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CHARLES MITCHELL
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A THEOLOGICAL STUDENT AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY WHO CONDUCTED A SERVICE ON ELLIS ISLAND CIRCA 1950

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for The National Park Service today is Monday, April 19th, 1999, I'm sitting in my office on Ellis Island, I think this is the first interview I've ever conducted in my office and I'm sitting here with Mr. Charles Mitchell. And Charles, uh, was a theological student at Union Theological Seminary and he conducted one Sunday service around Christmas time here at Ellis Island in 1950. And it's a pleasure to have you here.

MITCHELL: Thank you.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving me your birth date please?

MITCHELL: Yes, January 3rd, 1928.

SIGRIST: And I should also say, I don't think I said today's date, did I?

MITCHELL: Yes, you did.

SIGRIST: I did?

MITCHELL: You did.

SIGRIST: Great, January 3rd, 1928, and where were you born?

MITCHELL: I was born in Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: In Brooklyn, New York?

MITCHELL: Yes.

SIGRIST: Charles, could you do me just a little bit of a information about your family background?

MITCHELL: Well, my, uh, mother's family had lived in Brooklyn for a while- a couple of generations and her father's family were Puritans from New England back to the foundations, practically. And her mother's family had come from Cornwall about two generations before, about 1848, I think. And first to Cleveland, and then back here to Brooklyn.

SIGRIST: What was mother's name?

MITCHELL: Dorothy Buell

SIGRIST: Can you spell Buell please?

MITCHELL: B-U-E-L-L.

SIGRIST: And your father's name?

MITCHELL: Horace Mitchell, and he was from Mississippi. And his family had lived in the south there however long, however far back we know. My grandfather seemed to know about his own grandparents and nothing earlier than that. And they were in North Carolina, Tennessee and Mississippi.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

MITCHELL: Uhm, my father, after the First World War, came up here. He had a cousin already in New York, and who was going to make money by discovering oil in New Jersey --- which didn't work out. [Laughs] ---- as we may know. Uh, yeah, they met at uh, on the Jersey shore. My grandparents - parents and my mother would go down there on the summer and it was at Belmar, I believe.

SIGRIST: I think I've interviewed in Belmar, actually.

MITCHELL: Have you? Well, it's not far away, it's down the down the shore there.

SIGRIST: That's right.

MITCHELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit uhm some of your early childhood memories? Things that stick out in your mind as being significant to a five year old or a ten year old.

MITCHELL: Well, I don't know, I uhm, we moved to Long Island when I was two and a half and so I don't have many memories of Brooklyn --- although I do have a couple of flashes of --- you know --- sitting eating cereal and things like that that I know were Brooklyn because they weren't Long Island. Uh, so I grew up there uhm, I don't know that anything all that significant happened, just uh went to school, at a public schools, in, uh, Rockville Center, that's just where it was and uh, grew up kind of thinking that nobody could ever live in New York. [Laughs]. You know -- my mother and grandparents seemed to have managed it, although, New York seemed like home. And we would come into the

city, and, uhm --- for instance, I don't remember my first ride on the subway, or anything like that. It's just something that was always there.

Uhm, but, uhm, I was in the band in high school, played the clarinet, and marched at the football games ---- which, uh, I think that was about the only thing I did other than going to classes and study and uh. I always liked History, and French, and, um. When I went to college, I majored in French, actually, but decided I didn't want to teach literature, so that switched. And I ended up going to Union Seminary, for the purpose of teaching church history. Which is what I ended up doing.

SIGRIST: How did you become interested in that particular topic?

MITCHELL: I don't know. I always liked history [Laughs]. A and, uh, I was always active in the ---the --- the --- the church out on Long Island and uh

SIGRIST: This would be your family's church?

MITCHELL: Yeah,

SIGRIST: What denomination?

MITCHELL: That was Congregational, they had been Presbyterian in Brooklyn, and I ended up Presbyterian again ---- later. But, uh, they couldn't stand the Presbyterian minister when they moved to Long Island, so they switched. It's the kind of thing that happens. Uh.

SIGRIST: Did you have anyone in the family uh, that, uh, had interest in religion or anything of that nature?

MITCHELL: Not, uh, to a ---- any sort of great extent in that sense. I mean, my father was my Sunday school teacher for a good deal of the time, and, uh, my parents were active in the church. But I don't know of any relative who was a minister, for instance. Now down in Mississippi, I have a lot of relatives I don't know; so it may very well be. But, uh, I don't know, of any, anybody that I've known.

