

**Pam Collings**

**Interviewed February 4, 2008  
By Holli Connell  
Midway Village Museum**

Holli Connell: Let me just ask you to stay your first and last name.

Pam Collings: Pam Collings

HC: Are you married?

PC: Yes, I am married.

HC: Do you have children?

PC: I have two children.

HC: What is your education background?

PC: My education background, I was educated partly in West Africa when I was a young child because my father was in the military. Then, back to England where I finished high school and I did a two year bilingual secretarial college course and that's it.

HC: Where do you work now?

PC: I don't work now. I retired at the end of 2006 from a three day a week part time job.

HC: How long have you been here in the United States?

PC: I have been here in America since 1985 which will be 22 ½ years.

HC: And where are you from originally?

PC: Where am I from originally? Born on the South Coast in Kent, my father was in the Army so we moved a bit. We moved abroad to West Africa then we went back to the south of England again and ended up in Winchester which is where I met and married my husband.

HC: And when you said Kent?

PC: Kent is a county in southern England.

HC: What did you do before you came to the United States?

PC: Before I came to the United States, directly, I was a stay-at-home mom with two young children, they were 3 and 6. Before I had children I worked as a bilingual secretary in a firm that manufactured hardware for racing yachts and I worked with companies throughout the world and before that I worked for an import export company also with languages.

HC: What was your life like then?

PC: What was my life like then? Do you mean when I had children or before?

HC: Just your life before you came to the United States.

PC: My life before I came to the United States, because I was a stay-at-home mom I was heavily involved with the children and doing preschool stuff, visiting family, did a lot more yard work than than I do here. The climate is so different and we had a good lifestyle because my husband has a good education and therefore a good job.

HC: When did you decide to come here? Like what year? What month? What moment?

PC: How did we decide to come here? Basically, my husband saw an opportunity for engineers to come to “the second largest city in Illinois” which begs the question where is Illinois and which is the first largest city because we didn’t know that kind of stuff. He went through the interview process, was accepted and at that time we had to decide did we really wanted to come or was it just an academic exercise and actually can I ramble on?

HC: Yes

PC: I vividly remember the day we went for the final interview at which he was offered the job was also the day I was meeting my fairly newly widowed mother back off the plane from a trip to New Zealand and we couldn’t meet her off the plane so we had to ask my parents in law that they would have to meet her and we had to explain why we were going to take their only two grandchildren away from them. So that was kind of hard. But when we came I thought that we would be here for two or three years and then we would go back again and we are still here.

HC: And what year was that that you came?

PC: That year was 1985.

HC: Have you got tears in your eyes?

PC: Yes I do. It’s terrible isn’t it?

HC: I love hearing stories. That’s rough I don’t know what it is like to come to another country and just move.

PC: Lock stock and barrel.

HC: I find it so courageous and exciting and adventurous.

HC: Why did you decide to come to Rockford instead of anywhere else in the United States then?

PC: We decided to come to Rockford because that was specifically where the job was destined for. He was working for what was then the largest employer in the city which was Sundstrand. Since then they have become Hamilton Sundstrand and their numbers have gone down but it was a job offer directly tied to the company with a temporary green card for him and what's the term now, dependents visas for us with a promise of full green cards at a later date which have come through.

HC: Had you ever been to this country before?

PC: I had never been to America before, nor had he.

HC: How long did it take to make arrangements to come here and what was involved?

PC: To make arrangements to come here, it was made easy by Sundstrand doing some of the work for us, giving us oodles of information. They also set up a system, have you heard this one, whereby one employee would write to the prospective employees and say if you've got anything you need to know we are here to help you, we'll meet you at the airport, we'll take you to a hotel, will do anything you want just we are free to be asked anything. So that was a very good system. But making the actual arrangements, the job offer was in March and we came in July, so that would be four months. It was very quick.

HC: Did you come alone or with friends or members of your family?

PC: We came as a family, my husband, my two children who were then three and six and myself.

HC: So how did you get here physically? Did you go to airport, Boat, what was the journey?

