's that story?

**Douglas:** Oh, well we'd see them not every week, but from time to time.

**Zapol:** On MacDougal, you would see them?

**Douglas:** Yes. I'd look out the window, and he'd have a monkey. I guess the monkey went with a cup. You were supposed to put a little money in the cup. Yes, you certainly haven't seen that in a long time. And I think years ago you actually saw beggars, which I don't see around anymore. Maybe it was in the Depression. And I used to see people sleeping on the sidewalk around here. I don't see them anymore. Maybe they get picked up by the cops and put in a shelter. I'm trying to think, I should have more memories, more memories. [00:45:08]

**Zapol:** Oh, you've shared so many. I just wondered if there were particular ones that to you sort of essentialized the neighborhood also?

**Douglas:** I remember things like on the corner of MacDougal and Bleecker there was a clothing store. Half the time it was filled with black, because I guess it was run by an Italian Catholic family, and you know you always wore mourning back then. You never see it anymore, do you?

**Zapol:** No, not like that.

**Douglas:** And it was kind of depressing to walk by that—black, black, black.

**Zapol:** So would you see also ladies in mourning wearing black in the streets?

**Douglas:** Well everyone who was a widow, it was black. I remember the candy store man. The candy store was as big as this chair. I used to buy bubble gum with cards. Do they still have that?

**Zapol:** What kind of cards?

**Douglas:** Well, with movie stars or baseball stars.

**Zapol:** Do you remember any of the stars that you would get on the cards?

**Douglas:** No. Although I still have the cards. I have a whole box of cards. I plan to make a killing with them. But then the allowance in those days was 10¢ a week. But that bought you about ten bubble gums.

I remember my piano lessons.

**Zapol:** What were they like?

**Douglas:** Well, my mother had an acquaintance, a friend I suppose. Sad story. She was a French woman, and she had a little girl. And she'd been abandoned by her husband. So she was my piano teacher. And she'd come early so she could have a lovely tea with my mother. You know, tea and toast. And that was sort of, I guess, the nice part of the week. And I remember sitting in front of the piano, which was in the back hall, waiting for the tea party to end and start my lesson.

**Zapol:** You had a piano in the back hallway?

**Douglas:** Yes.

**Zapol:** Did you like to play?

**Douglas:** Yes, I enjoyed it. I never got to be terribly good. And I didn't like practicing. But my neighbors had a piano teacher who was much smarter. Taught them little things, little songs, you know, so they were more—you know, this [running musical scale] dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah. What a drag. I always wished I'd had their teacher. And they learned to really play. But that was fun.

Oh, and then we had a janitor. His name was George. My father's name was George. My French grandfather had a chauffeur called George. And now, in France, at the house there's a little house on the property where this couple now lives. His name is George. And they don't pay rent, but they keep an eye on things. George the janitor. But you know, so many people lived miserable lives then. I have to say I think people today in the lower echelons aren't as miserable as they were.

**Zapol:** Why? What was George's life like?

**Douglas:** Well I don't really know, because I'd never been to his house. But they worked like dogs, because the furnace in those days was a coal furnace. So they had to shovel the coal, and they had to do all the brass in the houses. Now people don't know what it is to work hard.

**Zapol:** Where was the furnace in MacDougal?

**Douglas:** In the cellar.

**Zapol:** And how would he access it?

**Douglas:** In the front door, down the hall, sharp turn to the left. Down this rickety stair. They'd be in the cellar.

**Zapol:** That was his place?

**Douglas:** Well, that's not where he lived, no. And he did not just our house, but probably the whole row. And probably got paid nothing, you know. So some things are better. [00:50:05]

**Zapol:** Where was George from?

**Douglas:** I think he was Polish or something. George, I can still see him. A little guy.

**Zapol:** Was he friendly?

**Douglas:** Oh, yeah. But you know, we tended to accept him as we accepted the walls of the house. I mean nowadays I think you'd know where he lived. You'd probably met his children. Which is a good thing.

