

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
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KS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

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Interviewer's Note

This little lady deployed barrage balloons in England during the Second World War to forestall dive-bombing by German planes. She also served as a radio telephonist, wearing headphones, speaking into an upright phone and sitting in front of a little crystal radio...high transmitter. The meteorologist would tell her and her compatriots in the Women's Voluntary Service the weather—always in code. Just a message. You'd have to read it. "Oranges are bitter." (That's the weather closing in. Or "Oranges are sweet." Once, she

burst out laughing (and was told off by the officer). The message: "Your cockerel is crowing; strangle your cockerel." That meant the pilot had left his switch on his high frequency; and you don't want the Germans to pick them up."

Interview

bc: [We talk about British, American, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Southern accents.] You were born in England. How did you come to be in Pittsburgh?

KS: I've lived here [in the United States] for years. I came after the Second World War. I was married in the Second World War. To an American who was in the Army. I was in the Air Force, the Woman's Auxiliary Air Force. And came over here after the War. And don't say, What war?! (Like a young girl did I worked with, seriously. And I said, "The First World War." And this was years ago and she said, "Oh...you look good!" And I said, "Go back to school!" She was insulted.)

Landed in New York, stayed in Brooklyn with my husband's family...because I didn't know the money or anything and had nowhere to live...and [eventually] moved around to different states for work—New Jersey, and New Hampshire, ended in Florida, retired, kept visiting Pittsburgh to visit our grandchildren, my son and his wife. And, eventually, as we got older, they couldn't keep coming down. (It was expensive...and the traveling....) And then, when the four hurricanes came in 2005, that did it—different hurricanes...no electric each time, water...we had to be evacuated because of my husband's health...for a week. And I knew then that we'd have to sell our home and come here. We couldn't live down there any longer. And that's how I came to Pittsburgh to live. I'm living here now.

You couldn't stay in a home with no electric: it was so hot, no food.... We decided then, but, actually, we were fortunate to be independent. All that time kept us

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together...the family down there. But I couldn't anymore. It was a good move. We should've been here...you should be near family. And I'm glad I came here 'cause I had support. I had support in Florida—wonderful friends.

It was good we came here. I like Pittsburgh. We only moved last year, 2006. [We had stayed in Pittsburgh from time-to-time] to take care of the grandchildren. So I do know Pittsburgh...the Zoo and the Aviary...beautiful places.

bc: Can you talk about the war and your service?

KS: I was in it for three years. You couldn't get out unless you had a baby. You couldn't get out once you were in. I was only 17. My home town was bombed: Exeter, on the way to Plymouth. Exeter is the capital of Devonshire, almost at the end of England.

England is beautiful. It's small, compact. You can jump on a train, trains everywhere. Don't have to rent a car. I cycled; dad didn't have a car. I cycled 'til I came here. Devon's very hilly. You had to coast down as far as you could, and coast up. I lived up near the coast.

You had to either go in a factory and do war work; and, where I lived, it was 82,000—it wasn't a large city. There weren't factories. Devon in those days was mostly farming, a little tourism. There weren't factories. My sister was in two years ahead of me in the Service. (You had to do something. You had to do war work.) And some were called up. I didn't want to be called up, conscripted. 'Cause then you had to go in the Army or the Navy; I wanted to be in the Air Force with her. (Of course I didn't see her much.) I was 17 in August and went in in September. [It was] so fast they took us; they needed a lot of women to replace the men.

At first I wanted to be a driver. I thought that would be exciting since my dad didn't have a car. I thought: I'll just drive these officers around. But, unfortunately, they found out that I wasn't 17-and-a-half. (I did tell a white lie: I said I was 17-and-a-half.) And they called me in; I was in trouble because you're not supposed to do that. I said—this is how naïve I was—Can I go home? 'Cause all you did was march around and I didn't like that—you'd get up in the dark, early morning. Of course I couldn't. Don't you know there's a war on? You can't go home! So, what they did...oh well, there'll be a big lorry. You'll be on this balloon site. (Have you ever heard of barrage balloons?) They're like a small blimp. I went on one of those sites. In Southampton—of all awful places—it was bombed every night. Southampton, a big seaport. And liners come in there and everything.... And that's where I was sent. I replaced a great big fellow at the balloon site. And we young girls were sent down there. Yes, there was a big lorry, but it didn't move. It was stationary with a huge drum cable on the side that the balloon was attached to...huge cables...and we'd have to get in this big lorry...be pumped up there.... See, I'm not that tall...pushed up in there in the seat. And you would start it like you were going to drive, but it wouldn't go...it would just be attached...you would just put this huge brake—big thing, heavy too. And the