PC: The journey to come over here, I only remember getting off the plane. We flew out. We have a photograph of the four of us standing at the airport in England looking quite bewildered and we flew out and we got off the plane at Chicago O'Hare and had to get on a big low loader airport bus because we landed onto the tarmac, they didn't have all the airport ramps they do now and my son who was only three, no he wasn't even three, we told him that he would have his first birthday in America. So this little voice pipes up "mommy is it my birthday now" and the whole bus erupted because it was so funny. And there were policemen with guns in the airport and it was hot, it was so hot and humid, unbelievable. It was July.

HC: Did you stop or stay anywhere along the way before actually getting to Rockford?

PC: No, we didn't stop anywhere. We came direct from Chicago airport to Rockford and we were put up at the Alpine Inn courtesy of Sundstrand which hadn't then been redecorated and it was pretty grim.

HC: Did you know anyone here before you came?

PC: We did not know anyone here before we came, apart from written correspondence between our host family that Sundstrand set up who were, by the way, another English family with two young children.

HC: So who if anyone, was here to help you get settled in?

PC: The host family helped us to get settled in and I am still friends with the wife, the husband has since died. We still see their daughters regularly and in fact I am playing Scrabble with the lady tonight.

HC: Did any members of your family come before you or after you did?

PC: No, we all came as one unit. Remember, the children were very young.

HC: Have any of your extended family moved here, either you or your husbands?

PC: Nobody in our family at all has come to live out here. Although I have an American sister-in-law but she lives with my brother in England but they are thinking of moving out here this year.

HC: Were there other people here that you knew from your home country before you arrived?

PC: No, when we arrived we were complete strangers: we didn't know a soul and we hadn't even heard of Sundstrand before we got here and we definitely hadn't heard of Rockford. The job and the area just tied themselves up together.

HC: But when you got here did you meet people from your home country?

PC: We met quite a few people as we were a new "intake" and Sundstrand at that time kindly arranged for us to meet other people in the same situation as us with a view to making new friends and taking out together and complaining about the Americans. No, I'm kidding. Sorry, couldn't help it

HC: Where did you stay when you first arrived in Rockford?

PC: When we first arrived in Rockford, we were put up for up to a month at the Alpine Inn at Sundstrand's expense during which time we were expected to find our own accommodation which we did.

HC: How did you find your first place to live?

PC: How did we find our first place to live? I don't know. I think I called real estate agents and told them that we would eventually like to buy but we couldn't immediately

but we needed somewhere for the time being and I think that's how it happened. I'm not sure.

HC: Was there someone or some group that helped you find your first place to live?

PC: I don't recall anybody helping us to find a place to live. It was all up to us, also dealing with schools and everything else at the same time, where the kids were going to go. People have told us about school districts which we didn't know anything about and so it goes.

HC: The first month you were here?

PC: No they weren't in school. But I had to find a preschool and I had to find an elementary school and that was also tied into where we decided to live or where we ended up living. Was it deciding or ending up; I think it was ending up to be honest.

HC: What is your current living arrangement now?

PC: My current arrangement now is that I am still a housewife, an empty nester, and I volunteer in the schools a little bit and I am looking for other volunteer opportunities but I have an awful lot of fun. I'm a member of the quilt guild here in town. I love to cook. I love to sew and I have a great time.

HC: Do you rent or own a home?

PC: We own a home...

HC: Is that the home that you purchased?

PC: Yes it is the first home that we purchased apart from the rental. We moved to that house 20 years ago. Yes we've been in that house 20 years. We had it built to our specifications.

HC: Is there anyone from your home country living in your immediate neighborhood?

PC: There are a few English families living in our immediate neighborhood. One of whom I am great friends with, another who is an older couple and they have retired and their interests are different but there are also a few English friends that I have made and kept living a little bit further away, driving distance.

HC: Did you have a job waiting for you on arrival?

PC: My husband had a job waiting for him on arrival. He had a temporary green card or work visa that allowed him to work. We were on a dependents visa which precluded any paid work even babysitting until such time as we had our green cards issued.

HC: You are the second person that has mentioned that out of 45 interviews so I find that interesting to hear that.

HC: Did your visa limit you to what kind of work that you could do?

PC: Did my visa limit me? The permanent one or the green card? The permanent one allows me to do anything. The original visa in which we came in on precluded any paid work.

HC: What do you see yourself doing in five years?

