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ROBERT BURCH

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LEVINE: Today is June the 12th, the year 2003, and I'm here in the Ellis Island studio with Robert Burch, who was named Robert Burch III, and he was coming from Ireland with his mother and his sister when he was eight years of age in 1952. They sailed on the S.S. America and left from Cobh, Ireland, and were detained here at Ellis Island for six months. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and if we could start at the beginning on the tape with your birth date and where in Ireland you were born.

BURCH: I was born on February 7th, 1950 – ah, what am I saying – 1944. February 7th, 1944. In Belfast, Northern Ireland.

LEVINE: And did you live in Belfast up until you left –

BURCH: Yes.

LEVINE: - for the United States.

BURCH: Yes, we lived in Belfast.

LEVINE: Okay, and so you were 8 years old. Um, what was your father's name?

BURCH: Robert Jr.

LEVINE: Okay. Robert Burch Jr. And your mother's name?

BURCH: Amelia.

LEVINE: Amelia. And her maiden name?

BURCH: Jess. J-E-S-S. Jess.

LEVINE: Okay. And did you have grandparents that you knew when you were in Ireland?

BURCH: Yes I had a grandfather. That was it. My grandmother died early, but my grandfather, he was a policeman in Belfast.

LEVINE: Oh.

BURCH: You know, and I remember him.

LEVINE: What do you remember about him? Do you have any memories of times with him, or ways he was with you, or anything about him?

BURCH: I don't remember a whole lot. The only thing I do remember is he didn't care for kids, he loved my sister. Now I don't know why, but there was a bunch of us, not in my family, but I mean cousins and what have you. And nobody could get close to him except my sister, and she could do no wrong. He was a big, tall man, played the horn, you know, the French horn, the trumpet, and stuff like that, in the police band. And, you know, we'd see him come in when we'd be down in the house and in Ireland in those days they were the only ones that were allowed to carry guns. 'Cause the police in England and Ireland, you know, they weren't allowed to carry guns except there, and we were fascinated by his gun. And that was about all. He had his own chair, just like I have my chair, recliner, and nobody sat in that chair, and of course there were no TVs or anything back then, so you had to be quiet while he smoked his pipe and read his paper. Just little things like that, not a whole lot.

LEVINE: Now is he your mother's father or your father's father?

BURCH: Yeah, my mother's father. And he was strict. I mean, my mother would tell me stories that when she would be going out dating my father, she had to be home, and my mother was 19 at the time. Had to be home at 10 o'clock. Now over in Ireland, which I just left there, on Tuesday I got back, it doesn't get dark until 10:30. In the summertime. Anyway, short story was, she got home like three minutes past 10 and he had the door locked, wouldn't let her in. She had to go to an aunt's house, because he said, "10 o'clock, I mean 10 o'clock." So that's how strict he was.

LEVINE: Yeah.

BURCH: That's just the way you grew up over there, I guess.

LEVINE: Yeah. Now do you think your grandparents, parents -- was the family from Belfast going back generations, do you know?

BURCH: Well no, I don't really, there were from a little place called Bambridge, and that's for argument's sake 15, 20 miles outside of Belfast. That much I know. And then they moved from Bambridge into Belfast to get better jobs because it was all agriculture farms, you know, but in the city -- Belfast is a big city, people don't realize it, but it is -- and he got a job as a policeman, so that's what did it. And he had, well I think it was 7 kids, so he had to needed the money to raise the kids. But I don't know how many generations lived in Bambridge. I just know my immediate family.

LEVINE: Nobody came from someplace else that you know of?

BURCH: Not that I know of. No, they all, we've been in Ireland for hundreds of years, yeah.

LEVINE: Okay.

BURCH: Yeah, yeah. That's it. Nobody came from nowhere else.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about your father. What was his temperament, how was he as a father in relation to you?

BURCH: He was the easiest going person in the world. I mean, everybody, I mean, even my aunts to this day and all of it, they talk to me, the nickname Burt. Ro-Burt, you know. And they just said, "There was nobody like Burt," they would say. He was just, he would never, I mean I can't explain it, but he never got angry, he never hollered, he never, he was just such an easy-going person. And everybody – to this day I've never met anyone that ever had a bad word to say about him, or ever to say, "Remember the time we did such and such," never, he's just that good of a person.

LEVINE: Wow. And your mother, was she the strict one?