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balloon would go up. The cable would move fast, and the balloon would go up. So many feet, way up in the air. Be all surrounded the big cities with these barrage balloons 'til they [the enemy] couldn't dive-bomb...come down low, the planes.... [The barrage balloons prevented the German planes from dive-bombing, from coming down low.] That's what [the barrage balloons] were there for. It had to be the winter months: it was awful, really. Lot of girls got hurt; cables would snap. Terrible things would happen. Hernias, ruptures. I did get bronchitis; thank God it wasn't pneumonia. I was really sick, but you still had to go out in the middle of the night, bring it in if there was a gale. And you had to guard it! Can you imagine?! Who would take a balloon?! There were two of us—two-hour shifts at night. They'd give us a truncheon... (I mean, this sounds unbelievable, but it's true)...I'd take a big truncheon and walk around it. I was so cold one night I said to the girl on watch with me...there was a little guard house by the gates and it had a little pot-bellied stove...I said, I'm going in there. I was so cold and wet because you only had one battle dress and you had to wear that and wool doesn't dry. You take it off—unless you've got a dryer, but nobody had them then. And poor Hilda, she was so conscientious.... I was like that at first. Hilda never came in; she just stayed out. I said, Well give me a whistle if an Officer of the Night comes. You could never tell; they'd drive up in their cars.

It was a Marine camp. [The Marines] would throw over little stones, you know, and you'd have to say it first, but I couldn't say it 'cause I'd start laughing, "Halt! Who goes there?" And they'd say, "It's only the Germans," [she says in a high, squeaky voice.] Silly things like that. But some of these girls they were so much more conscientious. Eventually we were taken off. An officer came around. There were a lot injuries and hardships. And he came around and said, "All those under 21, step forward." We all step forward; and we were taken off these balloons. There were too many injuries. We're not as tough, as strong as a man. Physically. Even though we thought we were. But I was happy. And you also had to train: you know, do wire splicing, use flux and a soldering iron, and do knots...[the balloons were] attached to big blocks, cement blocks...big guidelines...when you'd go out in a gale to bring them in 'cause sometimes they'd break away. Then they'd have to be shot down. A fighter plane would usually go up and shoot it down. They would eventually 'cause they had [hydrogen]...very inflammable....

We had to inflate them. Oh that was dreadful. I didn't know until my son told me over here one time. He said, Mom that stuff was highly flammable. They had a great big...it looked like a petrol, an oil-truck when they carry gasoline and oil here. It looked like that. It had a great big tube. We'd have to wear rubber gloves. Big gloves. And rubber little plimsolls, like sneakers. And I remember a girl asking, Why do we have to wear gloves. They said, Don't touch it; your hands would stick. Don't; you'll rip the skin off. 'Cause it was ice cold. When I think about it—so many of us held this big tube into the balloon and blow it up. But I was happy when I got off that. It was too heavy and hard work.

So they gave me a test. Put me in this little room. Put me in fighter command. To see how my nerves were. And my diction—if I could be a telephonist, radio

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telephonist, wear a headphones, speak into an upright phone and sit in front of this little crystal radio...high transmitter...very high transmitter. And, you would hear a voice saying, This is so-and-so squadron.... They always had bombers. Large type. I remember that one well. They would call you up and see if they could go up. Take off twelve at a time but speak one at a time. You had a log book and you'd have to write and...have you ever seen a movie where they have the plotters, plotting, girls plotting, pushing planes...officers in the back.... They would tell me if it was okay. And I would have to press a little button, speak to the officer, and say okay. And off they would take off. All we would do is send them up and they would call us back when they came back from their raid or their escort of bombers...chase them to Germany or escort them as far as they could. What they would do...the meteorologist would tell us the weather. And it was always in code. They never told you a thing—what it was. They would just give you this [message]. You'd have to read it. I remember reading, "Oranges are bitter." But that's the weather closing in. Or "Oranges are sweet." Once, I burst out laughing. I was told off by the officer. The message: "Your cockerel is crowing; strangle your cockerel." That meant he left his switch on his high frequency; and you don't want the Germans to pick them up.