PC: What do I see myself doing it five years? More of what I am doing now. I wonder sometimes what my life would have been like if we stayed in England and I think it would have been probably more or less the same with the exception that I would have to travel and see family whereas they would have been around me if I would have lived there but basically I am comfortably enough off that I don't have to work and I'm not terribly ambitious and I am nearly 60 anyway. So I really don't want to work anymore. I want grandchildren.

HC: How old are your children now?

PC: My children are 29 this month. So she is telling me it is my last birthday as a 20 something and 26 ½.

HC: Are either of them married?

PC: Neither of them are married, alas. Both of them are in steady relationships but the one who is 29 is moving back to Chicago so she is leaving her boyfriend. I think it is amicable. They just want different things out of life. So we will have to start from scratch again. Strike that last remark.

HC: How did you get around when you first got to Rockford?

PC: When we first got to Rockford, we had to buy a car which my husband loved. He loves cars. We could only afford one car, we only needed one car and so I would drive him to and from work and drive about wherever we went to go. You would see me sitting at traffic lights with a little map written down in my hand to turn left onto Alpine, turn right, 3 blocks and for six months I would find myself sitting at traffic lights thinking what am I doing here? It was a very disorienting thing. You are driving on the wrong side of the road but I had not done as much driving back home. I had only learned to drive two years before I came here and nobody walks anywhere. Back home we lived within walking distance of nearly everything and walking was the thing you did. No wonder more Americans are overweight and they should be. So we had to drive everywhere. No buses, no public transport. When my mother came to first visit she thought oh if Pam's busy I'll just hop on the bus and do something. There aren't any

buses that would go where we wanted to go or do what we wanted to do. We wouldn't understand a bus system anyway we never saw them. We would have to be downtown.

HC: [Interviewer comments on her personal trip to England]

PC: America is built up in the Midwest because of the automobile. Everyone relied on the automobile and that's why you still have to have it now. I couldn't walk downtown from where I live and I couldn't even walk to State Street from where I live.

The infrastructure is very different.

HC: How long did it take for you to get comfortable with getting around town?

PC: How long did it take me to get comfortable getting around town? If you mean getting around downtown? Well town it's grown up an awful lot from when we came here. Most of it was corn fields now it's all busy. So I have grown up with that. I know my way around better than my husband does probably and I know more shortcuts that he does. They call them rat runs in England by the way. So it took a year or two, yeah.

HC: Settling in. Did you speak English on arrival?

PC: I spoke beautiful English on my arrival as well as my two-dear children.

HC: How did you integrate yourself into the community?

PC: I'm glad you asked that question how I integrated myself into the community. They had a group called Newcomers for people such as myself who were new to the area. I went along to a Newcomers meeting and I came away thinking I can never go back there again and this sounds awful but it was just too American all at once. I couldn't handle it, I'm serious. I really couldn't handle it. I didn't know half the things we were talking about and so I basically integrated by talking to my neighbor, we lived in a duplex, a rented to duplex. Her two children babysat mine. I volunteered in the schools and then carried on conversations with anybody I could talk to.

HC: How was the meeting too American can I ask?

PC: I can't really remember now I just felt so overwhelmed. Everything was American accents, I know that sounds weird but they were talking about things like the banking system is different in England, the housing system is different, buying a car is so different. You don't go and have your choice of 6 million cars on a lot. You order one. It might be different now but there are far fewer choices and far longer lead times. It was just so very intimidating. Maybe if I would've had some other English person there we could have sat quietly in the corner and giggled. I don't know it really was a strange thing. So we never went back. But I am fine now.

HC: That's fun.

PC: If you went to an English thing you know exactly what I was talking about.



HC: Interviewer talks about her experiences in England speaking English and visiting sites.

HC: Did you attend any churches or temples or anything like that when you came here?

PC: I didn't attend any churches although I am Church of England. I am christened, confirmed and married in the church. We rather lapsed. That would not be Presbyterian. What is the Church of England called here? Episcopalian? I did once go to an Episcopalian service here. It was very modern, shake hands with your neighbor and stuff like that British don't do. Again, I found it intimidating. Our churches most of them are very old and very beautiful and I still find your modern stuff is disorientating in a way. And that's snobbery just sheer snobbery and I'm sorry that's what it is.

