

**EI-1169**

**DONALD MONTANYE BYRNES**

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**RESIDENCES:**

LEVINE: Today is October 17<sup>th</sup>, the year 2000. I'm here at—at Ellis Island in the studio with Mon—Monsignor Donald Montanye Byrnes, who was in the Coast Guard here at Ellis Island in 1940—

BYRNES: Two.

LEVINE: Two. Okay. And for a few months.

BYRNES: Correct.

LEVINE: Okay. And also with us today is Monsignor Byrnes' nephew, Roger Heidelberg [PH]. [laughter]

HEIDELBERG: Present. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay. If we could start again, if you would say your birth date for the tape.

BYRNES: Okay. I was born on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1922.

LEVINE: Okay. And where were you born?

BYRNES: I was born in Seattle, Washington. [laughs]

LEVINE: Okay. And just—w—was your family—where was your—where were your mother and father from?

BYRNES: My mother and father were from New York City.

LEVINE: Okay. And being that you were here at Ellis Island, how do you trace your mother and father's families back to when they immigrated to this country? Where were they coming from?

BYRNES: Hmm, hmm. Well, my—my father's grandfather came from Ireland. His name, I'm pretty sure, was Thomas H. Byrnes. His wife was from Italy, Maria Louisa Contello [PH], which I just discovered about 15, 20 years ago.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Okay. My mother's side—her father was—and I forget his first name. His last name was Rhinestrom [PH]. He was from Holland. Well, his au—I—I'm not sure he was from Holland but his—his—his family was from Holland. He was Jewish. And his wife was Emma Levy [PH]. She was originally from England but the family moved to Jamaica.

LEVINE: Jamaica, Queens?

BYRNES: Ja—no, no. Jamaica—

LEVINE: Jamaica—

BYRNES: —West Indies.

LEVINE: West Indies.

BYRNES: West Indies, yeah. Yeah, yeah. And then, I guess, they moved to New York and my mother was born in Buffalo. Her name was Hortense Consuello [PH] Rhinestrom.

LEVINE: Huh. And what was your father's name?

BYRNES: Okay. Oh, wait a second. Horace Dardar [PH] Byrnes.

LEVINE: Dardar?

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Is that a—

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: Is that a name—I've never heard that [unclear].

BYRNES: Well, I had never hear—heard it from anybody either until in Louisiana I came across some Dardars in my own parish in southeastern Louisiana. And they were Indians. Now, I don't know where my father got Dardar from. [chuckles] Because there's no trace of any Indian, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Unless I'm mistaken about the Dardar. Okay?

LEVINE: Well, y—you say you were born in Seattle?

BYRNES: That's right.

LEVINE: And were your mother and father there on a vacation or—

BYRNES: My father was a—a lawyer, an insurance lawyer. And the only thing I can figure is that he was traveling with my mother and—and go—we—we were in Seattle a little while. Then we went to San Francisco and to Los Angeles. And I'm wondering maybe what he was doing was helping set up insurance offices at that time. This is, as I said, 1922, '23, so on.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Okay.

LEVINE: And when you—where did you grow up?

BYRNES: I grew up—well, okay. [chuckles] When I was three and a half, we moved back to New York and we lived in—I'm trying to think of—the first place, we lived in mid-Manhattan, Midtown Manhattan. Then we lived in Jackson Heights. And then we moved to Elizabeth. Then we moved to Newark and then my mom and dad split up, unfortunately. And we went to live with my grandmother.

My dad and I went to live with my grandmother in Norwalk, Connecticut.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see.

BYRNES: Okay.

LEVINE: So how old were you when you went into the Coast Guard?

BYRNES: Okay. I've got to—I've got to figure it out. It was 1942 and I was born in '22. I was 19.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Because I was—in other words, I was 20 two months later, in March.

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: So I was 19 with two months left before I was 20.

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: I entered in January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1942.

LEVINE: And where did you go first when you were in the Coast Guard?

BYRNES: Came here to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: That was the first place?

BYRNES: That was the first place I went.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: No uniform, nothing. They just brought me over here. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Okay. And why did you join the Coast Guard?

