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Karelis, Evanghlia Interview

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Stockton Immigrant Women Oral History Collection

by Sally Miller

KARELIS, Evanghlia (Greek)

July, 1980

Interviewed by Carole Hensley

Transcribed by Robert Siess

[TAPE 1, Side A]
[Begin Tape.]

CAROLE HENSLEY: ... and when you were born?

EVANGHLIA KARELIS: I born Thebes, Greece.

HENSLEY: And when is your birthday?

KARELIS: September 9, 1913.

HENSLEY: When did you come to the United States?

KARELIS: 1949.

HENSLEY: Did you come directly or through other countries?

KARELIS: Directly.

HENSLEY: How many brothers and sisters did you have before you arrived?

KARELIS: Right here? Just my husband.

HENSLEY: Just your husband. Did you come here with your husband?

KARELIS: No, my husband come first. And after I come myself, I have my first child, and I pregnant with another.

HENSLEY: Did you come here alone?

KARELIS: With my child. Hero.

HENSLEY: When did you marry your husband?

KARELIS: 1937. In '38, I had my first child, and in '39 I come to the United States.

HENSLEY: Did you ever go to school?

KARELIS: Well, I go for my citizen test. Because after I been here year, I have another child. So after that I have another child here. And I never have to do it, you know, the [] school and all, I never have to do it. Because my husband, she always used to visit.

HENSLEY: What kind of illnesses?

KARELIS: Well, he used to be here alone. And he used to work on a rail lot, at the Seattle, Washington. He was young boy, just very young boy. He come here to get his own. And he have pneumonia many time.

HENSLEY: Why?

KARELIS: And I never have to work part-time, and part-time to take care of my family.

HENSLEY: When you came to the United States, did you come to Stockton?

KARELIS: No, no, no, no, no. New York.

HENSLEY: How long were you in New York?

KARELIS: About a year and a half. And after, we move to New Jersey, and we stayed in Newark, New Jersey. And we stayed there for two years. And after, we moved to California.

HENSLEY: Why did you move from the East Coast over to the West Coast?

KARELIS: Because my oldest daughter, she never grow up. Always have something, kind of like yellow. The skin used to be yellow.

HENSLEY: Jaundice.

KARELIS: Not exactly, but a doctor is... She born on other side, she born in Greece, and the climate and all of that is not correct for her. So better go to California or to Florida. So we come here, because my husband used to be here.

HENSLEY: What did your husband used to do here?

KARELIS: Used to have a restaurant. Used to work, first time used to work for Marioni's Grill Used to be head waiter. And after he have restaurant.

HENSLEY: Could you tell me about your husband when he first came here, and what he was doing and what happened when he went back to Greece, when you married?

KARELIS: Oh, for another child, for about three years, he used to work and have the railroad, you know where the rest of boys, all boys were all bacteria. So after that, he goes like bus boy in a restaurant. After he come back, and after he come head waiter in Commodore Hotel in New York. And after we move here, we have our business.

HENSLEY: So he started his business after you guys got married and you were already here.

KARELIS: Yeah, darling. Yes.

HENSLEY: Okay. What about your parents' educational background?

KARELIS: Well, my father used to be very, very educated. He come from a nice family.

HENSLEY: What did he do?

KARELIS: He used to have stores in all the different place, like department stores. And he had an olive oil factory. We come from a wealthy family, my father. And my mother too.

HENSLEY: What did your mother's family do?

KARELIS: Used to be a minister. And he have two brothers doctor and one lawyer.

HENSLEY: Did you go to school in the old country?

KARELIS: Yes, I did.

HENSLEY: What about your religion?

KARELIS: Orthodox.

HENSLEY: Have your religious views changed since you've come here?

KARELIS: A lot of different, yes. All over. Certainly. Well, you know, we got a lot of different, not very much.

HENSLEY: What kind of differences?

KARELIS: How I can explain?

HENSLEY: Is it through customs that it's different?

KARELIS: No, no, no, no, no.

HENSLEY: Or just the church itself?

KARELIS: Same thing you could say about the minard, because now they used to be more plain.

HENSLEY: In Greece it was plain?

KARELIS: More plain. Here, I love them. It's beautiful here.

HENSLEY: What's different about it here?

KARELIS: It's more American you can say. More education. How I can explain?

HENSLEY: Is it like more decorated?

KARELIS: That's exactly. That's exactly. Oh, it's beautiful.

HENSLEY: Which do you like better?

KARELIS: I love here.

HENSLEY: Did your mother work outside the home, Mrs. Karelis?

KARELIS: No. My mother used to be like designer.

HENSLEY: A designer of what?

KARELIS: Clothes. She'd design men's clothes and women, special suits. Men and women. That's what she used to do.

HENSLEY: Did she work in your home then?

KARELIS: Oh yes. I used to have a machine, and I used to make sweater, stockings, things like that.

HENSLEY: How did you feel when you left the old country?

KARELIS: Very bad.

HENSLEY: Very bad? Can you tell me a little bit about it?

KARELIS: Very bad.

HENSLEY: How did your family act when you left?

KARELIS: Oh, everybody crying and all of that. After I come here, and war start, everybody got happy down there because I've been here. Well, I've been happy too. I love it.

HENSLEY: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KARELIS: Yes. I have two brothers and five sisters.

HENSLEY: Did they ever want to come here?

KARELIS: I bring my sister, my twin sister.

HENSLEY: So when you came here, you brought some family with you?

KARELIS: No. After the war. 1946, I bring my sister.

HENSLEY: And how old were they at that time?

KARELIS: Well, she used to be about 32.

HENSLEY: What did you like most about your life in Greece?

KARELIS: My youngest age. You know how pretty things, and how you can forget that?

HENSLEY: Like what kinds of things did you do when you were young?

KARELIS: Well, I used to have my brother, and we used to go a field and playing, and we used to have close to the olive oil factory, we used to have a lot of tree. And we used to climb the tree and all of that kind of jazz. We used to have dog follow us all over. That's all I remember. I used to be tom boy.

HENSLEY: Oh, that's good. So was I. Is there anything you didn't like about living in Greece?