HC: When you talk about that do you feel the differences are in the traditions that we hold?

PC: Yes, very much so and when you say antique car dates from the 1950s it boggles my mind you know and here we are sitting in a museum.

HC: How did it feel coming to a foreign country knowing that you were staying?

PC: How did it feel coming to a foreign country knowing that we were staying? Well you just get on with it. If it would have been just my husband and myself than it would have been different but you have two small children who have to be educated, who have to be entertained and you have to cook and clean so you just get on with it. Like I said previously I did think that we would only be here a couple of years and here we still are 23 years later.

HC: Why were you thinking you were only going to be a short period and now you've been here so long?

PC: Because I just imagine that it was one of the things we would try and see if we like it and then we will go back home again. Because I am a very family oriented person. My husband is too but he also loves the lifestyle here. He is a consumer. He could consume for America. He does consume for America. He loves cars, cameras, computers and stuff. We have a better lifestyle financially here and there are probably more opportunities. Since we left the company he worked for, well the whole business, he's a very technical engineer and the whole business he is in has gone haywire. There are fewer opportunities, fewer openings and he has painted himself into a corner. He's a very well sort of person and so he's happy here and so where he is I am.

HC: How did people treat you when you arrived?

PC: How did people treat me when I arrived? They loved the accent, they still do. When I tell them how long I've been here they say why didn't your accent change? Well I was 35 when I got here. It was pretty well fixed. I used different words. People were always

very friendly, very helpful, very approachable. I guess it would be very much different if I was in New York, L. A. or something but Rockford people are really friendly and helpful.

HC: What did you think about this country before you came and have your ideas changed?

PC: What did I think about this country before I came and have my ideas changed? Well, to be honest all of our perceptions of countries nowadays are usually made through the medium of television and when you see things like Dallas and other rubbish like that you get an entirely skewed idea of what people are like. I didn't know what to imagine whatever my preconceived ideas were they went out the window. I was surprised by policeman with guns although I should have thought about that. Can I tell you a little story? The first week we were here and we got this car and my husband had gone to work and the children were bored and I thought okay we will go to a museum. So we decided to go down to the Burpee Museum on Main Street and I am there at the traffic light hand written notes of how to get there. We did the museum which wasn't air conditioned by then and upstairs on the fifth floor where the stuffed birds were it was a little bit high so we came out and got back in the car and I reversed by effort of getting here. So I get out and I turn left onto Main Street. There's no traffic coming, this is a 4 Lane Hwy and there are no lines in the road, no signs telling me which way to go and I turned the wrong way down a one-way street. Fortunately, a police car was coming on and he stopped me. He said maam may I see your driver's license. I said yes, can you tell me what I'm doing wrong and he said can I see your license please. Of Course, it's a big long English license about two foot long with no photograph. The children in the back seat and finally he told me what I did wrong. I said I am very sorry I didn't know how would I have known? He said if there's yellow lines down the road it's a 2 way street; if there aren't yellow lines it's a one way street.

HC: What has been the best part of moving here?

PC: What has been the best part of moving here? Making new friends, trying out new things that I may not have had the opportunity to do, travel within the states although we always go back home to England every year as well, so it gets expensive. It's meeting new people I think and doing scenery and new surroundings, learning the names of the birds and the animals or stuff like that really.

HC: What has been the hardest or most disappointing part?

PC: The hardest part of moving here has been leaving the family also as a bar none family and friends. Most disappointing, to be honest, the situation with guns. We still don't have that many guns in England. I know I harp on about this a lot. But there's so much crime that might be avoided and so much heartbreak that might be avoided if guns weren't the norm. I don't know you could carry one in your purse and I wouldn't know about it. And at one point they asked when your children were in school they asked you to ask other parents if your child was going to play is there a gun in the house? Good

heavens there shouldn't be a gun in the house stuff like that I'm sorry but that's how I feel.

HC: I agree with you on that. I think that's very bizarre that you have to worry about your children when they're in someone's home.

PC: There's probably other things but that's one thing that still gets my goat after all this time.

HC: What do you miss most about your former home?

