

Narrator: Annette Simpkins, nee Vartanian
Interviewer: Tina M. Young
Date and Place: Interviewed on 26 Nov 01, at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] kitchen.

Tina M. Young: This is Tina Young, conducting an interview with Annette Simpkins, maiden name Vartanian, at her home in her kitchen, on [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] It's the 28th of November?...

Annette Simpkins: [interrupting to correct] ...26th...

Young: ...26th of November, I'm losing the month. It's the 26th of November, 2001. This is tape one, side one. Let me situate the [referring to tape recorder on table] and, could you please state and spell your name for the tape please.

Simpkins: Okay, Annette Simpkins, S-i-m-p-k-i-n-s.

Young: Okay, thank you. Okay, well the first question I'm going to ask is what is your connection to Lincoln Place?

Simpkins: I was born and raised down there, my parents came over here from the old country, and I'm a first generation.

Young: First generation...[repeating] And how long did you, personally, live down there?

Simpkins: 'Till I was twenty years old, and got married, then I moved back when my husband went over seas for another year and a half and then I, we moved out. My parents moved out in '53.

Young: Oh so your parents moved out of the neighborhood as well, then?

Simpkins: Also, yes.

Young: Okay, where exactly from Armenia, what, what particular village name, or...

Simpkins: Yes, Betlis, B-e-t-l-i-s, I think, or something very similar

to that. Both my parents are from the same, same town, I guess you could say, province, or whatever they call them.

Young: Were they married before they came over?

Simpkins: No, no. No, my father came over here in 1905, and my mother came over in 1908. And my mother was twelve years, when she come over, and they got married, I guess, immediately, I don't know, truthfully speaking. And she was very young.

Young: [repeating] Very young...

Simpkins: My dad several years older than her.

Young: Now, you've mentioned the name of the, the village. There was a coffee shop down there with a very similar name. Was it named after that village, or...it was called Bitole, or...Bitole coffee house...or maybe that's the one in Madison, but I, I, I heard someone say that a lot of times the coffee houses were named after the village.

Simpkins: It could be...we had a couple down there, but I don't remember the names of them.

Young: And then you lived right on Niedringhaus, the main little strip there?

Simpkins: Main street, when I moved, when I was born and it was, excuse me, Pacific Avenue, and then they changed it to Niedringhaus. Oh, when, I think before WWII started.

Young: [repeating] WWII... Because I, I, a couple of people have mentioned to me that, that one of the reasons they changed the name was after the basketball team won the championship, and then sometimes people say no, no, it was before...

Simpkins: It was right around the same time, but exactly, I don't know

when. And, in fact, I didn't know this until, when we had this first meeting, somebody mentioned it, and, they brought up the championship, so I'm sure something, that had, something had to do with that, I think, I'm not sure.

Young: You were, you were just a little-bitty thing at the time, but Mrs., Miss Prather...

Simpkins: [interrupts to correct pronunciation] Prather...

Young: Prather...I always want to call her Prather because I went to school with a Prather...

Simpkins: Yes...Prather.

Young: Prather. She died in 1936, so you were just little-bitty, do you have, do you remember her?

Simpkins: I remember, I remember but faintly, but I remember the name...because she was always such a dominant being in that community.

Young: Yes, she sound like she had a lot of influence...

Simpkins: Very, she was good for the people down there, she helped them a lot, yes.

Young: Almost like a motherly kind of figure...strong...matriarch kind of... What kind of businesses do you remember down there when you were a kid?

Simpkins: What kind of businesses... Well, I know there was one or two restaurants throughout the time. There were taverns, of course, there was a pool hall, there were coffee houses, ice cream parlor...trying to think...cleaners, dry cleaners...there use to be a fabric store right on Niedringhaus...trying to think, Shepasheeds [spelled phonetically], I think was the name of it, Shepasheeds [phonetic], maybe I could be

wrong. I'm trying to think what else there was down there...church, a Baptist church while I was growing up, that little mission, missionary-like. I guess that's it. And American Steel Foundries, Granite, Commonwealth, they were surrounding us, like, you know. And then they built the depot.

Young: Did the depot help out, I mean, as far as, as employment, or anything...

Simpkins: Oh yes, yes. It helped in every aspect, I guess, employment, financially and every which way. It kind of put the little on the map, you know, before that nobody knew much about Granite City, but after the depot came it was a big help.

Young: Now, I noticed on you Bio sheet that you filled out, that you worked down there?

Simpkins: Yes...I started there in '49, and, it's really strange, I think I worked there less than a year and they moved our whole office over to St. Louis, and I, I thought, "God, I use to be able to walk to work." I was five blocks from the entrance to the depot, and here I'm going, have to go to St. Louis to go to work. I was very aggravated with that, and the, I come to realize much later that the office I was with was really not part of the depot, it was actually from Washington. The see, and it was just, renting, more or less, a space down there, and then they, they got bigger and they moved over to St. Louis. And it stayed there and it changed names a hundred times...

Young: [Laughter]

Simpkins: ...and location, too.

Young: Now when you were a kid, hanging out in the neighborhood, did

you, did you, was it a part of your life to know, okay, these, these are Armenians, and these over here are Macedonians, and, did you, I mean, how was it growing up in a neighborhood that was kind of, quite diverse, it sounds like?

Simpkins: We had a mixture of everything down there, I think. And we just grew up knowing who they were, you know, I mean, it wasn't like, you know, those are Macedonians there, or those are Mexicans, or, we grew up knowing what they were...how, I don't know, it, we just grew up knowing it. And I think we had a little bit of almost every nationality there was down there. Well, you know, I mean, I know we had a Greek family, we had some Germans, and we had a couple Polish people and we had Hungarians and Macedonians, and we had Bulgarians, and we had Armenians, Mexican. And there may have been a few others, too...[laughter], I'm not aware of, you know, but those were the major ones. There was a lot of them, too.

Young: Did you, now did your dad work at one of steel mills down there? Is that what his job was, or...

Simpkins: When I was growing up, and I was a child, my father was a food peddler. He had a truck, years ago he had a truck with a horse, then later on he had a truck, you know what I mean, or, or a wagon with a horse, then he had a truck. And he use to go up and down streets selling fruit and vegetables, we went all over Granite City, because I use to have to go with him. And he also worked at the Commonwealth, and we also had a tavern. But my father also opened the first theater in Granite City, right down in Lincoln Place, like catty-corner from American Steel, there's nothing there now, it's an empty lot. But there

use to be a three story building there, and he had his theater there, my father use to also have, he'd direct plays, Armenian plays. My father ventured into a lot of things [laughing] I guess.

Young; Entrepreneurial, kind of...

Simpkins: Never did made any money at it, but he, he tried everything out, yes.

Young: "A" for effort...[laughter]

Simpkins: Yes, that's true.

Young: Well that must have been neat, having the movie theater right in the neighborhood.

Simpkins: Well, that was before my time.

Young: Oh really?

Simpkins: That was before my time, yes. I remember my father, we had pictures when I was a kid, they were downstairs in the basement, and, and all four of my sisters, it was like a play he had produced. And all four of my sisters were in this play, along with others, and they had uniforms on like they were soldiers. And, and then there was another one, and I can't remember what it was, I think one was of my sister, oldest sister, playing the violin, and then another one was of her doing a, a, like a rhumba-type dance. And, I, I don't know what happened to those pictures, I think my older sister finally threw them out. I was very disappointed with them, went looking for them, and I couldn't find them.

Young: It's hard to keep track of that kind of stuff. It is.

Simpkins: She, she didn't want to keep all that old stuff, you know, she didn't like it, so...too bad

Young: Yes...I'm just the opposite, I like to covet that stuff...

Simpkins: Yes, some of that stuff, I mean, I know she got rid of lot of my mother's old dishes, and things like that, that she didn't want anymore, but I'm sorry, I would have loved to have had them, you know, I've got a few pieces, but not many.

Young: Well, they're heirlooms, stuff to pass down.

Simpkins: Yes.

Young: Now, did you grow up, it seemed like everybody seems to have kept quite a bit of the language, as far as you grow up speaking Armenian, and speaking that in the home...

Simpkins: Yes.

Young: Did you pass that down to your kids, then, to speak Armenian?

Simpkins: Unfortunately, I didn't. I wish now I would have, and my kids wish I would have, but my husband, at the time, didn't think it would be wise, trying to teach them two languages, you know the American and Armenian. So, I, unfortunately listened to him, and didn't teach them, and I'm very, very sorry for it, I really am, yes.

Young: Did, and I've been asking everybody this, basically, just was there anything in particular that your parents passed down to you as far as, I mean, not necessarily objects, but, as far as the idea of what your, your culture meant? [Simpkins phone begins ringing, tape is stopped and restarted]

Young: Okay, we're back...no, what I was asking was, was there anything in particular about your heritage that your parents expressed to you that was important? Or wanted to teach you, or tell you about your heritage as far as being Armenian, and what that might mean, or was it

just...?

Simpkins: It was just, they'd never, I mean it was accepted, you know, my dad, my father insisted we speak Armenian in the home, and everything was traditional Armenian, our food, you know, things like that. My father only had his mother and one brother and one sister, and the mother died before, I think, I was born, so I didn't learn anything from them. My aunt moved to California, I met her once in my life, and I was a child when I did, about eight-ten years old. I don't remember much about her. My uncle, I don't remember him at all, he moved away when I was very little, they went to New York. So, I was like, one on each coast and one in the middle, and I never grew up with family. All my sisters were, one was twenty years older than, older than me, and the youngest was fourteen years older than me, so, I didn't even grow up surrounded with my sisters because they were older than me.

Young: Your dad's first wife, then, I would imagine, or...?

Simpkins: No, no. No, he only had one wife.

Young: Oh!

Simpkins: My mother.

Young: Boy, she spaced them, then...

Simpkins: No, I, I think she had several miscarriages in between myself and the sister above me. But, then, I think it's almost like every two years...and then she had, had several miscarriages, and then I came along, another girl.

Young: So it was all girls...

Simpkins: All girls...big disappointment, I'm sure.

Young: Ah...[shaking head and smiling to disagree]

Simpkins: Yes, nobody to carry on the name.

Young: That's too bad that's emphasized...

Simpkins: Yes.

Young: So, food seems to a big...

Simpkins: Yes, we love our food...

Young: Yes, I mean, I'm hearing, you know, that's, that's a big part of identity, you know, this is what we make. What, what was your favorite types of dishes?

Simpkins: It's hard to say, I liked them all [both laughing]...

Young: Yes, me too..

Simpkins: One of our traditions, of course, like a Sunday meal, always consisted of chicken, and pilaf, which is the rice dish, and salad, I mean, and the, if you went to, if you got fresh bread at the bakery, Chris's bakery, that was, that was your meal. That, we'd make stuffed peppers, we'd make stuffed cabbages, we'd make...a round ball that has a, it's meat, and it has a filling in it of parsley and onions and ground up meat real fine, and everything, it's all very tasty. We don't make, we have pastries, but, one of them is Paklava, which, of course, the Greeks make, and the Syrians and the Lebanese, they all make it, and they call it Baklava, with a "B". And then we make a Bedeg, which is the fila dough with the cheese filling, or the spinach and cheese filling, which is also very good. In fact, I have some for you. [Yummy noises from interviewer] And Kafta, which is like a bread, and is has the consistency, it's a soft bread, but it had, we put a butter filling in it. And those are our three main desserts, really. And, out of all of them the bread-type one is my, very favorite. I think you'll find

most people say it is their favorite, and then the Bedeg and Paklava comes last, it's a little sweet.

Young: Yes, that Paklava is very sweet.