SIGRIST: Sort of sprung?

MITCHELL: Yes, I guess so.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit about --- about, getting to Union Seminary ----how --- how that happened and what happened when you got there.

MITCHELL: Well, I, uh, I went to college in Connecticut. Wesleyan University. And, uh, when I decided I wanted to go to seminary, Union was where the minister of my home church had gone. It had the advantage of being a non-denominational seminary, which I thought was attractive -- to me, rather than a denominational one. So, I don't know that I've really ever considered any other, uh. I knew about it, and, uh, I went

with the minister and saw the place, and, uh, so on --- so I just applied there as--. I don't --- I don't think I applied anywhere else.

SIGRIST: How did you meet the --- the minister, you said?

MITCHELL: He was the minister of my home church. And for the whole time that I was growing up. He was there for quite awhile. So he was really the only person I knew [Laughs] who - who had been to seminary- I think there was also one or two of the faculty members at Wesleyan had gone there too.

SIGRIST: Do you remember telling your parents that this is where you wanted to go and what you wanted to do?

MITCHELL: Yeah, I, well, I -- I wrote to them and said that, I don't know that they were particularly surprised or whatever, it wasn't considered to be uh, either a startling or an uh, desirable or undesirable thing to do particularly. I had been thinking of teaching for a long time; so in the sense, it was kind of a deck --- question of what to teach. And having dropped French literature from the possibilities, that meant switching back to some ---- some historical field.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about arriving at Union Theological Seminary and what happened?

MITCHELL: Well, it's uh --- it's up near Columbia University, on Broadway there. So we drove in from Long Island, and, uh, what I most remember about the beginning of it was that -- of course --- it was quite warm. It's early September, so that the windows were open in the dormitory ---- which is right on Broadway, at an Hundred and Twenty Second Street. And we were on the sixth floor, but even so, there was traffic on the street below. It's a hill, so that trucks would be stopped at the light and then start up with a great grinding of gears. The subway comes out from underground, just under our windows, and, uh, various emergency vehicles come by at irregular intervals. So that I felt as though, I had been awake all night.

Got over that --- you filter it out. That wasn't bad. And my roommate was from Detroit ---- but I guess not from a busy part of it --- was threatening to sleep in the closet, and shut the door. But, hum, but I didn't find the hum the classes particularly hard or anything. It's a good school and a school with a good Reputation, but I didn't feel as though I was all of a sudden on a higher level of difficulty or whatever on that. But, I enjoyed it. I, well, I always enjoyed most subjects that I was studying, as long as they weren't math, [Laughs] and uh.

SIGRIST: What year did you start?

MITCHELL: I started in 1949, so I was in the second year when I came out here. I did Sunday fieldwork in a church in Harlem the first year. And then that second year, I wasn't doing any church work, which is why I was available. And not too many students work, 'cause most of them did some kind of work that way. One year of it was required.

SIGRIST: Can you explain?

MITCHELL: Field work

SIGRIST: What that is, what you mean by church fieldwork?

MITCHELL: Uh, what I did was uh, teach, uh, Sunday school uh, visited the families of the kids in Harlem --- which was an interesting new experience as far as the uh, the general set up of --- and housing and so forth was concerned. Uh, often, uh, field - fieldwork would involve working with a youth group or something of that sort, sometimes, preaching, uh, but uh, very often Sunday school or youth group kind of work. The third year, I worked in a church in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I think I taught an adult Bible study course, and there I --- they had a retired minister came in from some distance. And uh, I was sort of ready to leap in if he didn't make it [Laughs] conduct the service, as I recall. It was a uhm, a congregation that didn't last much longer than that. It was --- they had been declining, uhm

SIGRIST: How, h--- because Union Seminary is a non denominational, so how is it decided who would go to do what field work at what church?

MITCHELL: Well, it's -- there's a director in charge of it and you had to go out and be interviewed and so forth. And I suppose it was usually churches of your own denomination --- not necessarily. I would - the church in Harlem where I worked was Presbyterian and I wasn't -- at the time. And it would depend on whether they were willing to take you on, as it were. Well the ---- the First Presbyterian Church in New York now, uh, has, a uh, student from Union Seminary--- working there with a college age group. And she is, well she's not Presbyterian. I'm not sure just what she is. But, uh, it varies. Some churches really want to have the right kind of person and others ---- right kind of person in a technical way --- and other people don't really care that much.