And, once a month, you were sent into...it was dreadful, really...into a small cubicle...and that was "May Day. May Day" high frequency. That's all you listened for. And you would just hear a plane saying, "May Day May Day." And sometimes they were going down. You would hear the noise. But they still speak. We'd say, "Give me your call letters." Just to hear their voice. So you could pick them up; and try and trace them. And that was awful. Nerve-wracking. I didn't care for that one. Sometimes they found them; most times they didn't. But then we were attached to Air-Sea Rescue so, if they did ditch, we could try and find them. I'd stay on my watch sometimes after twelve hours, thirteen hours just to see if they could pick them up. Of course they did have flares—different colored lights to flash...so they'd be up in the sky...hoping no Germans were around. That I enjoyed. I liked that job. I mean, it was nerve-wracking for my age, but I did it. 'Til the War ended.

If you were successful, they kept you on [and] I'm glad 'cause I liked it. Sometimes you were underground. I always admired...I didn't have Rock groups or movie stars on my wall...I had pilots, aces, beautiful aces...you know, pictures from the newspaper. They were from the Battle of Britain...Beacon Hill in Kent...and I was only a kid then...the Battle of Britain that went on...and that was Hurricanes and Spitfires...mostly Spits.... That's what I was on. Well I was thrilled—I was sent back there years later when I was in the Service, to Beacon Hill, which was the Battle of Britain one. This airport...this "aerodrome" they called them...and I worked underground there. You had to go down in the ground because they had a huge big area there, you know, London bombing. And I was there when the "doodlebugs" came. ["Buzz bombs": unguided, jet-propelled missiles used by the Germans against England.] And I remember I had to go on leave...and Mummy said to me, "Don't go back. They have pilotless planes." Now I was in the Service and didn't know. Don't you know—you never believe what

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your mother said at times. I said, "Mummy, don't be silly. How could they have a pilotless plane?"

[When I was on leave,] I always went home to Devon. They gave you a little ticket to go on the train 'cause it was a beautiful part of England and you got away. Well, we were bombed though. I wasn't in the Service then. I was younger. We were bombed: blitzkrieg. We had a reprisal raid for Lubeck in Germany. And funny: my sister went to a private school. She won a scholarship. And she used to have a pen friend from Lubeck. It looked beautiful. Well, we had bombed a factory there; I think a ball-bearing factory. And we heard "Lord Haw Haw," an Englishman; he was a traitor. [They eventually found him; they hung him.] Oh he would come on the radio. "This is Lord Haw Haw speaking." And we'd all listen; and you'd listen. "We are going to come to Exeter one of these days. You're going to get it. You're going to have a raid." And we all laughed: 'Cause we said, Oh, they'd be going to Plymouth. German planes came over our home. Well, this night, was a moonlit night; they followed the River Exe, a big river through my hometown. And they bombed Exeter. It was a blitzkrieg. There were no balloons and they dive-bombed. It was terrible; I mean really awful. Luckily, we had an indoor shelter. You could have an outdoor one in your garden, but they didn't think we would be bombed so they didn't have that many. And, besides, my Dad couldn't go [into a shelter]. He had an artificial leg from the First World War when he was 16. He had his foot blown off. He had 13 surgeries to his kneecap and that stopped the gangrene. So, naturally, [he] couldn't go in an outdoor shelter when you're bombed 'cause he couldn't run. So we had a big steel table—it was marvelous really—in our living room—which was small—with wire mesh on the side [of the table]. And they were proving, you could have a direct hit—the steel top would go in, but people were thrown out and still lived. So, we went in there. Mummy had a mattress in there.