BURCH: Oh, guaranteed, yeah. Strict wasn't a word. I mean you talk about child abuse today? Yeah, you should've been around whenever I was growing up, I'm telling you. Yeah, she was something else. My mother was, I don't know how to explain it, she was, she wouldn't stay at home, put it that way –allright. When my dad would get done with work – movies were a big thing back in those days, I'm going back to after World War II. Now I can remember, I know it seems hard to believe, but it's true, I can remember when I was 2, 3, 4, 5 years old. I really can. And my sister can, too. And my mother would be running to the movies. Every night that she could, with my father. And matter of fact we were just reminiscing about different thing: outside our house, we lived at 920 **Cromlin** Road, right outside the house was the old lamp. Gas light. And we had an old lamplighter. (He laughs) I know this sounds crazy, but it's the truth, I swear to God, when you interview my sister she'll tell you. And they'd go to the movies, and the lamplighter would come around and he'd look up and he'd say "Bobby, Isabelle" and we'd look out and he'd say "Are you all right up there?" and I'd say "Yeah, we're doing okay" and he said "Okay now,

you be good” because, you know, there were no babysitters or nothing.

LEVINE: Okay so your mother and father were at the movies?

BURCH: They went to the movies! And they said “You guys wash the dishes,” my sister was all of about 6, I was like 4. And we had to do the dishes, which we did, and then went to bed on our own, and had to be in bed. And that’s just the way you grew up, I mean there was no such thing as a babysitter, and we had open fireplaces, there was no central heating, you had to put sticks in and coal and all of it, just ever room had an open fire. There was no worry about the house going on fire, you kids in there, you know. That’s just the way it was (laughs). It’s truth. But she was strict. If you made a mistake, I mean, hit you, I mean a belt, I mean anything. She really did, you know. But I’m none the worse for it. You know what I mean, I actually believe they should be doing more of it today. If you want my opinion. But that was that, that was mom.

LEVINE: So it was just you and your sister, but you had a lot of cousins around...

BURCH: Well we didn’t have them around, no. We HAD a lot of cousins, I heard some click...I don’t know.

LEVINE: It’s going.

BURCH: Okay. We had cousins, but they lived in Bambridge, which was like 20 miles away. And in those days there was no cars, we had no transportation, you had to take the tram, as we called it, which wasn’t a bus, it was a trolley car, you would call here. And then take the train

to Bambridge, to visit, and you would do that once a month if you were lucky. So that's when we got to see each other. But my aunt and my grandfather lived – two aunts as a matter of fact – lived down the road, and that was about a mile away. And we'd walk down there and see them all the time.

LEVINE: Was there a name to the section of Belfast where you lived?

BURCH: Yeah, Lagonieol. On the Shankle Road, Crumlin Road, all there. You hear all the troubles were going on, over here? Right there.

LEVINE: How do you spell it? Lagenieol?

BURCH: L-A-G-E-N-I-E-O-L I believe, I'm not sure, I think it's something like, Lagenieol is the area it's called. But...

LEVINE: So did you go to school there?

BURCH: Yeah, I went to St. Mark's. And the schools were tough. I mean I was only 8 when I got here, so I was only in school like 2 years, maybe 3 at the most, and schools were hard because if you went to school you didn't know but you would end up, we called them "Doing Sums," which sums is arithmetic. And they'd give you, just make it easy, just say 1 and 1 is 2, 2 and 2 is 4, 3 and 3 is 6. Now if they gave you ten of them and you added them up, and if you got three wrong, you had to put your hand out and they came down with a cane, and I mean they just they didn't just they'd WHOP. And they'd hit you so many on one had, and it hurt too much, they'd make you put the other hand out, and you'd go home and your hands would be like this. And that's how you learned in school. That's the truth.

LEVINE: Now this St. Mark's, was this a Catholic school?

BURCH: No it was Protestant school. Yeah it was Protestant. I'm a Protestant.

LEVINE: You're a Protestant?

BURCH: Yeah. And it's strange, a friend I had with me, my lady friend, she never met another Protestant Irish person. 'Til she met me. She said "I didn't believe they had any!"

LEVINE: Well I don't know that I have either.

BURCH: There you go. Not that many people meet Protestant Irish people, but there are a lot of them.

LEVINE: I know, I read somewhere that there were more Protestants in...

BURCH: Northern Ireland.

LEVINE: ...Ireland than in...

BURCH: Well in Northern Ireland there are, I don't know about southern Ireland, but Northern Ireland there are. But...

LEVINE: What Protestant denomination was it? Like Methodist, Baptist...