SIGRIST: It sounds sort of like you were half social worker and half spiritual guide.

MITCHELL: Sometimes! Yes!

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit of, uh, because your face sort of lit up in a way as you were talking about going to visit the families in Harlem. Talk a little bit about that experience and how, what kind of an impression it made on you.

MITCHELL: Well, it uh, it was my first ex--- the whole thing was a first experience of being with -- in a group, who are almost all non-white. Uh, there were a few white people that came to the church. It was actually just down the hill from Columbia University ---at the bottom of the hill --- by Morningside Park. uh, and had a minister at that time who did a lot of college speaking and was a famous person that way. So that people would come ---- who were visiting New York ---- would sometimes come and turn up there and some people who were not from the neighborhood came to the church because of him.

Uh, but it was --- I felt a little nervous going in tenement buildings and uh talking to people and so on. In -- in retrospect, I think maybe I should have felt more nervous than I did. Because some of them were not --- not in a sense --- all that safe. I never felt threatened. But some people were glad to see somebody from the church and other -- others were not. As, aw, sometimes I wouldn't get in. I --- you know -- I'd knock on the door and they'd peer through the little hole in the door and decide they weren't going to let me in. And uh, a strange white man suddenly appeared ---[Chuckles] they ---at the door -- although I'd explain through the door that I was from the church --- but that didn't necessarily always get me uh, through the door.

SIGRIST: Was there one incident that sticks out in your mind

ITCHELL: Not really, not really

SIGRIST: That made an impression?

MITCHELL: No, no. I do know that once --- once and maybe twice -- - I walked across Central Park at night, in the upper parts, which one should not do. But I was on one side and I needed to go see somebody on the other side, and, uh, I didn't s- I didn't encounter anybody along the way. But, something I wouldn't do now.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little then about how you ended up being chosen, or asked, to come out to Ellis Island to conduct the service.

MITCHELL: Yeah, I don't know that I really remember. Originally a friend and I were going to come out here and he was going to play the piano. And uh since it was so close to Christmas, he --- I guess --- went home for Christmas. And I ended up coming out alone. Which sounds as though, uhm --- I don't think I was originally scheduled specifically for another date --- but it sounds as though the seminary was finding people for a series of dates. And uhm, reason that immediately before Christmas I was available and other people weren't was --- of course --- I lived right near, essentially in this area. and other people --- .The friend that ended up not playing the piano was from Denver and [Laughs] I presume he had gone home to Denver, so I must have come in from Long Island. I don't specifically remember that uhm, the night before and uhm

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you knew about Ellis Island before you got here?

MITCHELL: Uhm, I knew that uhm, that it was not being used for immigration but as a place of detention --- essentially for people who were being deported, I believe. I knew -- of course-- that it had been the immigration center, and things of that sort. I don't know that I had any terribly specific knowledge of it. I don't have any ancestors who came through here as they had been in this country before that time. Uhm, and uhm, I --- I just --- I knew what it looked like, where it was -- -- you know -- what it looked like from the Staten Island Ferry [Laughs] and so forth --- and felt just a general knowledge of Ellis Island as the

place connected with immigration and uhm, I think that was about the extent of it.

SIGRIST: Were you paid for this service?

MITCHELL: I'm not sure. I think so uhm. You know, I think it probably went through the fieldwork office and uhm, it would have been the--- those other kinds of church uh work that was done that was paid. I wouldn't have any idea how much for instance, uhm, but uhm

SIGRIST: Did you have to do any kind of special preparation prior to coming here?

MITCHELL: Well, I had, [chuckles] preparation without really knowing exactly what kind of people I was going to be talking to and so forth. Of course, I had to work up a sermon and plan --- plan the service. They had, I think ---- believe it was an armed service book. It was a book containing the New Testament and hymns and that was given to me before I came. And I guess the office on One Hundred and Twentieth Street had --- had a copy and I had that. And I know that --- I didn't know whether people were likely to understand English well, you know ---- I didn't know on that.