**Zapol:** What about the maids as you were growing up? Where were they from?

**Douglas:** Well, originally my mother imported some young French women. And then I guess we had mostly Black help. I remember one story: the day we were leaving for France, one of my neighbors my age came over. And I was in the hall with her and the maid, who was a Black lady called Ophelia. Very nice. And this friend of mine said, "Well Kelly"—because I was called 'Kelly' in those days—"Aren't you going to kiss Ophelia goodbye?" And I said, "Of course." And Ophelia said, "Oh, no, no, no."

**Zapol:** What do you think that story, what was that—

**Douglas:** Well, my little so-called friend, she knew she was doing something. Because in those days, not that I had any—I was happy to kiss her. But it was not something that was— Anyway, you don't tell people to kiss each other. I've never forgotten that. I thought it was a not nice thought to have had. She thought she was going to embarrass me, but it didn't embarrass me in the least. But the reaction of Ophelia is interesting, isn't it? She said, “Oh, no, no, no.”

There's something awfully wrong with that—see the bottom of the mirror?

**Zapol:** Oh yeah, it's a little askew.

**Douglas:** Do you see it's a bigger space on the left than on the right?

**Zapol:** Yeah, it's a little askew.

**Douglas:** It is. Is it the mirror or the sofa?

**Zapol:** I think it may be the mirror. But we're also sitting, you know—

**Douglas:** Oh, at an angle.

**Zapol:** So and then in terms of the neighborhood, were there African Americans, were there Black people in the neighborhood as well?

**Douglas:** Well interestingly enough, originally, before that MacDougal-Sullivan Gardens, before they took the stoops off, before, before, before, it was a Black neighborhood. Isn't that fascinating?

**Zapol:** It was called Little Africa.

**Douglas:** Was it? So how did that start, I don't know. But it would be interesting to know. And why did they, were they sort of pushed out by rents?

**Zapol:** Yes, I can send you some things about that.

**Douglas:** Fascinating, though.

**Zapol:** Yes, it is interesting. But you didn't see traces of that when you lived there?

**Douglas:** Well, either I just didn't make a distinction, I didn't say, “Oh, there's a Black person,”

or there weren't any Black people there. But we had them at Little Red.

**Zapol:** That's what you said.

**Douglas:** Yeah, June. I remember June, and Jerry somebody.

**Zapol:** So I think I've plumbed your memory for a lot.

**Douglas:** But I don't feel I'm giving you what you want to know.

**Zapol:** You are, you absolutely are. I really feel like I have gotten a sense of what that community was like on MacDougal. The wonderful Christmases you had. A real sense of what that life was like—

**Douglas:** And Digging Day.

**Zapol:** —and for your family. And Digging Day. And then your continued relationship with that street. And then now here, too. It's fascinating.

**Douglas:** But what luck to have fallen into this, five minutes from my mother. I would take my kids over to play every afternoon. I'd have tea with my mother. Big tea drinker. Well, it was an exceptional place. Imagine having eight little girls your age. We only had two boys. [laughter]  
[00:55:15]

**Zapol:** You had a lot of luck to have so many friends nearby.

**Douglas:** Oh, wonderful. Four of them Vassar girls.

**Zapol:** Well, thank you for your time.

**Douglas:** Well, I don't feel I contributed anything.

**Zapol:** I hope you will come to feel that you really have.

**Douglas:** I hope so. I've taken up a lot of your time.

**Zapol:** And me yours. So I am grateful for that. I know you were thinking about this in advance, and so I appreciate your time. Your memories about the Depression in the area, those are things that it's hard for me to get from anybody else.

**Douglas:** I did tell you about my dad helping the man?

**Zapol:** You did.

**Douglas:** Good. I think that's important.

**Zapol:** I think so, too.

**Douglas:** But if you ever need another person, Alden. And you'll love her. She's a great gal.

**Zapol:** Oh, fantastic. I'll pass that on. And thank you again so much. I'm going to turn this off. If you have anything else you want to share, you let me know.

**Douglas:** Okay.

**[END OF INTERVIEW]**