KARELIS: Mm-mm. I love 'em. Even down there they hear same thing. I love United State. I love 'em here. I work very hard here. Very, very hard.

HENSLEY: When you were coming here, was there anything that you really anticipated most about the United States, that you really expected to see, that you were looking forward to see?

KARELIS: No. I got surprised, because it's such a beautiful place.

HENSLEY: Really? When you first got here, where did you land into?

KARELIS: New York.

HENSLEY: And how did you feel when you first got here?

KARELIS: The first time I got to New York, my husband call cab. Because he just come from the work. And my child. And he call cab. And he colored boy. Good looking. I never see colored boy before. I never see colored people. And I got surprised, and I started shaking and crying and all that. My husband say, "What happened to you?" And I want to say nothing before the man, you know. So I tell you. Say, "What

kind of man is that? Why he look like that?" Big man and fat all of that, I never saw before a colored boy. That surprised me. Only thing.

HENSLEY: You made the trip by yourself with your little boy.

KARELIS: By myself. With my little girl.

HENSLEY: With your little girl. How old was she?

KARELIS: Little. One day we come here, another day have nothing. Little.

HENSLEY: Did you have a hard time traveling over here with just you and your little girl?

KARELIS: Yes. Yes. Very hard. Because used to be, we left January 17, and come to New York February 4. 4th is my daughter's birthday. February 4.

HENSLEY: What happened on the trip over here ?

KARELIS: Very, very bad. The boat come, you know, really because very bad weather. Very, very. A lot of snow.

HENSLEY: Were there many other immigrants on the boat?

KARELIS: Oh yes, a lot. Especially Italian.

HENSLEY: Especially Italians?

KARELIS: Not too many from my country, but Italian packed. Because used to be Italian boat by the load. Very nice people. I have good time, another time I have, I been sick.

HENSLEY: And your little girl, did she ever get sick or anything?

KARELIS: Yes. Yes. All got sick.

HENSLEY: When you first got here, who did you live with? Did just you and your husband settle up in a house immediately, or did you live with any relatives?

KARELIS: Here in apartment at the Bronx. He stayed down with every year, then moved to work.

HENSLEY: In your neighborhood, were there very many other immigrants?

KARELIS: Mm-mm.

HENSLEY: None?

KARELIS: A lot of Irish. Everybody speaking English.

HENSLEY: How did you feel?

KARELIS: Embarrassed. Embarrassed. Very much so.

HENSLEY: How did you learn the English language, Mrs. Karelis?

KARELIS: You can learn here and there, and after I come to California, I go to work. I work for Kennedy. Still I work.

HENSLEY: In New York, when you were living in the Bronx, did you do anything to overcome the embarrassment?

KARELIS: Well, the only thing, I used to sew a lot. Stay inside, then sew. A lot of my children's dresses and my husband's shirts and things like that. For shape.

HENSLEY: Did your husband help you at all?

KARELIS: Yes. Very nice man. Very, very gentleman. Very understanding, very , very well.

HENSLEY: Did he help you with the English language?

KARELIS: Yes. Yes. Yes, he did. He did. I go to school just for my citizen paper.

HENSLEY: And that was when you got to California?

KARELIS: After I just come to California, I go to school because I want to become an American citizen. The only thing is, here in this country, not to be scared, and pray to God and work. Remember that. Just first pray to God, and say, "Please help me." And work, and don't be scared, because if you be scared, never go no place. You remember that.

HENSLEY: When did English become the main language in your home?

KARELIS: After my children go to school. Come in, it's "Oh Mother, you don't know English!" And I used to feel so sorry, because I want to help my children so much and all of that, so my husband used to stay and help them. And I used to take them to the Greek school.

HENSLEY: So your children went to school here in California.

KARELIS: Mmhmm.

HENSLEY: When you came to California, where did you go to? Stockton?

KARELIS: Direct to Stockton.

HENSLEY: Whenever you were in the United States, did anyone else besides your family ever live in your home with you? Besides now, and the students who live here.

KARELIS: Yes. My husband first goes to Seattle. He comes here and see us, old man. And he stayed with us about six, seven months, and of course he used to be too old, and he used to love my children and all of that.

HENSLEY: How did you react to that?

KARELIS: Very nice. Very nice, because used to be old and need help, and I wanted to help. Take him to the doctor and take him for a ride and things like that.

HENSLEY: Did your children get along with him?

KARELIS: Very well. Still never forget him. Still talking about Louie.

HENSLEY: Did you ever work out in a job when you were growing up at home?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Pick olives.

HENSLEY: Pick olives for your daddy?

KARELIS: Oh dear. Oh yes. My husband used to run a lot of tree. And long ago, you see, I pick olive.

HENSLEY: Did your brothers and sisters do that too?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Oldest would work inside, because like I say, I used to have machine. And nobody in my hometown at that area have machine to make sweater, but years ago. About 40 years ago now.

HENSLEY: What was this machine? Was it a loom?

KARELIS: A looming machine. You know, it makes sweater. About this much. And you have handle, and things here in the corner, you can put all of the yarn. And you put, you know how you can mix the color. And you put two and two, four and four, six and six. Yeah, I used to make lots of stockings or men's sweaters.

HENSLEY: Did you ever sell them? Did you make it to be sold?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes.

HENSLEY: In your home, who made most of the family decisions?

KARELIS: My mother. She used to be very strong. Very strong.

HENSLEY: Did your father have any differences of opinion with her?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Have opinion, because he always used to go up. And my mother had big farm. Mother would say, "I need you here, because childrens need you and all of that." Say, "Okay, I come. I have business." He have to go. We used to come from nice family. No misunderstanding, both very nice parents. Very, very, very nice. I wish I see them again, because I never forget that days. All used to have, you know, on a holiday have company, and have dance in the house, and have a lot to eat, and we've never been poor. Not exactly rich, but I've never been poor. I've never known how, you know. All of us have a lot. Because both my parents wanted to. We had a beautiful home like this one. A Greek home, you know, different. A lot's outside, and porch all around, and all of that fancy iron on the porch.