So that, since it was Christmas, I know I read a long scripture lesson -- - Christmas story ---- and they could follow that in the book. So about the only thing I remember about the preparation is thinking that maybe that was going to hit home more than what I might --- or might say --- and --- and there was also that ---- I know that I --- now without knowing the people and knowing that -----except to know that they were likely to be very unhappy about being there at all. I ---I have no idea what --- what I said. And I'd probably be embarrassed now [Laughs] if I could somehow see a text of it, whatever, so

SIGRIST: Charles, let me just move your microphone 'cause your jacket is very rustle-ey ---- these are very sensitive.... [Remarks about moving microphone]

MITCHELL: All right

SIGRIST: So you didn't know a whole lot

MITCHELL: I, no, I really didn't --- I really didn't. I didn't talk to anybody else who had been here. I don't know that I knew who had been -- - and then, of course --- and at the moment I was trying to work this thing up, everybody had gone off everywhere else --- that -- because of the Christmas holidays ----- so I just sort of landed here.

SIGRIST: How did you get here actually? Do you remember the actual process?

MITCHELL: I came --- I came on the Coast Guard boat.

SIGRIST: How did you get from where you were to the Coast Guard boat?

MITCHELL: Well, where I was would have been Union Seminary. I presume I took the subway; it's on the number one line. And so I came down here and it was the Coast Guard boat --- where the governor's island boat would be now, not where the staff boat comes in.

SIGRIST: Which is where?

MITCHELL: It's the other side of the Staten Island ferry; next to the Staten Island ferry dock. It's east of it, yeah. right --- right on the other side. And it's --- you know --- it's a big building like the Staten Island ferry building. It's not just sitting out in the elements as it were. And I believe I was the only passenger at 9 o'clock on Sunday morning. I don't remember what ID I needed to show or anything but I think they must of had my name as someone who was going to come on the boat. And then I was met here at Ellis Island, by someone, who didn't have much trouble picking me out of the crowd of one [Laughs], I guess.

And he took me to whatever building it was now, I don't remember which building we went to. It wasn't the main building where the tourists go now; it's wherever these people were living. And so we came in and I think he had a key. There were several barred doors that we went through. We'd --- would go through one and it would clang behind us. And we'd walk down the corridor and we'd go through another and it would clang behind us. And then when we got near to where the service was, he was calling out, "Protestant Services" And the room with the services -- as I remember --- was a big square room with tiled walls. Utilitarian, I don't know what else. It had a sort of pulpit and a piano and seats and people came in.

They sat there and I stood up in front. And I remember feeling very, well, somewhat nervous about it all and particularly not knowing and wondering, "Who are these people?" And why are they being sent back or whatever? You know, how did they end up here because it was like visiting a prison. And -- so we had the service and they didn't join in singing the hymns much. But --- of course --- I suppose these were American style, even Christmas Carols or whatever ---- which is not necessarily what they might have known at home. I would say.----- trying to think of a possible number, thirty or forty people --- but who knows? I mean --you know --- that's the kind of memory that's very likely to have been edited, very much. I don't make any guarantees on that. [Laughs]. Not a big group, anyway.

SIGRIST: Tell me again how they gathered? This gentleman who met you?

MITCHELL: He ---- I could hear him out in the corridor shouting, 'Protestant Services.' Now, I ----- whether he went to particular rooms, you know, I don't know. And then, these people came in the door at the back of the room. And I don't recall that there were guards you know, or anybody who seemed to be official except maybe the man who had met me at the boat and brought me in there, but

SIGRIST: Had you been given any instructions prior to actually getting on the island about what you could and could not do once you were here?

MITCHELL: No, no, I'm pretty sure not. Of course, I was met and conducted to a particular place and ---- but no, there was nothing or what ---- what you could or could not do, as far as contact with the people or anything that shouldn't be said or ----no, I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Instructions on what to wear, perhaps?

MITCHELL: No, no and I don't - I presume I wore a black robe because I had one and I would have brought it with me, that's the standard kind of thing, I may have just simply worn a suit, I don't remember that. But it wouldn't have been more than that ---- the usual just sort of standard American Protestant preaching robe of that time. No, I don't recall any do's and don'ts about that.

SIGRIST: What about the selection of people who came to the service? Can you talk a little bit about.---- men, women, children. I mean, what --- what was the makeup of --- of the group?

MITHCELL: I don't remember there being any children, but I don't make any - as I said ---- any guarantees about that at all. I feel as though I can kind of see this group in general, but it was forty-nine years ago and I may very well be creating a lot of that memory now or in between. Men and women, but I don't recall a proportion of them. I remember for some reason --- I remember that there was one man who was quite tall, but I suppose because he stood out in the crowd in that sense.