BYRNES: [laughs] Okay. I was in the ROTC an LSU, Louisiana State University. [microphone noise]

LEVINE: This thing—

BYRNES: Oh, I'm sorry.

LEVINE: That's okay.

BYRNES: Oh, oh.

LEVINE: Go ahead.

BYRNES: Fell off?

LEVINE: Good.

BYRNES: Okay. I was—I had gone to LSU and ran out of money and then came back. And when—that was when they bombed Pearl Harbor and I wanted immediately to go into the service. But I wasn't very interested in the Army. I don't know. I guess I didn't want to do all the drilling and stuff like that. And I tried to join the Marines when I left LSU before the war began, even, because I was interested in the service. But they wouldn't let me in because of my eyes. My eyes weren't good enough. So that left me the Navy and the Coast Guard. And the Coast Guard base at that time for training was in Algiers, Louisiana, which is right across the river from—from New Orleans. And at LSU I was kind of smitten with a girl named Leatrice Alonzo [PH] from Algiers. And I thought, 'Well, this is perfect. I could see Leatrice.' [laughs] But then they sent me down south and it wasn't exactly near New Orleans. [laughter]

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: So that's with the two—my other choice, why I made the choice, the Coast Guard, is because I thought maybe I'd get to see Leatrice and Coast Guard sounded to me, that or the Navy. I didn't know anything about either one of them, very much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So—so you had gone to Louisiana from New York.

BYRNES: That's right.

LEVINE: And then you came back to New York once you—once you signed up.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: And—

BYRNES: Came back to New York because, as I said, I ran out of money and had to leave college and come back. You see, I worked a year to

be able to go to college and I thought I—‘Well, I’ll come back and go to work again and earn enough and then go back again,’ you see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: See, the government cut off some funds that we had and then that’s why I had to come back.

LEVINE: I see.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: I see.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: So can you remember any first impressions of when you got to Ellis Island? What—what did it look like or what—do you remember the [unclear]?

BYRNES: The first thing I remember is we go into this big building and there are the bunks. And the bunks were about two or three high and that was it on those bunks. I don’t remember whether I was in the bottom bunk, although I think I was. And I don—I’ll be honest with you. I don’t remember any of the guys. I don’t remember any of the officers or any of the noncommissioned officers. I just remember being here and I remember the bunks. I didn’t even remember where we ate. Now, maybe something you say might remind me but, just offhand, I can’t remember anything.

LEVINE: Well, what was happening? Why—why were you sent here? What—for what purpose?

BYRNES: What—what I picked up is that the—the war had happened so—they weren’t expecting the war. And the Coast Guard had no training place, except Algiers across from New Orleans. But with so many coming in, they had to have another training base established, I guess, besides Algiers. And they were just keeping us here for a month or two until they could send us someplace to be trained. And so we—we didn’t do much. I guess they indoctrinated us in some very basic things, like, “You got to remember your service number. This is how you wear a uniform,” how to march maybe a little bit, how to salute, things like that, you know. Very, very basic stuff.

LEVINE: Do you remember if anything else was going on here at the time? In other words, do you remember, like, [clears throat] if there were so-called enemy aliens that were interned here? D—do—

BYRNES: The only thing that—

LEVINE: Germans or—

BYRNES: —when you said aliens, it—

LEVINE: Japanese?

BYRNES: —kind of triggered—not—doesn't trigger enemy aliens. But I think—pretty sure I remember that there were immigrants here on the island with us. But they were in another building. I hadn't even thought of that before until you said that but I remember that now.

LEVINE: Do you remember this building that we're in now? The one with the Great Hall at all?

BYRNES: No. But when we were coming up and you mentioned the one behind it, that triggered something.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: You know, the big building itself didn't register. But when you mentioned the building behind it, boom, it clicked. So evidently, either we passed through it or we passed around it and went into that back building.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: So it must have been back there. That's the only thing I can figure.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: You know?

LEVINE: So did you have some specialized training that you got in the Coast Guard?