BURCH: It was High Episcopalian actually. It would be the Church of England. Yeah, the Church of England. And did you ever know, not that this is anything to do with this, but in southern Ireland, in Dublin itself, there are only 2 cathedrals in all of Dublin. Both of them are Protestant. And that's a Catholic town. One is St. Patrick's, and the other one is

the Church of Ireland, the Church of Christ. Two Protestant ones in Catholic Ireland. But that's the way it is.

LEVINE: Okay, well so were you religious? Was the family religious?

BURCH: No, not really. My mother and father wasn't. My mother and father used run card games on Saturday nights and drink booze, everything you weren't supposed to do. And I really believe, I remember we had the open fire, and you'd bring out just like you'd see from the Ozark mountains, I mean, the old tin tub out. And you'd heat the water on the thing and pour it in. And my sister would get in first and get a bath on Saturday night, and when she got out, they didn't dump the water, I'd just get in. And that would be in. And they'd tell us to go to bed, and don't get up until they wake us the next morning, or don't get out of bed. And they would have everybody over. And my grandfather, he hated it, being very religious, and they'd play cards, smoke cigarettes, drink booze, all hours of the morning, and we'd be hearing them. And Sunday morning we'd get up, we were scared to death to leave the room, 'cause we knew what my mother would do. Sometimes they didn't get up until 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh huh.

BURCH: And we'd be in that bedroom, no breakfast, no nothing. So religion no, uh uh, nothing. They told me, my aunt told me, my Aunt May, she's the one that saved us, but anyway she told me that was born in the house, at 920 **Crumlin** Road. And down the street was the Elam Church, and Elam was a Brethren church. That's where I was baptized because it was '44, the war was still going on, and there was no other place they could baptize me. So to this day I'm still a Brethren.

LEVINE: Oh.

BURCH: So that's the way, I mean, I'm not a church-going person, I'm just saying I was baptized that way. And...

LEVINE: What's your first memory, just out of curiosity? Your memories go back so far. What's your first one?

BURCH: My first one was actually in a pair of football boots, as we call them, playing football. Here it's called soccer. And I just thought it was the greatest thing ever, you know what I mean? I can remember so much, I remember what we had was motorcycle races. And they used to go up to a place that's still called today Nut's Corner. Used to be an old airfield. And what the kids used to do was just watch them go past the house and write their numbers down, things like that, all the other kids in the neighborhood, all sitting on the wall. See who could get the most numbers. A whole lot of stuff. It would take forever to go through everything about Ireland, you know what I mean? I can just remember everything about it. And it's all changed now, since I went back.

LEVINE: Do you remember the waterfront? Yeah, there's waterfront in Belfast.

BURCH: Oh definitely. There's a loch of Belfast is there, and the whole bit. That's where they built the Titanic.

LEVINE: Right, exactly.

BURCH: My great-grandfather worked on that. Of course, everybody says that's why it sunk, because MY great-grandfather worked on it.

LEVINE: He did? Your great-grandfather.

BURCH: Mm-hmm. No he was my grandfather, what am I saying? My grandfather, he's the first one to emigrate here. He was 15 when he was working on it.

LEVINE: So this isn't the policeman grandfather?

BURCH: No this is my dad's grand – I'm sorry, I forgot all about him. My dad's father. I forgot about him. And he was a good guy.

LEVINE: He was around?

BURCH: Yeah. Now that I remember. He migrates, see what happened, he went to America after the war. He was in the war, World War I. After that, he took my father and my grandmother and went to Detroit. Don't ask me why, but he did. And while he was in Detroit he got a job at the Ford Motor Company. My grandmother got sick, and he had to leave and take them back to Ireland. He went back to Ireland and my grandmother died. That's my father's mother. She died, so he left my father with his two aunts to raise him, and one we called her Grandma **Tronten [ph.]**, but she was his aunt. Anyway he came back to America, he came back here, and somehow he ended up in Canada and he met this other woman and married her, which was my second grandmother I guess, whatever you want to say, Alice. And then they ended up making their way to Philadelphia, and years and years passed and then...I think it was around 1948 that he got in contact with my dad, who had grown up and had family. And he came over.

LEVINE: Oh your dad was already married when his father got...

BURCH: Got in touch with him. He left him back in Ireland when he was like 5, and then he didn't see him again until he was, I don't know, to be honest with you, 25, 30, something like that. And he flew over. And in those days flying was unheard of. And he wasn't rich, he worked in a Frankfurt woolen mill as a weaver. So he just saved his money. And he flew over and I thought that was the greatest thing going as a kid. