

Interviewed: Gail Freeman
Oral History Clip Title: A Closed Door
Theme: Ties to South Africa
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(Interviewer)
Have you been back to South Africa since the time you left?

(Gail)
Only twice in nearly thirty years. And last time was twenty years ago. My husband's never been back.

(Interviewer)
Why has he never gone back?

(Gail)
Never had a desire to. He also doesn't have family there that he was close to. But he felt that when he left South Africa, he closed the door on South Africa and there was [sic] so many other places in the world that he wanted to travel to rather than spend time and money to go back there. Just a closed door for him. Only reason I went back was for family. My first time was because I had all my cousins there and I wanted to see them very badly and aunts. And the second time was because my mother had fallen ill. So my sister and I flew out to see her—She had not immigrated at that time completely. And they had a place in Shaka's Rock, which is in Durban. So it was like kind of, like, all of the family's here go to Florida, in South Africa they go to a place in Shaka's Rock. That's where you went to. And so that was kind of like our last bit of enjoyment of South Africa as well, you know. And so we went back.

(Interviewer)
What were your feelings when you went back?

(Gail)
You know, I was horrified. I was absolutely horrified to see what had become of the beautiful city centre. I remember driving through Johannesburg, which used to be such a beautiful place. You know, where we had our weddings at the Carlton Hotel that were great. And places that were beginning to become boarded-up. I saw gentlemen peeing in the alleyway, you know. And I saw the city centre, the core being destroyed. It had become unsafe. There were things that I saw that were positive that I liked. I saw that the black, no whites, you know, no black people (inaudible) like removed from the park benches or

removed from the post offices doors. So there were parts of it where I could see that there was progress. There seemed to me like there was a very long way to go, especially education as well. A long way to go.

There were restrictions at the time. If I remember correctly, whatever you had, you had to leave half behind. My husband may correct me on that, but that's my memory. Is that certainly we had to sell our home. We sold off everything. And we went and bought new things as well. And all the South Africans who had left told us that you've got to fill up your containers. So you can't imagine the things that we filled up on. [laughs] We wanted to make sure that—You would have thought that we were coming to a land where there was nothing. We brought toilet paper.

(Interviewer)
[laughs]

(Gail)
You can't buy toilet paper in Canada? We brought toilet paper and canned foods and... Gosh, I remember Woolite. Somebody saying to me, "You must bring Woolite. You can never"—I mean, who washes with Woolite here, right? So we did all kinds of crazy things like that. But we certainly didn't come with much at the time. Enough for us to have a couple of months rent. Not be able to buy a home, certainly to start with. And take care of business, you know? Just from the get-go. We bought a car. We bought washing machines. And, you know, just basic household items and started our lives here.