PC: What do I miss most about my former home? The climate, obviously family and friends, and food but I've thought about this when I go back to England and I get out into the countryside the air is soft. In Rockford the air is soft maybe once or twice a year it's either too dry or too humid. I have English skin and I notice it. So the soft air, the sense of history all around there's older buildings and walking on thousands year old cobblestones at Winchester Cathedral and stuff like this, the intangibles, it doesn't really matter and yet it's all-important.

HC: Have you gone home for a visit since your moved here and if so what was it like?

PC: We've been back several times for visits. At one point I had to go back three times in one year because my mother was sick and she has since died but we love going back but it also impedes our chances of travel to other places because of your anachronistic holiday situation. When we moved to America my husband was already receiving five weeks of holiday a year. When we came to Sundstrand he was on one week, then two weeks and now we are not quite back to where we were when we arrived and he's been here 23 years. So, where was I? There was something else I meant to say.

We were talking about coming here and going back for visits.

Another thing I noticed and this is driven by television is the changing accents. One time we went back and it was oh, okay, terribly posh you know and then one time we went back and it was well like right and it was driven by the current popular television programs. So the accent is actually changed it was bizarre and you've only notice that if your away for long enough otherwise we would be part of it. It was interesting.

HC: Do you think you'll spend the rest of your life here?

PC: Do I think I will spend the rest of my life here? If my husband's here I'll be here. And I don't see him going back. Besides which my mother has died, his parents have both died since we have been over here and our family therefore is getting smaller. Our children are here and with luck their children will be here so I don't see us going back, no.

HC: If you have children, which you do, what would you want them to know about the culture of your homeland?

PC: I have always tried to remind my children of things we do differently than over here. For example, Christmas is a great one, different food traditions and things. But they've totally absorbed American culture. My son tries to speak with an English accent and we all fall about laughing. But they are proud of their roots to an extent that they will say well I am English you know in their American accents and to our shame we have not got our citizenship yet although we have all four put in for it. It's just taking longer than we thought it would.

HC: So that means that you are still citizens of England?

PC: We are resident aliens in this country. We are still citizens of the UK and the nice thing about the UK is they will accept your citizenship. America technically doesn't accept your citizenship except some cases and I don't know which ones they are but they don't apply to us. However, if and when we accept American citizenship we have to lie by saying we abjure all loyalty to previous countries and we really have to really mean it and I don't know that I can really mean it so I might have to wind up lying to the government but that is the only way I can do it. I can't disallow being English and yet I do feel I should have more say in this country so I think really the government should try and sort that out, really, you know. I'm going to end up lying and I am not happy about it but on the other hand everybody does it everyday so go and do it.

HC: What do you like to do for fun?

PC: What do I like to do for fun? I love to sew. I'm happy making quilts, making clothes. I'm trying a re-upholstery project in a minute. I love cooking and entertaining and I love trying new recipes and I never try out a recipe before people come I try it on them. I love to listen to music, love the library, love going down getting books. I don't watch much TV but I do watch films. Love to talk can you tell? Watching the birds, just lots of stuff, there's lots of cool stuff to do in Rockford. .

HC: What has been the most difficult thing to adjust to?

PC: What has been the most difficult thing to adjust to? I actually can't think of one apart from the climate is very extreme. You have to have two separate and distinct wardrobes whereas in England if you are cold you just throw another cardy on and if you're not you take it off. I still have difficulty with climate. I hate the dryness in the winter. Putting on the air conditioning in the summer means closing up the house and that's awful and actually screens; we didn't have screens on our windows in England and so when we first came here you would have to remember to open it before you went out. Just little things but they are minor. We didn't have screens in England that's another culture shock thing. You don't have them in every state either; you don't have them in California.

HC: How do you feel about the current debate in this country about immigration and immigrants?

PC: I feel very mixed about the current debate on immigrants and immigration because I am an immigrant myself. But we did it the legal way but we have the education to do it. The Hispanic immigrants for example, the illegal aliens I feel very sorry for because they are stuck they can't really go back to what they had before because they had nothing but they are not legally allowed to stay and I would hate to be a lawmaker and make the final word on their fate. But it's gone too far and I don't know how it is going to resolve itself I really can't foresee. But when you start to put up a Berlin wall in Texas and Arizona that's tragic so there you go.