BYRNES: Here? No. No, they transferred me, after a month or two, to—to Far Rocka—Far Rockaway. And I was supposed to get training there. But there we were just trained on the job. We weren't sent to a training place, you know. We just trained on the job right then and there.

LEVINE: W—was that on the job, like on a ship?

BYRNES: No, no. No.

LEVINE: No.

BYRNES: It was a Coast Guard base.

LEVINE: Base.

BYRNES: Coast Guard base and there weren't very many of us, 15, 20, as I remember.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so then did you—did you have, like, a—a supervisor or anybody you remember that you worked with?

BYRNES: At that Far Rockaway? Nope.

LEVINE: No?

BYRNES: [laughs]

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: That's maybe a senior moment. [laughter]

LEVINE: Well, were you—were you thinking about—well, you weren't thinking about the priesthood. You were thinking of—

BYRNES: No.

LEVINE: —going back to Algiers. [chuckles]

BYRNES: No, I wasn't even Catholic. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Oh. [laughter] Okay. Uh-huh. So—so then, how long did you stay in the service?

BYRNES: Five years.

LEVINE: Wow.

BYRNES: Because when I signed up, they told me I could sign up in the Reserve, which would be till the war ended, plus six months, or—or whatever they decided, or I would sign up for three years. And I thought the war would be over in three years. You know, [unclear] gets in, we're going to be over in three years, you know. But it didn't [chuckles] end in three years. And so in order to get two weeks of liberty and some pay, and figuring the war is going to last more than five years, I s—signed over for two more years.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: And then it ended seven months later. [laughs] But I spent five years in.

LEVINE: Wow.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: So where did you go after you went to Rockaway? Far Rockaway.

BYRNES: Okay, I was in Rockaway for, I guess about six or nine months. And then—oh, then they sent me to get some training in sonar, sonar gear. And then they sent me back to St. George in Staten Island, which I used to go there as a kid. I was in St. George and on—when I was in St. George, they put me on a ship, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter, Balsam [PH]. Do you want me to go on from there?

LEVINE: Yeah, go ahead.

BYRNES: And we went from here down through the—stopped at Florida—stopped in Norfolk, stopped at Florida. Where in Florida? Oh, we stopped at Key West, through the Panama Canal, up to San Diego, San Francisco, and then across. They sent us across the South Pacific—

LEVINE: Oh.

BYRNES: —to the Solomon Islands and then New Haberdise [PH]. That was—that was—we got there—I'm not sure. I think we got there May of '43. Yeah, I'm pretty sure. We got there May of '43.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: So did you—you saw action then?

BYRNES: Not real action. The only thing was, when we were in New Haberdise and sometime in the Solomon Islands, have a Japanese pla—plane fly over. And it was just kind of an observation plane, occasionally drop a—a bomb. We called 'em—what did we call them? Something Charlie. I can't remember the name right now. Because it'd only be an occasional bomb and they never hit anything. And, well, once we had to depth bomb a—a—a Japanese submarine. I remember that. But we never had any direct action. We had a couple of things where we had to lay buoys in Bougainville in the Solomon Islands so that the destroyers could come through in a hurry. So we'd go through with another ship before the destroyers go through in order so they could go through, the destroyers, without running aground on a rock or something like that. So it was dangerous.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: But nothing ever happened.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: So we didn't have any—[unclear] action, any direct killing action or anything like that.

LEVINE: I see.

BYRNES: And I was there until sometime in '44. Then I was sent back to train to come back again. And I trained in Maine on the—the LST 21 called—we called it the Black Jack Maroo [PH]. And we practiced landings on Maine in order to land on Japan.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: So I was over in the Southwest Pacific for a year and a half.

LEVINE: Where were you when the war was over?

BYRNES: Maine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember that when you—when you got the news?

BYRNES: Very definitely. Very definitely. Yeah.

LEVINE: W—what was that like?

BYRNES: That's interesting. Huh. I don't remember that that specifically.

LEVINE: Huh.