HENSLEY: How did you as a child react to that? When you saw some families whose father made the decision, did you ever think about that at all?

KARELIS: Well, I never saw that, because we've never been nosy. Because our parents tell us. You go to somebody else's, don't try to, you know. So I don't know. I never have known. To be honest, God bless America. I have good life in my country. I love United State. I'm alone now. I raised all my children, all married. I'm alone, but still, I just come home.

HENSLEY: You visited?

KARELIS: I visited my daughter. I've got daughter there.

HENSLEY: Oh. When did you go?

KARELIS: I go to Heraklion[?], Crete. The island. That's where my daughter live. She's there now. Their two children, her husband, and I stay for two months.

HENSLEY: How nice.

KARELIS: Yes, it's beautiful. But not like United State. Mm-mm.

HENSLEY: What customs and practices from the old country did you observe at home? Religious rituals? Any special foods, holidays?

KARELIS: The same always, sweetheart. It's not much. The people the same way acting, exactly like United State and there too. The only thing religion down there got every... you can say, you have so many holiday down there. Yes, every week have to be two, three holidays. Every week! And people believe. People believe in religion down there. Very strong.

HENSLEY: More so than here?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Very similar. Very. Every Sunday, you can see children, young, grown going to church. Here you don't see that.

HENSLEY: What do you think about that?

KARELIS: I love 'em.

HENSLEY: Would you like to have seen your family go to church every Sunday?

KARELIS: Oh yes. I love that. The most precious, the only place that God just held out, I hope my children to go to church, because you don't believe in a God yet. I don't think so. From my opinion, because I believe, and that's helped me. I lost my husband. He left me with four children. And my baby used to be in nine years old. And I sent them all through college. I work too. I left work Kennedy, I used to go to another Kennedy. And after the union stopped me, almost put me in jail. And I told them. I told them the truth. I say, "I have to do it." I go through life, God help me. That's all I say. Believe in the God, and

don't be scared. Because you be scared, you'll never go no place. I been here so many years, and nobody bother me. Nobody said nothing to me.

HENSLEY: Have you ever felt discriminated against at all, since you've been here?

KARELIS: Never.

HENSLEY: Never? Not even when you first got into New York?

KARELIS: Never. No.

HENSLEY: How about your children when they were growing up, with language problems that you had mentioned?

KARELIS: No trouble at all. Because I used to teach them, and tell them, "Don't be scared. You see? No matter, you see old or young, need help, try to help them. Like you get in a bus and you see old lady or you see old man or you see pregnant woman, all child or something, help them. You be nice, they'll be nice to you too." And I never have trouble with my kids, thank God. The only thing that bothers me now, my daughter, she's [].

HENSLEY: She's what?

KARELIS: She's not Greece. Too far. And I don't see my grandchildren.

HENSLEY: Why did your daughter go to Greece?

KARELIS: She's used to being European. And she got, you know, the teaching in a pharmacy. And she met this boy, coming from... I don't know how he met. He used to be in church. And my daughter used to go to church. That's how met. In church.

HENSLEY: Here in Stockton?

KARELIS: Right here. Mmhmm. Yeah. Got together, and that's it.

HENSLEY: Is she practicing her pharmacology there in Greece?

KARELIS: Yes.

HENSLEY: What does he do?

KARELIS: He got real estate and paint. Part-time, he paint home and things like that. Two jobs, because real estate is not like here, very strong. It's different there.

HENSLEY: Why, do you think?

KARELIS: Why? It's not like United State. And now here slow too.

HENSLEY: Are customs celebrated at your home when you were a child still celebrated in your children's home?

KARELIS: That's right. Exactly.

HENSLEY: Did all of your children marry Greek people?

KARELIS: No. My oldest daughter, she marry , and she's divorced. She met him at UOP.

HENSLEY: Did all your children go to UOP?

KARELIS: My third daughter, she don't go to UOP. She got to Garrison, New York. In a church school. She going to be Greek teacher, and she have scholarship, and she go to all the [quarantine?] to teach there, and she met another Cretan boy from the island, and she come here with her husband. Got a beautiful home, beautiful children. No complaints.

HENSLEY: Do your children help each other with home responsibilities?

KARELIS: Yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. I used to write on a blackboard what each and every one had to do.

HENSLEY: Oh, they had their chores.

KARELIS: Oh yes.

HENSLEY: What did you have them do?

KARELIS: Well, like we start Monday. Sunday night, I put everything on order. Every Sunday night. Say, "Tomorrow morning, Stasha, the kitchen is yours. And Theo, the living room and dining room is yours. And Vickie, the bedroom is yours." And my bed used to be maybe that high, you see. Used to be smaller.

HENSLEY: Did you ever have them help you and your husband with the restaurant?

KARELIS: Oh yes. I used to work. I used to work. I used to both open the place and close it.

HENSLEY: Did the kids help?

KARELIS: Yes. Like now, summertime, no school. You sitting there, help us.

HENSLEY: Do you remember when your children first started bringing over kids who weren't Greeks? How did you react to that?

KARELIS: Well, I used to be proud.

HENSLEY: Oh, really?

KARELIS: Yeah. Not embarrassed. Why? Why to be embarrassed? Used to be speaking Greek, and they say, "What kind of language is that?" So my second daughter, very, very smart girl, she used to explain everything.

HENSLEY: Were you strict with your children? Did you let them go out a lot?

KARELIS: No. So and so, not exactly strict, but not...

HENSLEY: Not lenient.

KARELIS: Not loose either. I used to correct them and tell them the honest-to-God truth the beginning. Can't go, you know, any place you want, because you never know. And anyplace you go, you have to call me, or I have to know exactly what place you are. Or you don't go.

HENSLEY: How about dating? Especially...

KARELIS: No. Never have time for dating. This is the honest-to-God truth. Because my husband got sick. Have sunstroke. And my daughter used to be 18, my oldest daughter, 18. The other 17, Vicki 16, and my baby nine. And he'd been sick for five years, and the poor thing never go off to dating. No, no, no, no, no.

HENSLEY: Why? Were they just helping you all the time, working?

KARELIS: Yes. Because their father used to be sick.