I went in the Service about a year later. And some of the camps, where I was, were bombed. And that's why we were underground. It's amazing, isn't it? When I think back--that I'm still here...talking to you about it. A lot of times I don't care to. There were some sad, very sad times. You knew the pilots. Some WAAFs [Woman's Auxiliary Air Force] were killed. When you think about it, my eldest sister was in the Service. My youngest sister went in a year-and-a-half after. Everyone, every neighbor...and, if you couldn't go in the Service...they even took my friend's—I'm not being smart—my friend's brother who was mentally retarded, but he could peel potatoes. (Wasn't bad.) You all had to do your bit, they said. And, funnily enough, I mean, to take a bath, with six inches [of water]—they painted a black line! And we were all religious about it! We wouldn't go over! And what was wonderful—they queued up for everything! It was always a laugh—put two Englishmen together, they'll queue up. Because, during the War you queued up for everything—food, water.... [And so docile. You'd hear a few people moan, but they'd mostly moan about Hitler. "What ya going to do?" Mostly the poor housewives.]

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Our hometown had no water. I must tell you this: for six weeks no electric, and even the gas works went. So Mummy cooked on a little fireplace, a little fireplace, a low one. She was a tall woman. For all that time. And the Army brought us around—in big...looked like gasoline trucks—water. We were allowed a couple of buckets a day. I mean, people would run into the rivers, scrounge a piece of soap. You couldn't even get soap. You couldn't even get toilet paper. It was awful. When I think of here [the United States], the Vietnam War, I remember Mummy saying, "What's rationed?" I said, "Nothing. This country has everything." It's unbelievable: when I hear people moaning now, I feel like saying, "Shut up." During the War [in England], there wasn't any calcium. Your food was in a little baggy for a week: cheese, margarine, a little bit of butter, a little bit of meat. And that was it. [We were] lucky we had a few chickens in the back garden.

It was unbelievable at times. Of course all Europe was suffering. Daddy joined the home guard. And they had broomsticks [to practice with]. They didn't have guns. They kept saying there'd be no war. I was in school when it started. Daddy said, Oh, there's not going to be a war. And when it did start, It'll be over in six months. They gave us shopping baskets to go to the shops. And the food went in a month! It was supposed to last like...six years. [She laughs.]

bc: How soon after the War did you and your husband leave?

KS: He was still in the Army. So he came back first. And I couldn't come then 'cause I was still in the Service. It wasn't long. I came out in October of '45 when the War ended. Then I came here [the United States] the following April. [My husband] was from New York; he was born in England. Emigrated with his parents when he was two-and-a-half. One day he said to me—we weren't married then:

"Would you care to come to..."

(Quite a few Americans would say, Would you care to come to London? to the girls over there.

And I, [for one] would say [to them], Why would I come to London? Why would I think about it? And that was the end. [And I expected him to say the same as all the other Americans.]

But Maurice said to me, "Would you care to come to...Bristol?"

And I'd known him quite a while; I said, "Bristol?! What's there?"

"My auntie and uncle."

I said, "No." And he was laughing. [I said,] "I don't believe you. Why would I go to Bristol? I don't believe it."

But then his cousin wrote to me. He must have asked his cousin to write to me to prove that he had relatives there. (Because all the rest didn't have "relatives" there and I wouldn't go.)

I didn't tell my parents. But they [her future husband's aunt and uncle] were bombed out twice. In fact, Uncle Will—what a lovely family—lost his fingers from an incendiary bomb. (We had to fight incendiaries. Which I did. But I never picked one up. I wouldn't dare.)

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But anyway, I got out of the Service: gave us a handshake, I think ten pounds for a coat (which would cost 30 pounds when I came out) and said Thank you, gave me a little letter “for helping your country.” I think a couple of medals. And that was it. But it did help me in life. I think they should do that today. You learn to march; you learn to take orders.

bc: How did you and your husband meet?

KS: Well, the city I came from, Exeter, was a garrison city. There were two barracks. With all these British soldiers in them. When the British soldiers left—they went abroad to Tobruk—the Americans came in. And I was on leave. (It was fate.) I was on leave with my youngest sister. She said, Let’s go to a dance. Because that was your forte—you danced. You didn’t go into bars or clubs.... And I met him at a dance. With two friends. And they walked us home because there were no buses...petrol...they stopped early.... The barracks wasn’t far from our home. So, I had to go back to my camp. (And another fate stepped in again.) My “husband” went into a canteen: He says, “I don’t like tea; I don’t like drinkin’ the stuff.” But this one day I went in this canteen for a cup of tea and there was my sister. And he asked for my address and wrote to me at my camp. And I wrote back and asked if he would go home and gave him my address. And Mummy and Daddy welcomed him with open arms. And he was sent nearer my camp. And we would both hitchhike to meet. And it progressed from there.