BYRNES: That's interesting. I don't know why not. I guess it's because we were—we were at a port practicing and we didn't get the information. That's right. We didn't get information back until we came back into port.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: And then they told us. So it wasn't any—from coming over like with Kennedy or something like that that hits you right in the face, you know.

LEVINE: Right, right. But then you were in for a period after that.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: After the war.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. I was assigned to buoy tender, an old one, and we brought it over to Manila.

LEVINE: Oh.

BYRNES: And I was there for about six months and then sent back to get discharged.

LEVINE: I see.

BYRNES: Okay?

LEVINE: So when you look back on it now, when you—

BYRNES: Hmm.

LEVINE: —look back on your—on your—

BYRNES: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —Coast Guard stint—

BYRNES: Uh-hmm.

LEVINE: —h—how do you feel about it? How do you think about it?  
What—how does it—I mean—

BYRNES: I thought it was very good. I thought I learned discipline from it. I learned to—how—how will I put it? My family was very open to other people but I learned you need more to be open to different kinds of people, different cultures, you know, so on, so forth. I loved it in Manila. I almost stayed there. I—a girl that I liked, a Filipino girl, but then I got homesick and decided, no, I better come back home. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about—

BYRNES: That's—

LEVINE: —being on a ship? What was that like?

BYRNES: Oh, I loved being on a ship. It was great. It was great. Little tight. The quarters were a little tight. [laughs]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BYRNES: Like, we'd have five bunks and o—one was—I can't remember whether if it was four or five, and I was on the top bunk for a—

LEVINE: Where you could barely sit up?

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. You—oh, you couldn't—well, I guess I could sit up, yeah. Like this.

LEVINE: Just—uh-huh.

BYRNES: Yeah. But if you were underneath, you couldn't sit up at all. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, yeah.

BYRNES: But I was on the top bunk.

LEVINE: You'll have to look at the dormitory we have set up here. It's like that.

BYRNES: Oh, yeah. That's what—I'd love to look at that.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Sure.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So—so then have you ever—have you kept any contact with anyone from the Coast Guard years?

BYRNES: No.

LEVINE: No, uh-huh.

BYRNES: No. Because when I got discharged I'd just been sent back. You see, I was on that buoy tender and my time was up so they sent me back, leaving the crew that I was with there. So I had no contact with them. I had no contact with the—the crews before that. And so I came here and I was stationed—I don't know whether I was on Governor's Island or St. George for just a little bit. And then I got discharged and I think it was—I think maybe I was at St. George. And my family—by this time, we'd moved to Staten Island. So—and I didn't—they didn't have any work for me to do because I only had, like, a couple weeks left. So they didn't assign me anyplace. So they'd say, you know, "Just take off till your enlistment runs out," you see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Wow.

BYRNES: But we—[unclear], no, you all wouldn't have been here yet.

HEIDELBERG: No.

BYRNES: No, they wouldn't have been here yet.

HEIDELBERG: We were—

BYRNES: They were in Upper Manhattan. That's right.

HEIDELBERG: We were there for summer times.

BYRNES: For summer times, yeah.

LEVINE: Ah.

BYRNES: Yeah, but I got out in January—

HEIDELBERG: Till 1950, we moved [unclear].

BYRNES: Yeah, that's right. I got out in January so—I know what it was. I used to—I used to go up to where they lived, see, because my mother and father were both dead by that time. And I'd go up and stay with my sister, his—his moth—his mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: You see?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Were you there then?

HEIDELBERG: [unclear]

BYRNES: You must have been. I don't know where you—what room you were in but you must have been there. [laughs]

LEVINE: Did you—

HEIDELBERG: The living room.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

BYRNES: Ah, ha! Yeah, I think that's where I lived too. [chuckles]

LEVINE: [chuckles] So you had one sister. Wh—did you have more than one sister?

BYRNES: No, just one sister.

LEVINE: What was your sister's name, or is your sister's name?

BYRNES: Audrey. Audrey Stephanie Byrnes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you have any brothers?

BYRNES: No. She was my half sister and there was me and that was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: There was just the two of us.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: So what did you do when you were discharged?

BYRNES: Let's see. I was discharged in—oh, I was discharged—

HEIDELBERG: [unclear]

BYRNES: I was discharged in January—

HEIDELBERG: When did you with my father in the [unclear]?

BYRNES: Oh, that was later.

HEIDELBERG: Oh.

BYRNES: That was later. I was discharged and I guess I just—I had a job doing I don't know what for just about a week, and then I went back to LSU.

LEVINE: Oh.

BYRNES: Because it was—it was in—the very beginning of February the new semester began, and this was January 17<sup>th</sup> that I got out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: You see.

LEVINE: And then did you get the GI Bill?

BYRNES: Oh, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Oh, yes. Yes. It went all the way through LSU. I graduated in that in—I graduated in—my major was political science. My minor was history.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

LEVINE: And then when did you decided to become a priest?

BYRNES: [laughs] While I was at LSU I had a roommate, who was a very fine Catholic and a great guy. We're still buddies to this day.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: And his example—and I—I needed to do some thinking. You know, ‘What’s my life going to be about? I’m going—you know, I’m going to be graduating. What do I tend to do with my life?’ I was into political science because I was thinking of being a labor lawyer. You know, work with unions.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: And—but I wasn’t sure and I just needed to get my head together. You know, what life is about and all about. And so he mentioned a retreat and I said, “Yeah, I think I’d like to go.” And then I went on the retreat. I wasn’t sure that there was a god. But on that retreat, God said yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm.

BYRNES: Yeah. I—I got the gift of faith.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Became a Catholic and then decided, “I want to be a priest.”

LEVINE: Well, had you been raised religiously, in any religion?

BYRNES: No.

LEVINE: No. Uh-huh.

BYRNES: I was baptized Methodist in Seattle and that was it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: My mom and dad didn’t go to church except—[chuckles] except when we lived with my grandmother.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

BYRNES: And you know that’s going to happen. [laughter]

LEVINE: Well, do you think the war had anything to do with your thinking about religion and becoming a—

BYRNES: In thinking about it serious and what’s life about and everything?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Very much so. Very much so because of the fact that you're kind of down to the basics, even though we were never in combat as such. You still didn't know when it was going to happen, you know, and so you thought of the basics.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: You had to think about the basics, you know, and at sea in a storm, you know, it made you think about the basics, you know. Like I never will forget, off Norwalk it wasn't a storm but the wind was so high, I can remember us going down into a trough. And the wave was higher than the mast of our ship. You know, and this ship wasn't—it wasn't big but it wasn't small either, you know. So, you know, you—you had to do some serious thinking.

LEVINE: Well, I mean, being—being in the war from 19—for—at—at age 19 for five years, that's—they're pretty—pretty significant years—

BYRNES: Yeah, they were. They were.

LEVINE: —in deciding what you would do.

BYRNES: They were. They were. About 10 years ago, I remember one guy from one of the ships I was on and where how from, a fellow by the name of Henry Altigot [PH], who was from Chicago. And so I called information there. They had about three of 'em and I called one of 'em and it was him. And—but he didn't remember hardly at all so he wasn't particularly interested, so that took care of that. [laughter] So I haven't had any more contact with the guys from the service.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I can—I can show you the Coast Guard people that I've interviewed—

BYRNES: Hmm.

LEVINE: —and when they were here.

BYRNES: Yeah, that would be interesting.

LEVINE: And maybe it'll trigger—

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: —something.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: I doubt it, but it's possible, you know. I'd remember probably better the ones later because I was in those places longer, you know.

LEVINE: Right. This was actually—Ellis Island was really just a place where you came before you were sent somewhere. Right?

BYRNES: That's right. Exactly. And that's—that's the way I experienced it. Now, I've heard others say differently. You know, like the lady downstairs, like—not—no, it wasn't her. It was someone else talked about it, the—the f—young fellow that—it was in the—

LEVINE: Library.

BYRNES: —library. He seemed to indicate that there was much more going on than that but I didn't know anything about that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. Well, i—do you—do you feel any specific or particular attachment to—to this place?

BYRNES: To Ellis Island?

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: Just memories, you know. In other words, I—when you get older, I guess you kind of like to go back to different places to see what you can remember of it and—I don't know quite how to put it. But it's just that it's a memory and you want to refresh that memory.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

BYRNES: What was it? In one of the parishes I'm in? The kid said, "Father Don, you're nostalgic." [laughter] I think everybody my age is nostalgic.

LEVINE: Is—yeah.

BYRNES: You know, you're trying to—I think what you're trying to do is look over your past and trying to see, you know, what is the significance o—significance o—significance of it. Is there anything I need to look at, and so on and so forth, you know.

LEVINE: Well, you must be a reflective person because, I mean, I think some people do that other people—

BYRNES: Okay, okay. And while, of course, is being a priest and I'm—you know, I'm alone and I have more time to think about things like that. You know?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

BYRNES: And I guess, having moved a lot in the service and otherwise, it's made me look at those things, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, did you settle then in—in New Orleans after?

BYRNES: Well, I—I—I went to—let's see.

LEVINE: [unclear].

BYRNES: Okay. Now, where were—okay. I went right af—after I became a Catholic, I—I finished college. I finished LSU. I came up to Catholic University to be instructed in—and tutored in Latin and to take philosophy in order to enter the seminary. And I entered the seminary at New Orleans and at—when I finished the seminary I was ordained a priest and given an assignment in the suburbs of New Orleans, a place called Medery [PH]. And then I've been—I had various assignments since then.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And the—but that's kind of home base? Is that—

BYRNES: What, Medery?

LEVINE: Yeah. Or—

BYRNES: No, your home base—

LEVINE: No?

BYRNES: —is where you're sent.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So it keeps changing. But—so you've been—

BYRNES: Yeah.

LEVINE: —in New Orleans but you've been lots of other places [unclear]—

BYRNES: Well, I've been in New Orleans but when I said New Orleans I meant the general area, because I've stationed in a—several times in New Orleans but also outside of New Orleans.

LEVINE: I see. So you—New York is—is no longer your home.

BYRNES: No.

LEVINE: [chuckles] It's New Orleans.

BYRNES: New Orleans is my home.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: New Orleans area. In other words, just like a New Yorker will say he's from New York if he's from White Plains.

LEVINE: Right.

BYRNES: Or somebody's from Staten Island, they'll say New York but for them, really, it's Staten Island. Or Brooklyn is really Brooklyn, you know, and so on and so forth.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: You know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: But I—so I say New Orleans. Unless they're from New Orleans and we meet somebody outside of New Orleans, then I'll say, you know, "Well, I'm from the general area." But I guess I would say, if someone would say, "Where are you from—where your heart is in

the New Orleans area?" I say St. Bernard. That's a county or a parish, as it's called down there. They don't have counties. There's civil parishes.

LEVINE: I see. And this—this is a parish that you worked in for a period of time?

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. I worked in St. Bernar—people will say, "Where are you from?" "I'm from St. Bernard in St. Bernard in St. Bernard." [laughs]

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

BYRNES: In St. Bernard Church in St. Bernard Village in St. Bernard civil parish, you see.

LEVINE: I see.

BYRNES: Yeah, I was there for nine years.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

BYRNES: That's the longest I ever lived one place in my life. [laughs]

LEVINE: Wow. Well, have you seen a lot of immigrants coming through New Orleans?

BYRNES: Now, yes, because now I'm out by—I'm in Kenner [PH] as a retired priest in residence helping out. And we have a lot of Latin Americans from Central America, Honduras, Nicaragua, whatever. I can't remember all the names o—of the area. But m—m—mainly Honduras and Nicaragua, but not only that. Some from Cuba, maybe Costa Rica but not very many. S—a couple of guys from the—I can't remember it. It's in Central America but it's English speaking. I can't remember that right now. I'll think about it later.

LEVINE: Well, did you—as a priest, did you—di—was—were your congregations immigrants in par—not particularly?

BYRNES: No. They were—

LEVINE: This is later.