HENSLEY: Your husband, you say, was sick. Was it a prolonged illness that he was in bed, or was he in a hospital?

KARELIS: For five years, used to be back and forth, home and hospital. Oh, I go through a lot. And like I say, God help me. He give me the health, and I take care of my kids. Now I don't think what happened. I don't think, because thank God.

HENSLEY: Do your children have children?

KARELIS: Oh yes. My oldest daughter, she got 19-years-old girl, and she got boy 13 now. But she's got divorced, like I say. And she teach, she's on Delta College. And my other daughter's in New Jersey. She used to work the stock market, and after she got married, she used to [].

HENSLEY: Excuse me. She used to be what?

KARELIS: She used to be model.

HENSLEY: Wow.

KARELIS: After she got the children, she got []. And my other daughter Vicki, she's here. She got three, two boys, one girl. And my baby, she's got two babies now. A boy and girl.

HENSLEY: Mrs. Karelis, when did you start working? Was it after you had all of your children, or did you work in between?

KARELIS: Yes. I work after I have my third daughter. Used to be about two years old. I used to have one lady take care of my children, and I used to work in cannery.

HENSLEY: That's why you're here in Stockton.

KARELIS: Yes. So for a little while, we're doing fine. And my husband got sick after, and I used to work pregnant too, with my last child. Ten hours on the cannery.

HENSLEY: Why didn't you work in the restaurant?

KARELIS: Well, after we had the restaurant.

HENSLEY: When did you start with the restaurant?

KARELIS: 1948, they started it.

HENSLEY: And how long did you have it?

KARELIS: About four years. Four or four and a half, you can say.

HENSLEY: When you look at your children's lives with their husbands and their family, and the United States as it is now, what do you think is the best thing in their lives that they have going for them? They, with their families?

KARELIS: Well, all my daughters want to do, I don't have no complaint. It's beautiful. Except my oldest daughter. I hope my oldest daughter find somebody – my oldest daughter, you know, she go through a lot, the poor thing. Because she's alone, and she try to make it all by self.

HENSLEY: And your oldest daughter is living where? She's doing what?

KARELIS: My oldest daughter, she's working on Delta College. Just that the one, you know, she's rough, anyhow. She need help, poor thing. Well, she do pretty good, no complaint. She try the best.

HENSLEY: What do you think is causing her most problems? Just being alone and not married?

KARELIS: No. She don't want to get married again. She never cared for that. She worry because she can't, the bills, you know. You know, things like that. No matter how much she make. And the boy been sick, so she have pneumonia almost for a month. The doctor bills and all. Oh well. That's life. What you gonna do?

HENSLEY: Do you still feel close to Greece?

KARELIS: Not like I used to. Not like I used to. I don't know why.

HENSLEY: Was there ever a time when you were here and you wanted to go back?

KARELIS: Oh yes, I cried. Oh no. After my mother passed away, mm-mm.

HENSLEY: How long do you think it took you to get used to just being here, and not really wanting to go back?

KARELIS: Oh, about 30 years. Maybe more. I always had my mind to go back.

HENSLEY: Did you ever visit Greece within that time?

KARELIS: No. I visit in '71. And now I just got back.

HENSLEY: Are you still in contact, besides your daughter? And through that time that you weren't there, who were you in contact with?

KARELIS: Oh yes. My brother, my sister. Oh yes. Like I said, you know, we go every other week.

HENSLEY: How long ago was your mother alive after you left? Your parents alive?

KARELIS: About thirty-something years.

HENSLEY: So you were still in touch with them, weren't you?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. I used to send money to her, and say, "Please don't send me money. I got money. You don't have to worry about it." She had nice life. Very nice.

HENSLEY: Did they ever try to talk you into coming back to Greece?

KARELIS: Yes. My mother.

HENSLEY: Really? What did you tell her?

KARELIS: Maybe someday. I don't want to disappoint her. Maybe someday.

HENSLEY: Do you think of yourself now as a Greek woman, or as an American woman?

KARELIS: More like a Greek, you can say. I like America, but still.

HENSLEY: Why?

KARELIS: I don't know. I can't explain why. I love United State. No matter what everybody say, but I never go back there.

HENSLEY: You never would? Why?

KARELIS: I don't know. I got disappoint now I go down there. I got so disappoint, because people so rude.

HENSLEY: They're rude?

KARELIS: Yeah. Especially in Heraklion, on the island. Because American Air Force, and Navy and all of that. And I don't know what is the deal, but the people down there don't like United State at all. Got against the United State. I got sick by that. I used to go to post office, send card here to my family, you know, say, "No. We don't take you over."

HENSLEY: Really?

KARELIS: Yes. I go to cash my travel checks, oh boy, what I go through. They don't like America at all, I'm sorry to say. I'm embarrassed to say, honest to God. You wanna be like that, that's why I got so disappointed I don't like to go anymore.

HENSLEY: Do you think they saw you as an American?

KARELIS: Yes, exactly.

HENSLEY: Really.

KARELIS: Yes. I'm not American, I'm Greek. "No you're not," they say, "you're American. We can tell." I say, "[] lot easier to have know me." They say, "But part away can tell."

HENSLEY: Did you ask them why?

KARELIS: Yes!

HENSLEY: What did they say?

KARELIS: That my language, and American, and all of that. "Because we know you're American!" I say, "No I'm not! I'm Greek!" "Don't lie to us!" Just like that. Yup. "We don't need your money." And this island especially don't like America, because Air Force down there and all of that. I don't know what is the deal, to be honest. I never asked, I got so, so sick, I never asked why, you know, to repeat and find out.

HENSLEY: Did you talk to your daughter about that?

KARELIS: Oh yes.

HENSLEY: What did she have to say?

KARELIS: She say because the Greek people help American people, in 1940, '41, I don't know the deal. And American push the Greek people away. I don't know why. And I said, "That's enough. I don't want anymore. That's it." What is the fight between, because I don't want to get in the fight. It's a Greek girl down there. I want to see her. She's got long hair.

HENSLEY: You want to change places?

KARELIS: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Go ahead, sweetheart. That's okay.