SIGRIST: Well, that's interesting in itself

MITCHELL: Yes, there was a tall man in the group [chuckles] --- you know. Where he was from, what -- what had --- how he had gotten there, what happened to him later, of course, you know, would wonder. But, I don't know

SIGRIST: Would you know at all if any of the employees attended the service?

MITCHELL: My impression is they didn't, but I don't know why I would even have that impression. I was focusing more on the fact of these being internees, so it's possible that they could have. I don't remember. I don't remember that I encountered any employee --- other than the one man who took me with --- but there must have been people in the building, you know.

SIGRIST: Well, it was Sunday.

MITHCELL: It was Sunday, Yeah. I mean minimum. But whatever - you know ---- whatever they were doing, I guess they wouldn't need to have housekeeping people and so forth. But, presumably there was a dining hall somewhere, not that I ever saw ---- but.

SIGRIST: Aside from the fact that the people didn't participate in the singing very much, what other things stick out in your mind about the service itself? Or your participation in the service?

MITCHELL: Yeah, I don't know that a lot does. [Laughs] And --you know -- I don't --- other than the fact that it was Christmas time; I don't think that there was anything about the service that was unusual. Otherwise, it was a plain preaching service; it was not a communion service. That's it. I presume it lasted approximately an hour, which would be the standard. Again, I don't think anything was other than sort of an ordinary --- in many respects, if I had been going to some other church in Brooklyn or somewhere --- that I would have done differently, except --- in so far as I did try to deal with the particular situation. But I - I didn't know how to do that or - really, how you know what ---- I know that I didn't really know what would have been particularly appropriate for those people. I felt strange, in that sense. That --- was sort of picked up and dropped into this situation from the outside.

SIGRIST: That's right, 'cause you figured they might have at least told you, you know, what the ethnic makeup would be?

MITCHELL: Yeah, I have no idea what the ethnic makeup was. Other than that they were interested in coming to a Protestant Service. Well then so little may have been happening that may have - you know -- maybe everybody would have come because it was better than sitting in your room, or whatever. And - I suppose -- there must have been a Catholic mass, probably, in another time or whatever and they may have gone to both, you know. But I assume that the majority of them were Protestant - you know ---back home, wherever home was. But I don't

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Of the room itself, other than the fact that it was tiled?

MITCHELL: No, I - I'd --- my impression would be tiles up to sort of above head height or so and windows above that --- and kind of large windows, you know, institutional type of thing. It was a fairly large room, not just a little closet or anything of that sort. It could've held a lot more people. But I --- I think it was just set up for that purpose on Sundays or whatever. It wasn't as though it was a chapel or I'd --- my impression would be it didn't look as though it was used only for that purpose. But ---of course --- at that time there were very few people. It may have been the only purpose that it was being used for then, but ---

SIGRIST: Your buddy in Denver who played the piano and went back to Denver ---

MITCHELL: Yes

SIGRIST: for Christmas --- you mentioned that people --- that there were hymns and people sang Christmas carols....

MITCHELL: Yes

SIGRIST: How was the music provided?

MITCHELL: I played the piano

SIGRIST: You played the piano?

MITCHELL: I played the piano.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about that?

MITCHELL: He --- he played ---- well, he--- he played the piano much better than I did, but I could - I could manage that. And of course, I knew that he wasn't going to be there, so I had sort of, practiced a little [Laughs] on that.

SIGRIST: [superposed] [not understood]

MITCHELL: Yes, right, right, something like that. So that it was just that I did that too. And I imagine that normally there would have been two people go. Whatever happened at other times that the Seminary supplied.---.people to lead the service and --- as I say --- I don't know, I assume that they did ----- that this was not somehow ---- this was the only time that Union --- Union Seminary, particularly since there were supposed to be two of us and then because of -- because of the date, there was only one. And so that it must have been that we originally had said, "Okay, we'll do it sometime." or something like that. But whether there was somebody who --- who went fairly regularly, same person ---- which would be a kind of fieldwork thing that could have been arranged or whether it was always different people, I don't know that either.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if the people who were attending were actually given the little booklets, like you had?