BYRNES: They were—they were local.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: They were local. It just happens that this parish has a lot of people moving in from Central America. One-third of the parish is Spanish speaking where I am now.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

BYRNES: Where I was before, I was in two African American parishes. And then the one in St. Bernard, I was there twice. That was way out in the—kind of the corner of the areas, fishing villages and farms and—and s—moderate suburbs. You know, kind of—kind of agriculture suburbs, if I could call it that in the sense that m—these were people, grew up in the area but didn't work in the area. Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, what is your life like now as a—as a retired priest?

BYRNES: Busy enough, but being older with different things going wrong. [laughter] Like, it used to take me a half hour to get up and get ready and—and go over for prayer, now it takes me an hour. [laughs] So with that and—and friends in the area and—but I—I—I say mass every day and I—

LEVINE: You mean you're a retired priest but you stay say mass?

BYRNES: So I'm helping out.

LEVINE: Oh, I see.

BYRNES: I'm helping out. See, some priests retire in their own home so they would say mass in their home. But I'm retir—I wanted—I wanted to keep active.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: And so that's what I do. See, and—and he can't tell me what to do but he can ask me and, sure, I'm going to do it unless it's interfering with something I've already [unclear] doing, you know. And I work with the RCIA. This is people coming into the church or trying to get to know more about Catholic teaching. And I work with the scripture study group and bless homes, and people come for—to talk to me and things like that, you know. So I'm kept reasonably busy. Some nights are a little slow but most of the time it's fine.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: You know.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

BYRNES: Okay?

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: And then I came up here on vacation.

LEVINE: Yeah.

HEIDELBERG: [unclear] [chuckles]

LEVINE: Why don't you say wh—what brought you here today?

BYRNES: Oh, what brought me here today was just reminiscing about where I was in Coast Guard and trying to find out exactly where it was on Ellis Island that we—that we stayed.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: And that's when you told me about the building in back and as soon as I looked at it, I said, "Yeah, I think that's it." I'm pretty sure that was it.

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: Okay?

LEVINE: All right. Well, is there anything else you can think of that maybe we haven't touched that you—

BYRNES: I'm sorry. [chuckles]

LEVINE: N—don't be sorry. This is wonderful.

BYRNES: [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, [clears throat] I've been speaking with Monsignor Donald Montanye Byrnes, who was here for a few months at Ellis

Island when he—when he was 19, t—or just turned 20. Wait, you came here first so you were still 19—

BYRNES: That's right.

LEVINE: —when you were here at Ellis Island.

BYRNES: Yeah, yeah. March, I became 20.

LEVINE: And that was 1940—

BYRNES: Two.

LEVINE: Two.

BYRNES: Right.

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: Right.

LEVINE: Okay, and—

BYRNES: You did—you were asking me a question about my ancestry and I didn't know—did you want me to talk about that for a minute, about the Montanye?

LEVINE: Go ahead. Yeah.

BYRNES: Montanye was originally Dela [PH] Montaigne. And according to my grandmother, Dela Montaigne, I don't remember his first name, was a French Huguenot. And he worked with the Dutch when they were settling New York City.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Now, I—I can't verify that but that was what—what she said. And—and evidently, the family changed the spelling because nobody knew how to pronounce M-O-N-T-A-I-G-N-E. You see, so they spelled it the way it sound, M-O-N-T-A-N-Y-E.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: Okay?

LEVINE: Well, you've got French connections [unclear]?

BYRNES: Yes, yes. Yes, yes. Because my grandmother was a Cosse and she was the one that traced it back to that. C-O-S-S-E.

LEVINE: Okay.

BYRNES: And evidently, a friend of mine who is from that area, from Nova Scotia, a sister, looked it up and th—she said there were some Cosses but it was spelled C-O-S-S-E-T. Now, I don't—have no idea what means.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

BYRNES: There's probably some meaning to it.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BYRNES: Okay?

LEVINE: Okay. Okay. Well, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I thank you—

BYRNES: Thank you.

LEVINE: —very much.

BYRNES: [chuckles] Thank you.

LEVINE: And I'm signing off.

BYRNES: And what's your last name?

[END OF INTERVIEW]