Simpkins: Yes, my mother was a very good cook. She seasoned her food very well, you didn't have to go along and season with a lot of extra salt and pepper later, you know.

Young: Now going to, let's say, the, the, you went to Washington School, then the junior high, and then high school... Because you were a part of Lincoln Place, you know, part of this, this very specific neighborhood...

Simpkins: We were shunned...

Young: Really? Because that's, that's kind of what I'm hearing...

Simpkins: Yes, we were. Not so much in, at Washington School. And not even too bad at, in junior high, Central School. But when we got to high school, is when we felt the blunt of it. And it was bad, it really and truly was. They, they made you feel like an outsider, and one or two of them got along okay because, like Andy Phillips who was a big basketball player, or Andrew Hagopian, you know, or some of them that, oh, I don't know, they were noted for a sport of some kind. And they were more or less accepted, but if you didn't have any of those quali-, qualifications, you know, you were shunned. And I remember our gym teacher, she was a horrible woman, and she really made, she picked on us...people from Lincoln Place...a lot.

Young: I'm just, it makes no sense why people would do that, you know...

Simpkins: I know, but she was bad, she was very...she was, she was a

bad person, a mean person, she really was. I could give her name, but it wouldn't do any good, you know, [laughter]

Young: I've one or two teachers in my time... Now were those guys, Phillips, that sounds familiar, was he on that basketball team...

Simpkins: [talking over end of last sentence] Andy Phillips...on the...yes...he was a star. That's when they had something a couple of weeks ago, where they, they, made a memorial out here and they donated, I think, in his name, if I'm not mistaken. Yes...Andy Phillips.

Young: How big of a part did the Community Center play in the neighborhood...was that like the focal point of, of the community?

Simpkins: That was it, yes. Everybody congregated there, your parents would send you to the Community Center. You learned from Miss Prather and the others that came along after her. We went there, every summer we had Bible school. They taught us the Bible, they taught the girls how to embroidery, and how to different things. They taught the boys how to do things. They even had women that came in and, or men, or whatever, and taught you, if you wanted to learn how to play the piano they gave you lessons and all that. Of course, my, I never could grasp it, I tried, but I couldn't grasp it. [phone begins ringing again, tape stops and then restarts] I guess that, unfortunately, I never learned how to play the piano, but a lot of them did, they had visited a lot. And, I remember every Sunday we had Sunday school, and we'd all go there at the club house, and there were two women that came down, one would lead us in singing and devotional, the other one played a piano. And they came every Sunday, and that was our only means of church, unless, I guess, some of the Catholics walked downtown and went to Catholic

church. But the rest of us, all of us, went to the Sunday school on Sunday mornings.

Young: So they didn't have a, didn't have a specific Armenian church down there at the time.

Simpkins: Not at that time. You know, it, we were there winter time and summer time. I mean, winter time we'd play basketball, we did all kind of sports on the inside, whatever it was, I can't remember, but we did everything. We'd sew, we'd embroidery, we just played, we played school, we played, you know, this or that, we'd write right on the chalk board. Summer time, we'd play soft ball, you know, and baseball, and they had swings, and, I don't know we just occupied ourselves at the club house. There was always something going on where could do something.

Young: That's good for the kids...

Simpkins: It was, it was. It was wonderful.

Young: A lot of kids have nowhere to go and nothing to do these days, or they seem like they don't.

Simpkins: Yes, I wish they, I know it's still there, and it's run by the I think the YMCA, or the Park Board, be in the Park Board. But it doesn't have the activities they did when we were younger. There was always somebody there to help you, to do something for you, to, you know, to help you find something to do. I can even remember when I was a teenager they'd, they'd have movies on Saturday night, they'd bring movies in, and everybody would sit around on the floor, or on chairs, and watch a movie. Even the parents would come.

Young: What kind of role did the, the Baptist mission play in the neighborhood?

Simpkins: The Baptist mission kind of took over when the Sunday school stopped at, on Sundays at the club house. We called it the club house, Community Center. It, again, Miss Lambert was a, she was an influence on all of the young children at that time. She was a very strong-willed woman. She had a heart of gold, she was a go-getter, and she never gave up, she kept after you and after and after you. And, again, all of us went to, it didn't make any difference if you're a Mexican, Armenian, Macedonian, Hungarian...we all went.

Young: I'm kind of at a loss as, as why they, I don't understand why there would have been a, someone would have...why there was a Baptist mission there, I mean, you know...

Simpkins: I don't know. I don't know.

Young: Because it just, it kind of struck me as odd...I don't know...it sounds like it was good, but, for the neighborhood, but I was thinking...

Simpkins: I think it's because we had nothing down there at the time. There was no kind of church, or Sunday school, or anything going on, and she came in, I mean, she, she had the work cut out for her. Because it was hard to get a lot of those people to go, but we went. And our parents encouraged us to go, most of us, you know. Even the Catholics went. I remember a lot of the Mexicans, they're all Catholic, you know, they all, they would go. We all did, she was a, she gave you a lot of inspiration. She was a, she was a good woman, she really was.

Young: Her name was Miss Lampert?

Simpkins: Lambert.

Young: Lambert. [nodding]

Simpkins: Yes, Helen Lambert, when, her nephew, at one time sold real estate here in town. In fact, that's who I bought my house off of, he was the realtor. Can't remember his first name, though. But I remember her...[laughter]...it's a sign of old age.

Young: [pause in narrative] I'm trying to phrase my question here...[laughter]...silences aren't bad... Did your parents ever tell you any particular stories, or anything, about how, when they came over here, or how they came over here, or anything in, you know, anything that struck them, anything they passed down, anything funny old stories about...

Simpkins: No, I know, I think my father went to England first, and then he came over here. And most of them landed in, I guess, around Providence, or somewhere. Why he stayed in this part of the country is beyond me, except there was a community here with foreign people, and the, the steel mill. That's the only thing I could figure out. But I couldn't remember, I can't remember, he never talked much about it. I know one time he went to California with the intention of looking around to, to move out there, and he come back and we never did move. We were all very disappointed. [laughter] No, nothing was said, I, I do remember my mother talking about coming over here. Her parents let her come over here because they thought she would have a better life over here. And, she came from a, not wealthy-wealthy family, but a, a fairly wealthy, I guess you could say. Her brothers were all educated, and all, so, my mother was intelligent, but she never go to finish school,

you know. And, I remember her saying how if her mother had known what a hard life she was going to have over here she would never sent her over here, you know. And she said her brothers were all blond, blue-eyed, I remember that, that's one of the things I remember her telling me. But my mother, when she came over here, she didn't know how to do anything. And she ended up being a fantastic cook, she made clothes for all of her children, all of her girls, hand made their dresses, smocked the, in those days, washed cloths by hand, I guess, until they ended up with the washing machine. Cooked with the, I guess, the wood stove, and all that, you know, her life was not easy it was very hard.

Young: You know, house work back in those days was...

Simpkins: ...terrible...

Young: ...I couldn't do it...[laughter] ...I would just set a match to it and walk away...

Simpkins: That's one reason I swore, I would never have a home that had venetian blinds. Because we had them when I was growing up, and I hated them, because I had to clean them, and I swore I would never have venetian blinds. I'd put a sheet over my window before I'd get another set of venetian blinds. No, I can't remember, my parents, I guess you could say they were pretty close-mouthed, they didn't have too much to say.

Young: Now...

Simpkins: My, my sisters knew more than I did. But, see, my sisters were all close, they were closer then. When I come along, I was like an outsider. So, they had discussed everything through the years, and I was left out. And a lot of the things that I have learned have come

from my sisters, hearing them talk about it through the, oh maybe the last twenty years, or so, you know.

[tape stops and then starts again]

Simpkins: When I was growing up I use to go with my father every day on his truck to peddle vegetables and fruit. And we'd come home at noon for lunch and then we'd leave again and I use to cry because all my friends were out playing at the club house. And here I was having to go with my father, selling fruits and vegetables. I didn't find it degrading, I was upset because I couldn't play. And one, I remember, as soon as we came home I took off for the club house. Well, and my dad got through eating lunch and he couldn't find me, he came up to the club house, up through the alley of course, and spanked me, and off we went down the road, you know, through the alley, and I'm crying and he says, "If you cry , I'm going to hit you." And the more he said that, the more I cried. And the, he, but he never hit me again, but he'd threaten me. And my father's threats were worse than his actual bite, I guess you could say. My father was a strong-willed man, he never had to repeat anything twice. He, he said once, the second time he looked at you and that was it. Another incident, oh, I got a couple of incidents...another one was, I was tiny baby when this happened. But my sister, I, my oldest sister, I remember her talking about it...during the depression my father was a boot-legger. And he made liquor in the basement, but you had to go through the living room, push the carpet back, open the trap door, and go down into this one area of the basement. Now, if you went in from the outside and went down in the basement, you didn't know that there was another room behind that back

wall. But, anyway, he, he was, of course, I, like I said I was young and I didn't know this, he was a boot legger. And one day my sister was work, she worked at the bank in Granite City, Granite City Trust and Savings Bank, and she was walking home from work and she saw all this crowd of people in front of our house. And she saw that it was the FBI [laughter] so she said she pretended she didn't even know, she just kept right on walking, you know, [both laughing], but they were there arresting my father for boot legging. But I'd stop and think about it and, I, you know, I'd think my God...what would we have done if it was in this day and age, you know. And another incident was when my father, this is during WWII, my father was going to the City Hall to, you know, I want to say something, in those days, you had to, you did whatever you did to survive and to take care of your family, and people always wanted liquor, I guess, I don't know, so, my father made it and sold it.

Young: Oh, there were so many boot leggers in this country because, you know, the FBI were drinking it too...

Simpkins: Oh yeah...[laughter from both] But anyway, my father was going to go up to the City Hall to get his citizenship papers, and he thought it would be a good idea that I went with him and spoke up for him. So, I went with him, I was, I don't know, twelve-thirteen years old. And the judge asked me a few a questions and he says, "What do you speak at home?" And I said, "Oh my father don't let us speak anything but Armenian." Well, needless to say my father didn't get his citizenship papers, and he chased me all the way home...you know, I'm crying and, oh I wasn't crying, but I was frightened because he was so angry, and I practically ran from the City Hall, this is the old City

Hall on Niedringhaus...well, it's still there, what am I saying the old one, it's still there...all the way down into Lincoln Place. And that night at supper, when my sisters found out what had happened, they were hysterical, they were laughing. And when we all sat down to supper, they were trying to tease with my father, and, and he wasn't an easy man to tease with, and he, when he thought about it he glared at me, and he started to get up, and I remember I jumped up out of my chair and ran out of the room again. I was scared to death of my father. He was a very domineering man.

Young: Well he had been in the, the country since, what, 19-..

Simpkins: 1908...

Young: 1908? And he...

Simpkins: No, 1905.

Young: 1905? And, did he ever get his citizenship papers?

Simpkins: Oh yes, he got it...[both laughing]

Young: I was about to say, I...

Simpkins: Yes, he got it a few years later... But it was just the idea, you know, he says, "Why did you say something like that!" Well, the man asked me, you know...

Young: It's like, dad, you should have warned me if you wanted me to lie! [laughter]

Simpkins: Yeah, really!

Young: [long pause of silence] I noticed your mom's name, the first name, how do you pronounce that?

Simpkins: Biazar.

Young: Biazar...[Simpkins nods in agreement]

Simpkins: Biazar.

Young: And then your father's is...

Simpkins: Aranos...

Young: Aranos...[Simpkins nods in agreement] Okay, so you lived there until you were married, we were talking about...where did you meet your husband?

Simpkins: He was stationed out at the depot. Let me say that my family, I don't know when they moved to the house on Niedringhaus but, before that they lived on a house on Maple street, behind Louie's Market, it use to be Kirchoff's Market, then it was Lui's, but of course this was before I was born. And, I remember, we must have lived, my family, must have lived on the lower level, and I think my uncle and his son lived, and maybe his wife, on the floor above us. But, see, I don't remember them...none of them. Now what was, what did you ask me?

Young: Oh, I was just, I was wondering where you had met your husband, I was going maybe even guess that it was...

Simpkins: He was stationed out at the depot, and I worked out there, and my dad had a tavern at the time, and he, I'd help out once in a while in the evening, and he came in and that's where I met him...unfortunately...[both laughter]

Young: Oh well...

Simpkins: Yeah...he was from West Virginia. He lives, he's still around the area, he lives in Belleville now. In fact, he just moved to Swansea, and the children have always stayed in touch with him.

Young: Now, a lot of people grew up speaking the language, do you know how to write the language as well? Or...

Simpkins: No. I never learned how to read or write, I could speak it, and I'm not the best, far from it, but I do speak it. And, I think the reason is that when my sisters were younger, they were forced to learn how to read and write and speak. They all spoke beautifully. I think my oldest sister Mabel remembered how to read and write, but probably passed through the years, but when I came along my father kind of eased up a little bit and he wasn't quite as stern as he was with them, and we, like I said, we had to speak it, but, and I went to Armenian school several times, but I never, the teachers would get, I guess they got exasperated, or whatever, and they wouldn't last long, you know, so... because they were donating their time and everything.

Young: Well I, I, Nelle Bogosian had mentioned the, the Armenian school...was that just extra, outside of your regular school work, or that was just to reinforce...

Simpkins: Yes, they had to have it in the evenings and, yes, different ones would teach, and they'd last for a, a couple of months, or better, and then they'd stop, you know, and then somebody else would start it up again, and, in fact we've got it going on at our church now, kind of get the younger kids, because most of the fellows and girls are married to odars (spell ?) as they call them. I don't know if you've heard that word, or not, odars, that means "other than Armenians," foreigner-like, you know. We'd call them a foreigner, and yet, we're, to the Armenians, that's what it is. Anyway, they, they have children, and most of them want their children to learn the language, so they, they do have Armenian school now. They've had it for the last few years. Sometimes they get good participation, other times they don't. It's hard to find

somebody to, to, in the younger group that can really read and write and speak Armenian. There are a few that are really, really good at it, but...it's hard to get...

Young: It takes a lot of commitment to do that.

Simpkins: It does, and you, you can't, the kids have to really be interested, if they're not interested then it's no good, you know.

Young: Have you ever been to Armenia? Have you ever traveled there?

Simpkins: No.

Young: Because I know a lot of people have traveled back...

Simpkins: No... Yes I spent seven years in Germany, working, but I traveled all over, but I never went to Armenia, they had no, I don't know if I could have even gone. I don't know if there were any tours. it was a communistic country at the time. Although they did have a few tours to Russia, but that was like to Moscow, you know, so and Armenia is pretty far from there. We had tours to Turkey, in fact, I took a tour to Turkey, and to Istanbul, and Armenia is north of there. So, north...? North, I'm trying to think, Armenia is here [gesturing with hands on table] so, that would be...yes, north, I guess, would be right. I'm trying to think it was northwest, or northeast, but I, I don't, it doesn't really make that much difference. No, I didn't, but my, I had some relatives that come down to visit us, oh, back in the late '60s and early '70s. My mother's brother, the one she just found out was still alive, I guess, after the genocide. He finally got in touch with her, somebody told her he had put an ad in one of the Armenian papers, and they corresponded.

Young: Because she got out of the country before that happened...

Simpkins: Yes, right.

Young: Did she lose a lot of her family then...?

Simpkins: She lost all of them, probably, except the one brother. And she never got to see him again, even though she wanted to, but his son, who's, who runs a cancer clinic in Moscow, he came to the States, he and his wife. They traveled all over, visiting different relatives and, not so much, my cousins, as his wife's relatives. But they stopped here, and they spent a week, or so, here. And then later on, his wife came back for another visit.

Young: Are you involved in the, like the, Armenian Relief Society, is that what it's called? Armenian Relief Society?

Simpkins: Yes... No.

Young: Because I didn't know what kind of work they did over there, I didn't know...

Simpkins: Nelle Bogosian belongs to it, a lot of them do. And, I was, through the years, I was never involved with this church. I mean, I rarely went to church. And, I use to go to the church in Belleville, or East St. Louis, wherever it was, and, I then I went to Germany, when I come back, I decided to join the church, so I joined this one because it's close to me, rather than going over there. And I've become very active in it, but I've never joined in any organizations. I've had, I've had bad experiences joining groups of women, and it's too much...
[making a face]

Young: Amen to that one! [laughter]

Simpkins: Yes, too much politicking going on, and too much hassling over stupid things. So, what I've always told them is, I'll help you

any way I can, but I just don't want to belong to the organization. They have a ladies guild, and they have the ARF, Armenian Relief Society, I guess is what it is...which is like the Red Cross, I guess you could say. And, whenever they have a function, I always bake, or whatever, and donate, but I won't join.

Young: Yes...it tests your patience...

Simpkins: Well none of it, a lot of it is political, and I try to stay out of the political end of it. I've tried, I've told them all that from the very beginning, there's too much politics and I don't want to be involved in that part of it.

Young: I, I would have to agree with you. [laughter]

Simpkins: Yes, it can get bad.

Young: Well then you, you lose sight of what you're actually trying to do, and it becomes unpleasant. Instead of, you know, what it's set up to do.

Simpkins: Right.

Young: [talking to self] Make sure I have enough...here, I'll maybe stop this real quick...[end of tape 1, side A]

[Beginning of tape 1, side B]

Young: This is Tina Young interviewing Annette Simpkins, on the 26th of November, 2001, tape one, side two. Right before I started this, you were talking about how safe you felt in the neighborhood as far as it, it was, it seemed like a very safe place.

Simpkins: It was safe. We could leave the house without locking the doors, we didn't have to worry about locking our windows. We could stay out playing, as long as our parents would let us at night, we'd played

hide and go seek, and the girls and boys, and ten-twelve year olds, you know, in those days things were a lot different than they are now. And we had a good time, and there was a comradeship, or whatever you want...comaraderie, is it, amongst the people.

Young: Comaraderie, something like that?

Simpkins: Something like that, amongst the kids growing up, I mean, there were the Armenians, and the Macedonians, and the Hungarians, and the Mexicans, we all played together, and we felt safe with one another.

Young: Hanging out with all these kids from different backgrounds, did you, did you feel like you were learning something from them, from their, you know, being exposed to something different [clears throat], excuse me, different, like food, or, you know, or thinking "oh, that's different," or was it just...

Simpkins: No...[laughter] The only thing I remember is, I loved Mexican tortilla. It's the first time I had, you know, first time I ever ate one was when the people rented from my father, and she used to sit, be down on her hands and knees, cooking a tortilla over a, on the, like a flat rock, or something, on the low grill, like. I hadn't, I couldn't figure out what it was, you know, I had never seen anything like that. And I remember this one Hungarian guy, he was always talking about they lived in their basement and they ate, they'd have soup all the time, because that was the cheapest. I mean, things like that, you know, nothing specific. We all grew up eating our own type of food, and we didn't really discuss...and I guess our foods are really similar, you know. But I remember that when I was growing up, this one Hungarian woman, who, who was a friend of my sister's, her mother use to make the

most beautiful donuts you ever saw in your life. And she'd bring them over, hot from the kitchen, you know, powdered sugar donuts. God, they were good. But, and some of the women made different pastries and stuff, sometimes we were lucky and got some, you know. I remember when they had the, the first, we had two, or three bakeries in those days, and then they dwindled down to just one. But, I can remember when they opened up a donut shop, which ended up being Busy Bee and moving to Madison, you know, but we use to stand outside that little hole in the wall and smell them cook, smell and watch them cooking donuts, you know, glazed donuts. Yes, yes, a lot of things going on. Sim's pool hall was popular spot for all the fellows, and you felt safe, you know, you could walk up and down the street anytime of the day or night and you never had to worry about anything. Until after WWII, then things changed.

Young: Things changed... Was there anything specific about the neighborhood that you, you missed when you moved out, other than...

Simpkins: I missed, well, I think television had a lot to do with it. We used to, you know, my mother, I used to go with my mother and we'd go visit people in their homes for the evening, you know, we'd sit and it's, it was somebody that had children my age it was fine, you know, I got to play with them, if it wasn't, I sit and I played with a deck of cards, or something. But we go, and we visited. You don't do that anymore. The other things, we'd sit out in the yard, and the neighbors would come by and, you know, you'd chit-chat, people walked in those days, up and down. So, if we were sitting in our front yard, we could see everybody walking, if they were going to town, or coming back from town, and people stopped and chit-chatted, you know, and they'd come

over and I remember my mother used to go in the basement, bring up a jar of fruit that she had canned, you know, and... But the thing I miss most is visiting with people. How we used to sit, go to one another's homes and visit. And we'd sit around and listen to the radio, and the good stories, you know, they'd have. I miss that a lot.

Young: Yes, because, like my neighborhood, for instance, I, I don't really know my neighbors.

Simpkins: Well, that's it, most people don't know their neighbors.

Young: And that's a shame, because that's, that'd be nice to have that kind of open feeling where, you know, everybody knows one another, and you can visit and...

Simpkins: Like on this block, I've been living here since they built these homes in 1954. The only ones I really know are the ones that moved here when I did. You know, and the people that have come in since then, I don't know who they are, because you don't get out, you don't visit, you know. I miss the old days, I really do, I miss how we grew up in Lincoln Place. The closeness that was there, and the goodness and how, I think, it, it made better people of us. I really do. I wish my children could have experienced it, and I think they would have benefitted whole-heartedly from it.

Young: You know, one of the guys I interviewed, he, he's probably about the same age as your kids...that's, he remarked on that, he, he felt he was very lucky to have grown up...

Simpkins: Was that Evelyn's son?

Young: Yes.

Simpkins: And yet, he was a lot younger. But he was lucky that he grew

up in Lincoln Place, yes.

Young: Because he got to experience it, even though it was changing, you know, and people were moving away at the time, he still got to experience that, and that's still with him very much.

Simpkins: Yes, it is. I, because even now we can reminisce, you know. One of my best friends, of course we weren't friends then because she was a few years older than me, you know, and they didn't hang around with young kids, but they lived like one house over from us. And her father had a tavern, and I had, my dad had a tavern, and we were, like competitors, you know, and I could remember seeing her cross the street, she was built like a million bucks, you know, and I used to be so envious of her build, you know, and she was a good dancer, and everything. God, I used to, and then she used to across the street and then I's see this young fellah and his sister and I felt sorry for them because their, they didn't have a mother and the father was so mean to them. And, good looking guy, and she was a real doll, and they went, he went to WWII, he was killed. She left, eventually, and she died a few ago of cancer, so, you know, I, I, I just remember things like that. Like the woman that, whose wake I went to today. I grew up with her, her mother and my mother good friends, used to go one another's home, you know, I've known Sue all my life. I saw her sister today for the first time in fifty years, maybe. She came down from, for the funeral. It's sad. People drift away...can't wait to get out, and then when, when they're gone they wish they were back.

Young: Yes...

Simpkins: I wish things were like they were forty-fifty years ago,

believe me. I didn't appreciate it then, but I do now.

Young: Well one thing, you got to experience something like that, because I don't most people get to experience a neighborhood like that.

Simpkins: No...they don't. I think in certain communities, maybe, you know, like East St. Louis had a, a community of Armenians there, but they were scattered around, they weren't as close knit as we were. We were on the other side of the tracks, and that's speaking truthfully, we are on, we were on the other side of the tracks. [laughter] But, we just had some wonderful memories of how things used to be, you know, and how much they helped us. Another one that helped a lot was Alice, in those days was Sobeleski, and now she's Dineff, and she was like, she helped Miss Prather, I, if I'm not mistaken, at the club house.

Young: That name sounds very familiar...

Simpkins: It's Dineff now...Alice Dineff. One of her daughters teaches music at the schools here.

Young: Did she teach the sewing, perhaps, was that the woman that taught all the sewing?

Simpkins: Yes, she did, she did sewing, she did everything, yes.

Young: Yes, one of the, one of my other interviews were saying, you know, well, you know, unfortunately, things have a tendency of passing...and Lincoln Place had it's time and it's place, but at least it had that, I mean...it's...

Simpkins: Yes... I'm trying to think what else happened out there that would be...we used to go to, after Sunday school on Sundays...I think it was after Sunday school, maybe it was after the mission, I used to stop at the bakery and get a pita bread, and by the time I'd walk those two-

three blocks home, a quarter of it would be gone because you, you bite off a piece and you'd keep eating at it, you know, as you walk down the street. [laughter] You do that now and people look at you like there's something wrong with you, you know, but it was very common to see people walking home with a loaf of bread and breaking off hunks of it, you know. But, when I was in Germany they, they did that all the time, and they had all kinds of stands along the streets, and you'd walk the street...

Young: Bread is very big in Germany...

Simpkins: Yes, so they got fantastic bread.

Young: Heavy breads.

Simpkins: I love it. Have you been there?

Young: No, I'm a German student, and I...

Simpkins: Oh, I love Germany, God I loved it.

Young: I would like to go...definitely. So, the neighborhood really, really started changing after WWII, and...

Simpkins: I think so, yes.

Young: Was that because the men were coming back, and they had been abroad, and maybe they were moving out, or were, was it just...that generation that was changing?

Simpkins: Well, I think the depot being built there, and I hate to say this, but it's true, people got greedy, a lot of the people. They had, I know people where that they rented every room of their house out to G.I.'s and his wife, you know, they made money hands over fists. And, they, they changed. The people changed. And I think the war had a lot to do with it, you know, and then after the war ended, it's started kind

of building down a little bit, you know, people weren't, the people had changed. They just had changed, but I guess the war did it, having a little more money than they used to have, you know, people didn't have money before the war. Now, suddenly, they all had money. And they, changing.

Young: They thought moving out was somehow better?

Simpkins: They tried to better themselves, yes. They thought they were bettering themselves, but they really weren't. But a lot them settled in Lincoln Place and a lot of them are still there. So...I don't know, I think, they just wanted to get out. I know my older sister did. She couldn't stand it down there. My mother loved it, it broke my mother's heart to leave there. But, they did, they left. My mother missed not being able to walk to a neighbor's house, and talk, you know, it meant a lot to them. And they just don't do it anymore.

Young: No. Because we did a walking tour of the neighborhood, and, and saw where things use to be and, and how things have changed...

Simpkins: Well, a lot of the homes... a lot of homes have changed, like on that Niedringhaus, that first block, all those buildings on the left is where my home was. There were like three or four buildings completely destroyed by a fire in '53, you know, so...

Young: Was that why your mom moved out there, moved from there...?

Simpkins: She had just moved out the year before...

Young: Oh...

Simpkins: ...but they still owned the building. And, oh she was devastated. I mean, it, I, I was recouping (recuperating) at home, I had just had surgery. So, I couldn't go, but she, she went all the way,

she walked from Delmar all the way to Lincoln Place, to see about the fire when she heard about it, you know. But it did, it destroyed a lot of homes, and, in fact, I think the only thing that's standing there that was there originally is right in the middle of the block and it, there's a, used to be a barber shop, now it's a beauty shop and something else. I forget what the other thing is. But that's only original building left, and it used to be a barber shop. They've got a, like a credit union, or something, on that, on the end of that block, but that's new, that wasn't there before. And across the street they've torn down buildings there, there use to be a ice cream, or Ernie and Annie's tavern next door to it, used to be a ice cream parlor, like. And the men use to drink coffee there, and they use to play cards. And then, next to that was like a, oh, Duke. Duke was the Macedonian, I guess, and he sold comic books and he sold ice cream and candy and, I don't know what all, you know. A lot of if, yes, a lot of it's changed, a lot of it's gone. They've built up a lot of homes, like down Maple street, if you go down Maple street towards West Granite, that used to be all empty on the left hand side. There were three houses on that last block, where the American Steel Foundry, it's right here where it's going down this street and down this street [motioning with hands on table] this is West 20th, there were three homes right across the street from it. Now it's all filled up, all the way down. And I, I remember walking to school, God I hated that walk.

Young: Long walk?

Simpkins: Oh yeah! I used to think it that American Steel Factory was that, I could just cut right acrossed it, you know, because it would

have been, what, maybe three blocks, and I'd have been there. This, and we had go all the way up to Maple street and all way down and go across, just like almost a square, you know. But...yes, that's, and then we had to walk to high school, no Central School, we walked. High school we got to take a bus, we got busses in those days. Before that we walked. Young: It's kind of hard to motivate a kid to walk to school when it's a long and if it's bad weather, I tell you...

Simpkins: We walked in any weather, it didn't make any difference. And I remember this one Armenian guy, he was like in the sixth grade and I was in our fifth grade, maybe I was in the first, he always made sure I got home. He, he took care of me. But, I still think, I don't know if anybody has mentioned this to you, or not, but there's a lot of people, if you're going into Lincoln Place, on the right hand of, side of the street, that have died of cancer. A lot. Not on the left side, but the right side. And I've always felt like, American Steel Foundries had something to do with this, I don't know if there's something they've buried in those big mounds that have gone across and saturated the, the yards, or what. But a lot of people have died on that side of the street of cancer.