HENSLEY: Have you talked to many other Greek immigrants who've come here recently?

KARELIS: No.

HENSLEY: No? None at all?

KARELIS: No.

HENSLEY: Have you participated in any organizations or groups since you've been here in the United States?

KARELIS: Yes. I belong on the... you know, the church group.

HENSLEY: Do you work a lot with the church?

KARELIS: Sure. I go every Sunday. And I belong to two works.

HENSLEY: What are they?

KARELIS: Philotanus[?], to help people, old people. You know what's Philotanus?

HENSLEY: Mmhmm.

KARELIS: And the other is Hebra.

HENSLEY: And what's that?

KARELIS: Well it's a... maybe it's a men club. It's to help people too. You see, I have that book here. So you can see. [away from microphone] You know, this is the religion books.

HENSLEY: Oh, I see.

KARELIS: Yeah, that comes once a week.

HENSLEY: [something about a church directory]

KARELIS: Yeah, that's my daughter live down there in that area. North New Jersey.

HENSLEY: Oh, okay.

KARELIS: Yeah, she sent it to me.

HENSLEY: Could you tell me about working in the canneries? How long have you been doing it, when did you start?

KARELIS: I started 1944.

HENSLEY: And you started when your husband started getting sick?

KARELIS: Well, my husband used to be so-and-so, but not exactly sick. Well, you know, he used to work a club and all of that, so I used to work day, and he used to work night.

HENSLEY: In a club. How many canneries did you work in?

KARELIS: One, two, three.

HENSLEY: Three.

KARELIS: Three. And still I work. I waiting for telephone anytime now.

HENSLEY: Oh, to go back to work?

KARELIS: Oh yes.

HENSLEY: Have you worked always? Like throughout the whole year?

KARELIS: No whole year. It's just season time.

HENSLEY: Seasonal work.

KARELIS: Yeah, seasonal work. Like you know, peaches, apricots, and tomatoes and squash. Things like that.

HENSLEY: So you've been doing it every year since 1944.

KARELIS: Well, I start because I have my child, and after opened the store, and after I stop for ten years, you can say. Between. And after my husband passed away, I started, 1960. '58 I started, yeah.

HENSLEY: You mentioned something about the union. How did the cannery become unionized?

KARELIS: I don't remember. Used to be, the time I come here, used to be union. Oh yes. It used to be.

HENSLEY: And did you have any problems because of that?

KARELIS: Yes.

HENSLEY: Could you tell me about them?

KARELIS: Yes, because he find out I work on more [pack?] after that time. I used to be cannery here more [pick?], and I used to work on []. Flog tail, used to call them flow tail. So I go down there seven hours, and six hours on more pack.

HENSLEY: What happened when the union found out that you were working two jobs?

KARELIS: Oh, I got letter saying they want to stop me. And I told them. I told them my association, I say, "I do this, I don't do because I'm proud of myself. I'm ashamed of myself. I have to do it because I've got four children, and I have to do it."

HENSLEY: How did they find out you were working?

KARELIS: Because I paid two. I pay down there, you know, once a month you have to pay union.

HENSLEY: Oh, double union dues.

KARELIS: Union dues. So that's it.

HENSLEY: So you paid twice.

KARELIS: Sure. You're working two cannery, you pay twice. At that time, used to be four dollars. Who's care for four dollars?

HENSLEY: Geez. What happened? Did just the union official come and talk to you?

KARELIS: Yes, yes.

HENSLEY: Who came and talked to you? Did that come to your house, or work?

KARELIS: No, no, no. He came on the more pack and the floor lady come to me and say, "Mrs. Karelis, somebody want to see you." I took to the office, he say, "What you think you doing?" I say, "I working." He say, "We're here to stop you." I say, "Why?" "Because you're working full time on here, and you have to stop your complete." I say, "No, you never can do that to me." He say, "Yes, we do." So I told them, you know, I told them exactly what happened, and what all my association. He say, "Okay, you can follow one cannery, not two. Don't do that again."

HENSLEY: And did you?

KARELIS: Oh yeah. Sure. Have to. Have to follow rules. I need my job?

HENSLEY: What was your husband doing? Was he still working in the restaurant?

KARELIS: No, no, no. Used to work Marioni's Grill that time. Yeah, nightclub.

HENSLEY: Being a bartender?

KARELIS: No, used to be head waiter. Yeah, because he used to know French.

HENSLEY: What happened to his restaurant?

KARELIS: We sold it. After he got sick, I sold it. I can't take care of myself. And that's all.

HENSLEY: How did he react to selling it?

KARELIS: He react very bad, but what you gonna do? Life is more important. And after he passed away, he been sick man. He understanding all of that.

HENSLEY: Did you like working?

KARELIS: Oh yeah. I love to work. I'm not scared to work. I don't like to stay home.

HENSLEY: You don't like to stay home? Would you ever want to live with your children again?

KARELIS: No. I don't like to bother my children. No, no, no, no. I love my children. That's okay, come in here, and we have dinner and all of that, but to live and to go down there and bother, uh-uh.

HENSLEY: Do you ever babysit for your children?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. I loved that a short time, now all the time.

HENSLEY: When you first got here and you started to work in the canneries, did you ever feel that every job that you got, you got because you were Greek, you were an immigrant, or because you were a woman?

KARELIS: No, because I have to work, I never look that. I never look what I am, Greek or English or what. I never cared for that. Because I need to work. I need my job. I need to have my family and my kids. I have three children that time, and we rent home, and looking to buy home, so I try to help my husband very bad. Because he used to be such a good man and help everybody. And never help himself. Any penny he used to get, he send them to his father, his mother, and all of that. Never looked at himself. And after he got married, we have to do it because we have children who need home and all of that.

HENSLEY: How old was your husband when you married him?

KARELIS: 37.

HENSLEY: And how old were you?

KARELIS: 27. 23. I have my first child, yes.

HENSLEY: So that was kind of a big age difference, 14 years.

KARELIS: Oh yeah. We used to go beautiful. No complaint. Very, very nice. Very gentleman, and very understanding.