MITCHELL: Well, I hope so. I think so. Yes, I think so, I think they --- they ---and if they were given, that must --- that must have questioned by whom -- must have been, you know, the guy who --- the guy who brought me in. Or they may have been simply on a table at the door or something like that

SIGRIST: Do you remember if -- if --- if there were any kind of --- any kinds of Christmas decorations in the room whatsoever that would remind people in there that it was indeed a holiday?

MITCHELL: My impression is that it was very bare. You know, I can't guarantee that there was not. [Laughs] I don't --- I don't recall a Christmas tree with lights or anything like that. There may have been a little something, but if there was, it was not anything very elaborate.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out about the service itself, before we?

MITCHELL: I don't think so, [Laughs] -- as I say ---- it was in a sense not ---- except for the - for where it was, it was not different enough from any other service that I might have done somewhere else that it doesn't stick out

SIGRIST: Well, that's significant in itself, isn't it? [Superposed]
[Not understood]

MITCHELL: Yeah, yeah, what I ----what I did ---what I did was pretty much what I would have done somewhere else. Now it might well be that it would have been better if it had been somehow different but I didn't know what that different way of doing it might have been.

SIGRIST: What happened when the service was over?

MITCHELL: Well, they went out to - you know, who knows where. I don't recall that I stood at the door and shook hands. Maybe they started ---- - they got out before I got to the door [Laughs]. I don't know. I do remember one or two people saying, "Thank you." or sort of appearing to. I didn't have any other conversation with anybody. Yeah, I don't know.

SIGRIST: So how'd you get, how did you get off the island? What happened with that?

MITCHELL: I don't remember getting off the island but obviously I did because I have been here for the last forty-nine years uninterruptedly. Must --- I must have reversed the process and gone out and taken the boat at the --- at the dock. I would say that it came in at the dock, like where the tourists boat comes in now, in front.

SIGRIST: In front, in front of the main building?

MITCHELL: Yeah, in front of the main building.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing anything either in your way over to the room or the way back from the room that made any kind of impression, as you were walking through?

MITCHELL: I really don't remember anything outdoors, other than the --- the fact that the dock was in front of the main building and of--- in the building my impression is basically of the corridor with the ---with the metal doors and that one room. I don't remember otherwise, really.

SIGRIST: Well, this is all very interesting

MITCHELL: Well, [Laughs] one --- one cameo appearance in the history of Ellis Island

SIGRIST: Well, you know, it's sort of like that that glimpse of eating cereal or whatever they do in Brooklyn ---

MITCHELL: Yes, yes

SIGRIST: Just a little bit longer

MITCHELL: Yeah, well it well it almost is, yes, because it - well, I remembered it -- of course -- because it -- it was an unusual thing -- in the sense of for me to be on Ellis Island for any reason --- at that time, while it was still functioning. And so that it made an impression

that way. But otherwise, I --- I would not be able to stand on the dock and find my way to that room now at all.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you were nervous

MITCHELL: Yeah

SIGRIST: Going there

MITCHELL: Yeah

SIGRIST: For good reason

MITCHELL: Yeah

SIGRIST: How did you feel when it was over? Or when you were leaving?

MITCHELL: I suppose I must have felt relieved but I really don't have an impression of that

SIGRIST: Well, we have a few more minutes, why don't you tell me a little bit about the course of your life in five minutes or less?

MITCHELL: Oh, dear! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Unless there's anything else connected with the Ellis Island experience.

MITCHELL: I don't think there really is

SIGRIST: Good

MITCHELL: Well, I graduated from Union Seminary, fortunately. It's a three --- it's a three-year course, I graduated in 1952.--- spring of 19--.

SIGRIST: [superposed] With what type of degree?

MITCHELL: It was then called a Bachelor of Divinity, so it was a second bachelor's degree 'cause you have to have gone to college. But they've upgraded the name of it to master of divinity now although I don't think it's any different. And I could have sent them a fee and upgraded my thing, but I never did. And I was a ----- I was assis--- assistant minister in a Presbyterian church in Ann Arbor, Michigan for two years, which is how I switched to Presbyterian. And then I was a country preacher in Ohio for two years. And then I went to graduate school at Yale and got a PhD in church history and taught at DeBuque Seminary in Iowa for quite awhile and also at a catholic college --- Mt. Saint Mary College in Newburgh, New York ---- where I was the proof that they were ecumenical 'case the State of New York asks. That was in the 1970's. In the -- in the fifties it would have not---- not have been imaginable that that sort of thing would happen. But in the seventies it was. And then I moved to New York and became a computer programmer at Columbia University

SIGRIST: May I ask why the sudden shift.--- a totally sudden shift in direction?