I’ve been very fortunate. A wonderful marriage and a wonderful man. Hard-working, but fun. We danced practically our whole lives. Over here, I mean, we danced all the time. We were good dancers—even if I do say so myself. At the Elks clubs. My husband joined so we could dance. I said, Let’s go and dance, but where can you dance—here? (I don’t like nightclubs and stuff.)

bc: After you got to the United States, did you work?

KS: No, because I came [to the United States] four months pregnant. You couldn’t travel. I came on a troop ship, but it was the Queen Mary. Some troop ship! A lot of them were little tubs—you were seasick; it took days. Oh yeah, I was in a bunk; it was still a troop ship. I landed Easter Sunday, a beautiful day. My husband came back on [one of those little tubs]. I was very fortunate. I really was. So my son was born here. My parents didn’t want me to leave. I wasn’t even 21. I wanted my husband to be around when his child was born. And be born in America. Which he was.

bc: So you came to Brooklyn, that’s where your husband’s family was.

KS: Yes. Lovely family; nice area. I had to live with my husband’s family. No one wanted children then [in their apartments]. All the GIs were coming back. And all the landlords would say the same thing: Do you have any children? I’d say, No, I don’t. Well, [they responded], you’re having one. I said, “So?” (to myself). I wouldn’t say it to them ‘cause I wanted to get an apartment. I’d smile and be polite. They’d say, We don’t want children. But one day I had to look up and say, What’s the matter? You don’t like children in this country? And they all said, No,

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because they ruin a place. I said, Mine won't; they'll be brought up like I was—properly. Well, we couldn't get one. My son was ten-months-old and it was difficult. It was a small apartment in Brooklyn. Father-in-law worked nights. Two bedrooms. And a little tiny one—looked like a big cupboard to me—but they said my husband slept in there. His two unmarried sisters—they slept in the dining room on a sofa bed. They were awfully kind. We only finally got this one apartment because we went to a Lutheran church and the landlord and the landlady were in Sweden. They were of Swedish descent. They didn't want children. My husband was friends with their twin sons. And we [finally] had an apartment. It was wonderful. We slept in the living room, but we didn't care.

When I look back now and I see how couples have homes...they'll buy a home together...you go to a shower...I brought everything over in a small suitcase...you'll get a refrigerator for a shower gift!...it's marvelous really. But what they have today...blankets and everything given them...so much. But I like Brooklyn. It was beautiful then. It was a three-family house [we lived in]. A tree-lined street. Beautiful. We got an apartment with six families. Hundreds of people on the street and children. No trees. But near a park. Brooklyn in 1947—I guess was our first apartment there. My husband was an apprentice tool-and-die maker when I married him. When I came here, he was on strike. No money. I didn't have any because the Service only paid you very little—a couple of dollars a week. His company had gone on strike while he was away. And his father was a machinist in the American Can Company, biggest can company in the world. So he couldn't get another job because of the union. But, after three weeks, they went back. So it was okay.

bc: Did you ever join the work force?

KS: Yes, [but not 'til my children] were older. It was safer then, but mothers didn't work on the whole then: no one could bring up your children, but yourself. But I wanted to work to go back to England to see my parents. (I got homesick.) But my husband said, No. He said, It's best I stay home and he get a second job. Which was awful because we didn't see him for a year. He'd come home after eight hours, go out and work another half shift after dinner, and go to another factory and work for four hours—a half of a shift. Come home and go to bed. He did that for a year. To save up. So I made a vow that I wouldn't tell him next time I wanted to go back: I got a job, got a job in a bank. [She laughs.] But I was awful at arithmetic! I left school at 14 when the War came. 14-years-old I went to work. 44-hour week. I wasn't a drop-out! That's the way it happened! [Bringing up children, I never thought of going back to school.] Luckily I was a good reader and a good listener. I guess you might say I was self-taught to a certain extent. And my husband taught me a little bit of math. Fortunately I did have a pretty good education. I had Mental Arithmetic. We had Shakespeare. Because I went to school at four for full-term. There was no kindergarten when I went to school. You went all day and you learned from the start. They didn't mess about with kindergarten. And I grew up.

bc: I've got to ask you: is class really an issue in England?