HENSLEY: How did he feel about having you have to work all the time?

KARELIS: He don't want me to work, all that. I say, "Why not? I'm not Cretan, why not? I took care of the children and all of that, and I have old lady take care of you. She never do nothing, just to watch you. Not bad."

HENSLEY: Did he have any kind of aid from work to support the hospital bills while he was in there, or did you have to take care of that?

KARELIS: I used to take care of that. Oh yes.

HENSLEY: How did you feel?

KARELIS: About what?

HENSLEY: About having to pay for so many things. Did you ever feel defeated?

KARELIS: Like I say, I've never been scared for anything. Just to do it. That's it. Because you...

[End of Tape]

[TAPE 1, Side B]
[Begin Tape.]

KARELIS: ...hardly your life. And any kind of person, any kind, you know, nothing easy. You have to work, and you have to make the best. You have to make the best for you and your family. And teach 'em correct. Teach 'em nice things. Never teach 'em dirty, or say, "Don't talk to the neighbor, because he's no good," or "Don't go here, because no good."

HENSLEY: When your daughter got old enough, did you ever have her go to the canneries and help you there?

KARELIS: Oh yes. My oldest daughter worked in the cannery. For two years, yes.

HENSLEY: Did she like it?

KARELIS: No. As a mother, you can't [teach him how you work good?].

HENSLEY: Oh. Was she the only one who went to work in the canneries?

KARELIS: Yes.

HENSLEY: Did any of your other kids have any other paying jobs, you know, outside of the house?

KARELIS: Oh yes. My second daughter, she used to work market. The grocery store.

HENSLEY: Did she like that?

KARELIS: Very nice. She's very smart girl. Very smart. She used to work the shifts, 16 years old, cash checks. Very nice.

HENSLEY: How did you meet your husband?

KARELIS: Hmm.

HENSLEY: [laughs]

KARELIS: That's a big story. My husband used to be here in United State. His sister used to live close to us, exactly like that. And we used to have big porch. Used to be home like this. And all of us stand outside the porch on the summertime. His sister, same thing. My husband's sister. She used to have big home, and being neighbor, I used to help her. And my brother come, I tell him to [marry her, oh you something?]. "No," I said, "don't make jokes, because your brother come from United State, he's [different there between what you are?] and what, you know, dumb people are. He said, "Never mind." And I thought she joking, so I stopped talking her. I never talked to her anymore. I thought she made fun of me. So [], and I never saw my husband before we got engaged, I never know what kind of man. We never go out, or all of that.

HENSLEY: And you got engaged?

KARELIS: Yeah, because he used to saw me many times. I never saw him.

HENSLEY: But you just went ahead and said you'd marry him anyway?

KARELIS: I heard so much about him, a very nice man and this and that, and that's all.

HENSLEY: Really? Did your family influence your decision?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes.

HENSLEY: What did they have to say? What did they do?

KARELIS: Oh, my mother, my father used to be so happy, and everybody, for this special man. He used to be, you know, good-looking guy.

HENSLEY: What made him so special? Was it because he was in America?

KARELIS: No, because used to be [different gentlemen greeters?]. [Something about a lot of Americans coming there now]. They didn't usually.

HENSLEY: So what was he doing when you first married him? He was still working at the railroads, is that correct?

KARELIS: No. At that time, for three, four years, the time he come here, talking with his boy. A very young boy. Thirteen, or – I don't remember. A very young boy. And he used to help on the railroad, because his brother dig 'em here that time, years ago. 1912, I don't know how long. And after he getting a restaurant, like busboy, you know what is busboy?

HENSLEY: Mmhmm. Picking up plates and stuff, yeah.

KARELIS: Pick dishes and all of that. So after he learn how, and he help run a restaurant on Seattle, Washington for a little while, he make money, he come to other country, he got married.

HENSLEY: You got married in Greece then?

KARELIS: Yes.

HENSLEY: Was it a big wedding?

KARELIS: Very big wedding. Very big wedding.

HENSLEY: After you were married, how did you two make decisions? You said your mother was the strong one in your family. Were you the strong one also?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes.

HENSLEY: Did that ever cause conflicts? Did that ever cause problems?

KARELIS: No. No. I never do before I ask my husband. I say, "Oh, you think? []?" You know, we talking and all of that. I never have misunderstanding with my husband.

HENSLEY: Never?

KARELIS: Never.

HENSLEY: Really.

KARELIS: Like two children, you know, really something. Like I say, used to be special man, kind man. I never saw hint of, you know, to scold the children or things like that. Nothing. I say, "Come on here. I want to ask you, why you did that. Sit down on the chair." And we used to talk, and all of that. Very nice. I don't have no complaints.

HENSLEY: How did you divide responsibilities? Was it just he worked days and you worked nights? Or, no – excuse me. You worked days, and he worked nights.

KARELIS: I work at days, and he used to work at night.

HENSLEY: Was this seven days a week?

KARELIS: Not on Sunday. On the cannery, never worked at that time. And he used to be Mondays off.

HENSLEY: So your kids were more or less raised up by him in the daytime.

KARELIS: Yeah. You can say that.

HENSLEY: Did he take them places?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. Every Sunday in the church, and afternoon before he go to work, I used to be home, Sunday. And maybe we go visit sometimes, maybe not. Monday, he used to take 'em to the park.

HENSLEY: Where did you live? Did you live in town?

KARELIS: On Commerce Street. Yeah, 1120 South Commerce. We bought a big home, too.

HENSLEY: After you got married, how did things change between you and your family? Evidently they were pleased to see you married, but with you going away so soon after you got married...

KARELIS: Everybody be happy. I be happy. No complaints about that, no.

HENSLEY: What was your greatest concern as a mother?

KARELIS: Nothing else, to be honest. Just proud.

HENSLEY: What was your greatest satisfaction? What made you happiest that your children did?