MITCHELL: Well, I didn't get tenure at Mt. Saint Mary College, and in a sense I wasn't too sorry about that too. And somehow I knew I would like computers. I don't ---- I hadn't ever worked with them and this was 1979. So, I took a course at NYU on computer programming and got the job at Columbia. But I'm still a Presbyterian minister in good standing, occasionally preach. I'm on the list of people to call if you're desperate for [Laughs] somebody to conduct a service

SIGRIST: So you're official title would be, Reverend, correct?

MITCHELL: Yeah

SIGRIST: In addition to minister?

MITCHELL: Yeah, it is. Yeah well, that's all right, I don't I ---it-- I don't go by that particularly except in those contexts but so

SIGRIST: And are you affiliated with a religious institution now?

MITCHELL: Well, the First Presbyterian Church - in --

SIGRIST: Here in New York City?

MITCHELL: In New York, yeah, on Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street. So - but I -I'm not --- I don't have any definite duties there. I'm retired anyway. But, I am affiliated with that partic--- specific one, so

SIGRIST: Just talk a little bit about how you ended up here today

MITCHELL: Well, Diana Pardue, who is whatever her title is

SIGRIST: Chief of Museum Services

MITCHELL: Chief of Museum Services also belongs to the First Presbyterian Church in New York. And so, I had talked to her at various times and she said she was at Ellis Island and I said, "Oh, I once [Laughs] - you know - in a memorable moment, set foot on Ellis Island, when it was still Ellis Island and not a museum." And so she had said, "Well, have to have you come and be interviewed and lo and behold here I am --- after a fair - fair amount of time after that, but at any rate, so

SIGRIST: And I guess Diana probably mentioned to me, maybe nine months ago or something like that

MITCHELL: Yeah, yeah, and then she had also mentioned volunteering here. And so that I had said, "Well, I'd like to do what -- you know -- - what would that involve. But if it ---I would like to do that now being now retired and so on, and so anyway, I ended up on the little boat

coming in at the back door instead of, what I remember is a bigger boat. I think it probably was ---coming in at the front door

SIGRIST: Well, that's what happens when you ---[Laughs]

MITCHELL: Yes, I know -- it [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Well, I think that probably wraps up the interview, this has been most interesting, actually it was my pleasure to be able to do this. Any final thoughts before we turn off the microphone and find out what it means to be a volunteer on Ellis Island?

MITCHELL: I don't know, I think that's really about all I recall from this particular appearance as I say on ---- on the world stage. In that ---in a sense, there wasn't anything that unusual about it as far as type of service, or sort of thing I was doing or anything of that sort. It was just the setting that was the unusual and memorable part of it

SIGRIST: Well, and unique to our oral history collection certainly. [Laughs]

MITCHELL: Well, as I say, there must have been other people

SIGRIST: [interposed] There must be other -

MITCHELL: who --- who did that and perhaps more often or -- and perhaps knew more about it. And it's possible that the ---- the Seminary might have some sort of idea of how that was being done, who was in charge of shipping people out and so forth

SIGRIST: [interposed] Right, who made that decision

MITCHELL: Yes, yes, I think that probably the fieldwork office or something like that must have been recruiting people to --- to do it. I --- I'm sure they were --- there was in a sense of recru--- trying to find somebody to do it rather than of assigning somebody to do it

SIGRIST: I wonder if they also supplied people to conduct services in different languages even, you know -- for instance

MITCHELL: I don't know

SIGRIST: An Italian service?

MITCHELL: I don't know. Yeah. I don't know --- whether they would have had anybody who could do it. And -- of course --- in the case of Catholic immigrants, then you could just do Latin. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Yeah, that's right, ----

MITCHELL: [superposed] Although --- although probably a priest who spoke Italian could have been ---- been produced. I imagine for Catholic services probably the Archdiocese was --- or some office there was sending people

SIGRIST: Well, great, thank you very much.

MITCHELL: Welcome

SIGRIST: This is Bill Sigrist signing off with Charles Mitchell, Reverend Charles Mitchell on Monday, April 19, 1999 here at Ellis Island in my office. You've probably heard the ferry boat whistles blow

MITCHELL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And all kinds of things. Anyway, thank you very much

MITCHELL: You're welcome

END OF INTERVIEW

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