Young: It sounds like something should be looked into definitely... because of...

Simpkins: I think so...I, I, at one time a few years ago, they were out there digging in all the yards. I never did find out what they found out, or if they did find anything. Never heard. But they even dug up our church, we were still in Lincoln Place. That they dug up the yard, in Lincoln Place. Then if I remember correctly, they didn't find

anything, you know. And that's hard to believe.

Young: Well, this whole Metro-East area is, especially back in the early days when they had all the factories going, and all that, this is one of the most polluted areas on the map in the United States. It really is. You know, it just makes you wonder what's out there, what's even in your own yard that kids are rolling around in.

Simpkins: Yes.

Young: So... yes. Let's see, we've been talking for a while now, and...

Simpkins: Have we...? Oh yes, over an hour now.

Young: I was just wondering...

Simpkins: I don't know if I've said anything beneficial, or not, really. Doesn't make any difference...?

Young: It's just everybody's own perceptions of the neighborhood, and, and their memories, and, and different things...and one interview will help relate to another interview, to another, to another, to like validate things that haven't been written down. Like things that went on at the Community Center and such not, so, as such... Yes, there, it's all useful [laughter].

Simpkins: Well good, I hope so.

Young: I guess I'm going to wind this down, and just ask you is there anything else you'd like to add, anybody stand out in your mind from your childhood that was in the neighborhood, or any particular events, or... I know one thing I wanted to ask you, I'm, I heard that whenever there was a funeral, very early days, I don't know when they stopped this practice there, everybody would, you know, join in, in like a

funeral procession, kind of, in the neighborhood. Did you ever see any of those?

Simpkins: I remember one, and that was my sister's. I was five years old, why it stuck in my mind, I don't know, but I remember this one Armenian lady from East St. Louis came and was watching myself and niece, who was a year younger than me, and she took us. My mother, I remember the casket was in front living room in those days, they brought it to the home. And I remember the shades being drawn, and it was real dark there, my mother crying. And I remember the sister above me, who I used to worship, had come home. She was, lived on the East coast, and she was a dancer. And I remember this Armenian lady taking my niece and I to the one restaurant, Macedonian, or Hungarian restaurant, up the street on the next block and buying us those little marshmallow type candies that had a ring in them. And she bought each of us ten of them, I remember. A ring for each finger. And I still wasn't happy, I was crying for my sister because she was walking down the street, in the procession, they were walking from my house, they were going all the way up and going, in those days it was the Bulgarian church, which the Armenians took over in 1954. Took her up, and it was horse drawn carriage, and they were all walking. I remember that just as plain as can be.

Young; How old was your sister when she died?

Simpkins: She was twenty, or twenty one.

Young: That's very young...

Simpkins: Yes.

Young: Was it anything in particular? Or...

Simpkins: Well, for years they told my mother it was a, she had a stomach infection. Well, I didn't find out until I was grown, and married, and quite a few years older that she had had an abortion that went bad. She went to somebody and they messed her up, and use bad equipment, or whatever, and she ended up...but my, my mother and father never knew it though...they kept it from them. And she died when, I think, twenty one. She died in 1936.

Young: Wow...

Simpkins: I was born in '31, so, I was five years old.

Young: You know, a lot of women died like that...you know, you just...

Simpkins: And I found out the fellah, and some guy from Madison, who was married, you know. I finally say who he was, he use to, come to our tavern, and I heard my sisters talking, they didn't know I was listening, because, of course, I was too young, they wouldn't tell me anything, you know, but I thought, God what'd she ever see in him, because he was not a good looking man, he had a scar down his cheek. He was a gangster type, you know, but...

Young: But you had another sister that was a dancer?

Simpkins: I have a sister that was a dancer. I had four sisters, one eloped right after I got, I was born. That's the second oldest, the oldest never married. And then, the third oldest, that's the one that died, and then the one, that, the only one that's left living besides me is the one in California, and is a dancer.

Young: Was it, what kind of dancing was it, like stage, musicals type things?

Simpkins: Yes, yes.

Young: Well that's kind of fun! [laughter]

Simpkins: Yeah, I guess...

Young: Not an easy life, I'd imagine.

Simpkins: Yes, they did, I remember that funeral procession, it's the only one I remember. It's strange that it has stuck in my memory all these years...

Young: Well, it's funny what your, what your mind will hold onto, you know, because I think back when I'm young, when I was very young, the things that pop into my mind, and why do I remember that, and not my fourth birthday, or, you know, whatever. So...

Simpkins: Did anybody tell you that we use to have dances every Christmas, New Years Eve... at the old Hungarian home? We'd have Armenian dances there, yes, big dances. And they were wonderful, we'd looked to it, I mean, this is when all the groups would get together. Because there was no political...change then, but we would, we'd have dances, they'd come from Belleville, St. Louis, East St. Louis, you know, wherever there were Armenians they'd all show up, you know. We'd have a, the best time. And that went on for years, everybody looked forward to it.

Young: Does that still happen, or, I mean...?

Simpkins: We have, yes... in fact there was a dance a week ago this past Saturday. But it's not the same. It's not the same.

Young: Yes...

Simpkins: The kids now they, they don't dance like they should dance, they, they, they try to make jump and run and, you know, we do a ring dance. And they, I, I, they really mess it up bad is all I can say, I'm

glad they're learning the dances, but they're doing it so horribly.
[laughter] Nothing dignified about the way they're doing it, is what
I'm trying to say. Let me warm up this stuff for you...

Young: Oh, okay!

[tape stops, then starts]

Simpkins: Now there was, oh! [ending tape, Simpkins talking, then
stops, small talk during food she prepared not included]

Young: Oh! Well, we're going to go ahead and end the interview. So,
I'm signing off, I'd like to thank you for doing this interview with me,
and that's it!