KARELIS: You know sweetheart, you got good man, and you got to [understanding?] together. And that's all it is. And that kind of thing. But you fight... "I don't like this one, this don't fit me, this is no good," and all of that, little by little... Like I say, I used to work. I used to make my bed. I never buy that. I used to sew my children all my clothes. My husband's shirts. Anytime I have visit, I teach my children how to put things on the table, how to cook, all of that. So I don't know. I have the best life. That's why I say, I never have no trouble, as long as we've been together, me and my husband. After he passed away, yes. I go through a lot. But like I say, I pray to God to help me, and he did.

HENSLEY: When did your husband pass away?

KARELIS: 1958.

HENSLEY: And from that time on, you just worked in the canneries?

KARELIS: I worked anywhere, anyplace. And like I say, don't be scared to work. Don't be scared.

HENSLEY: What were you especially proud of in your home, and with your children?

KARELIS: Well, with my husband, my children. I never cared for proud for my home. Or furnish, or the wall. Because that is materialist. Who's care? I care, you know, for my children. I sent through college each and every one. And because I don't have much education, because we never sent the girls away to school. Just the boys.

HENSLEY: Would you like to see that changed?

KARELIS: Oh yes. And I pray for that.

HENSLEY: Do you think there's very many Greeks who feel that way? Who still would rather just send their boys to school and not their girls?

KARELIS: Yes. Yes. And a lot in the village all got that idea. The girls have to stay home and not to go to school, and I don't like that.

HENSLEY: What would you tell someone if they would tell you...

KARELIS: Well, I told them. I said, "That's not fair." You have to be 50/50. Why not? She's special. She have to go to work too. She need good education.

HENSLEY: When did your children start to be more independent and live on their own?

KARELIS: Oh, my oldest daughter start very, very young, because I push her so much.

HENSLEY: Like in what ways?

KARELIS: Well, like the money. I say, "Stasha, the time you go to school, sweetheart, you have to do this and this and that." Sometimes she used to say, "Oh, I don't remember." She pretend like, and I say, "Okay, I write out on blackboard." On the Greek language. Because I never know English. And I teach her

Greek, and I say, "You have to do this and this and this. You come home and you start to cook, and that's all you have to do. Just start like this. And you have to iron." And all of that, you see? What have to be done. And I feel sorry, they still work hard now. She used to be like mother and sister to her. Her sister eight years old. Well, that's my fault. My second daughter, no. She never get into cook, you know, like... After she got 14 years old, I used to beg her. I say, "You have to learn, because you are woman, you are lady, and you have to know everything." She know how to sew, to cook, things like that, but not like my oldest daughter. She always say, "Let Stasha do it. Let Stasha do it."

HENSLEY: How about your other two kids? When did they start to be independent?

KARELIS: Thirteen, fourteen. I send my fourth daughter in a college back east, Garrison, New York. In a church college.

HENSLEY: How old was she then?

KARELIS: Sixteen.

HENSLEY: What were your concerns as a mother when you were sending your children away to school?

KARELIS: Oh, don't tell me. I send 'em for good. I send 'em for better.

HENSLEY: Did you miss them badly?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. But she used to come for Chirstmas, for Easter. She used to send money, and I say, "I'll meet you for Christmas, the New Year, the holiday." And go back again. Of course, money, I don't care about that. What I have that time, I have to divide it. For the best of my kids.

HENSLEY: Now that they're grown up, how often do you all get together?

KARELIS: Oh, every other Sunday.

HENSLEY: How long has your daughter been over in Greece?

KARELIS: September, it be two years. September 5. Two years.

HENSLEY: Has she been back here since she's been over there?

KARELIS: No. I've been there for two years.

HENSLEY: When did you get back from that trip?

KARELIS: I left here March 25, and I come May 27.

HENSLEY: Are you still in touch with sisters of yours?

KARELIS: Oh yes. I have a letter today, because my sister in French. Paris, French.

HENSLEY: Oh, she's in France, really?

KARELIS: I have two sisters in French.

HENSLEY: Why are they in France?

KARELIS: Because my oldest brother used to be tailor. Designer like my mother. He go to French, and they took my one sister there, after took my other sister, and son arrived in May. He's getting married on September 6, and I don't know how to be French.

HENSLEY: Do you and your sister still share problems?

KARELIS: Oh yes. And fight. Sometimes. That's life, honey. You have to.

HENSLEY: Did you get to see them when you went back to Greece?

KARELIS: No, I see one sister, because we're five sisters altogether. One here, myself, two in French, and one in Greece. I saw her. A lot of nephews, and a lot of niece.

HENSLEY: While your children were growing up, did their activities in school events lead you to meeting a lot of different people?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Tell them to be nice and all of that, but you see anybody try to be smart to you, don't talk back. Just keep away. Because you start fighting, and all of that. And then we get no place. Just fight all the time. Just keep away.

HENSLEY: So you don't argue much with anybody, Mrs. Karelis?

KARELIS: No. I don't want to get in that. For what? What you get, honey?

HENSLEY: Overall, how does your family resemble families from Greece, the way you've raised them up?

KARELIS: You don't see each other, kind of hard to tell. Because it's far away.

HENSLEY: Well how does your family now resemble maybe your family, when it was growing up?

KARELIS: They still like each other.

HENSLEY: Is it common, though, to see kids going away to school, and long relationships?

KARELIS: That's life. You have to do it.

HENSLEY: Okay. When you were first married, were you expecting anything out of married life?

KARELIS: No. The only thing, and my mother told me, is just respect your husband. I never have that kind, to say why I don't have this, why don't have this, and why don't have home, or why don't have a lot of money, no. I always used to say, "That's okay. You together, you can make it." That's right. And we did. We used to work together. I never expect my husband to be rich and to have a lot of thing, or all of that. No.

HENSLEY: How did you like married life overall? Was it a good married life?

KARELIS: Very, very, very good. Very good. You've got good husband, you've got good everything. I don't have no complaints for my marriage. No, no, no.

HENSLEY: When did you become a United States citizen, Mrs. Karelis?

KARELIS: '58. No, pardon me, '57. '53! '53, yes. In '57, I start to learn how to drive.

HENSLEY: Who taught you how to drive?

KARELIS: I go to school for that.

HENSLEY: Comparing years and periods of your life, which would you say is the best stage to be?

KARELIS: To be what?

HENSLEY: How old is the best age to be?