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KS: Not so much now. I was just there recently. But when I grew up—Oh yes! [My family was] considered middle class. My father was in the Civil Service, but we had to live in city housing. The city of Exeter built a beautiful Estate—that's what they called them. The Council built them. They were red brick homes with gray slate roofs. Quite lovely. However, there were no trees planted up the streets at all. And they were all the same. They did have crescents and circles. But there was class distinction. And you could usually tell by diction. "First class," they usually went to university and they had beautiful diction. And you worked for them, as a rule. They were the business people...the doctors. And, on these council estates...they sprung up all over England. Now you can buy them. You can buy them now. Margaret Thatcher brought that out. That class distinction...you learned it in the Service. Although, there was a girl next to me...she had beautiful diction and quiet. You could tell the difference. I thought, This Joyce is something else. She would undress in bed...you know, hide herself. Whereas we would all do it fast and not worry about it. And awfully shy. She was conscripted. And there was a letter came one time and I picked it up for her. They asked me to take it to her. And it was [addressed] "The Honorable...." I said, Who's this for? What's this "Honorable?" I said, "Your father a Lord, [your mother a Lady], your parents? She said, Yes. And took me to her home—beautiful but lovely. I found that people that were born into money, coming from their grandparents, their generations, they were lovely. It was the ones that came up—sometimes the hard way, that were brought up hard, and let you know it. In the Service you were always saying that was one good thing: your officers obviously were university. But there was a lot of class distinction. Not so much now, because there's a lot more money now too. Decent wages. But you were looked after. We could go to a doctor—not like here. Lot of people [here] can't go. [People] cutting pills in half. You never heard of that.

But life was tough for my mother. It was hard, but she never complained and always looked nice. You didn't see slums. They were clean and tidy. Hard-working people. Riding their bicycles. 'Cause you couldn't have a car, of course. You couldn't afford a car. They were all bicycles. You would see three abreast cycling to work. My dad cycled to work. 'Til he left at 60. With one leg. And he had a medal from the Queen. Because he went through the blitz. He took his little dinner on the back of his bicycle. And pushed his bicycle. [You] couldn't cycle once you got in the town: it was all [fallen] bricks [from the bombings]. They had 500 laborers come over from Ireland. The city sent for them. To pick up the bricks and clear the roads. Exeter burned for six weeks. This was the clean-up after the bombings. And we had no water. And [Joan] and I were in the WVS—the Women's Voluntary Service. And we had big galvanized [baths] of water--set up in the schools. We fed [the workers] in the schools, in our school...the men sitting there...there was no where for them to eat. They brought the food in and we served it. There were no paper plates in those days. So we'd have to wash them up outside. We'd bribe these little children 'cause they'd pass the hat around...and we weren't allowed to take any money for being a volunteer. So we gave it to the children to help us clean up. A lot of ladies came—some were titled—to help us in the canteens.

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bc: How often did you get back to England after you arrived in the United States?

KS: Oh I didn't go for six years 'cause there wasn't any money years ago—even if you were working two jobs. [But eventually we went a number of times.] I belonged to a club, a British war brides club. We would go to New York and charter a flight, fill it up with all the children....

bc: Did your family come here to visit you?

KS: One time, yes, I brought them here. They loved it. I took them for the boat ride in New York where you see the U. N. They loved the Statue of Liberty. I took them to Washington, D. C. I took them to a log cabin—a friend actually lived in an old log cabin in Maryland with 36 acres. They loved America! They thought it was a little bit too big because you're driving a lot. They couldn't get over the size of it, you know.

bc: You've traveled. What do you think of Pittsburgh? How does it compare? One of our Sister Cities is Sheffield.

KS: Oh yes. In the North [of England].

I think the transportation, number one, is very good [in Pittsburgh]. There's plenty of buses (and I hope they continue them). And I think there's beautiful parks, a lot of lovely parks, Schenley, Frick.... And the museums, Frick Museum, Carnegie.... And huge libraries. I think it's a very good city culturally and I also think the people are so friendly and helpful.... And there's a good mixture of people in Pittsburgh....