KARELIS: The best age a person is to be 18, 19, 20.

HENSLEY: Oh really? Why do you say that?

KARELIS: Maybe to 30, maybe 35. That's all I find myself.

HENSLEY: Why would you say 18, 19, 20?

KARELIS: Because that's about the time I used to have the best time for myself. Used to go off, and used to have a lot of friends coming into our home, and you have dances and all of that.

HENSLEY: What would you say is the worst stage to be?

KARELIS: I'm 66, and after that's the worst. I hated to be old. I don't mind to be old, I'm scared. Because I'm lonely. And I don't want to bother my children.

HENSLEY: Do you feel that much alone?

KARELIS: Oh yes. You know, a lot of people would probably say, "That's okay. I'm not just myself." A lot of people might see it like that. So I don't worry, what happen happens.

HENSLEY: When did you start having students live with you?

KARELIS: 1964.

HENSLEY: Have you had them living here every year since 1964?

KARELIS: Yeah, sure. Coming and going, you know.

HENSLEY: How do you like it?

KARELIS: I like it. Good and bad. Can't be all good, but can't be all bad. We [], and I tell 'em to go, and that's it. If you don't like it, I give you your money back, and go.

HENSLEY: What kind of arrangement do you have here? Do you just let them have kitchen privileges?

KARELIS: No, no, no, no, no. No nothing. No kitchen.

HENSLEY: What is it?

KARELIS: Just, you know, stay and sleep. That's all. Nothing else. No bodies, no making fun, nothing. And somebody try to be smart and have music upstairs and all of that, I tell them in a nice way, "I'm sorry. I explain to you to be good. So you don't like it, please move. This is the rule."

HENSLEY: How much do you charge them?

KARELIS: \$80. Not really much. How much you pay?

HENSLEY: Oh my gosh.

KARELIS: No, really.

HENSLEY: I pay 110, but I have another roommate. For a two-bedroom, it's 210.

KARELIS: You got kitchen too?

HENSLEY: Uh huh.

KARELIS: So you can make \$50 more. 55.

HENSLEY: No. Over 80? That would be \$120 more, \$130 more. But that's a whole bedroom more.

KARELIS: Oh, I thought you divide that 110.

HENSLEY: Yeah, we do. So I just pay \$30 more than they do here. Since you've been here in the United States, has there been any real main turning points in your life, like the death of your husband or selling a restaurant?

KARELIS: No.

HENSLEY: Did the Depression affect your family? Well, you got here really late. So then war had started.

KARELIS: To be honest, I never been that poor. I never say I don't have nothing to cook, or I can't pay the rent. I always look how I can make it. So really, I never have tough. I have tough time, because I lost my husband. I lost myself. I lost my husband, and I lost myself. But I have four kids, and my children need me that time, more than ever before. All the little one. All through school. I say God help me, and that's it.

HENSLEY: Why do you say lost yourself?

KARELIS: Because, yes, you lose yourself. Sure. You don't know what side to go off. It takes you a little while.

HENSLEY: Did you have any help from anyone as soon as your husband died?

KARELIS: No. My children. I don't have no help from nobody. My kids and myself.

HENSLEY: When did you move into this home?

KARELIS: 1944. 1964.

HENSLEY: It's beautiful.

KARELIS: All I have to do, I sold my other home, big home. We don't have rooms to rent nothing, so I say, I have to do something. And I did. You have to work, sweetheart. But like I say, don't be scared. Pray to God and don't be scared, and you can make it. Don't be scared to work. That's my advice.

HENSLEY: Are there any government programs that you particularly enjoy having, that you've taken part of since you've been here?

KARELIS: I don't want to take it.

HENSLEY: What do you think of the union?

KARELIS: On the one side, it's good, on the other side, I don't.

HENSLEY: Why do you not think it's so good?

KARELIS: It's good. The union is good. One side. Another side, I don't know. You know, because a lot of people want more and more and more and more. And getting strikes and stuff is no good.

HENSLEY: Have you ever taken part in a strike?

KARELIS: Oh yes.

HENSLEY: How did you feel during that?

KARELIS: It's okay.

HENSLEY: How long did the strike last? When was it?

KARELIS: Before last year. About three years ago, in the cannery.

HENSLEY: Why were you striking?

KARELIS: Because want more money.

HENSLEY: Did you get it?

KARELIS: Yeah. We usually get five and a quarter. Now we got seven. That's not right, because everybody have to work for two shift now. Why don't you put three shift and put everybody to work? A lot of women, a lot of people need to work. And everybody looking for work. You could just hire seniority and people for ten hours, and the rest, women and the rest people waiting down there in line, that's hurting. I don't like that.

HENSLEY: Have you ever gone and taken part in the union meetings, and talked to them about that?

KARELIS: Oh yes. Oh yes. Many time. Many time.

HENSLEY: Do you think you influenced them to change?

KARELIS: O no, honey. No. That people never care what you say or all of that. They're very strong. Very, very unusual. It's too bad, because a lot of people want to work. And we as group, I have to tell the company to put three shifts. Put some more people to work. Not ten hours. We have two shifts for ten hours. I don't know. Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know.

HENSLEY: Have you heard of the women's liberation movement?

KARELIS: That's okay. Nothing wrong. I like it.

HENSLEY: You like it?

KARELIS: I like it, yes.

HENSLEY: Do you think women should be assertive, and as influential as men?

KARELIS: Yes, yes. Nothing wrong. Oh, I can lead men and push you around, and for what? No, I don't like, you know... I like things to be 50/50. That's what I believe.

HENSLEY: Does it bother you to see a woman who will let a man push her around?

KARELIS: Yes. If somebody tried to push you or tried to put you down and all of that, no. Give it. Oh yes. I don't like to be pushed, uh-uh. I never push nobody. I don't like nobody to push me. I teach my children a lot. Oh yes, I like that. Very much so.

HENSLEY: Do you vote, Mrs. Karelis?

KARELIS: Yes I do.

HENSLEY: Do you keep up with American politics?

KARELIS: I have to. I don't have much experience, but I try my best.

[End of Tape]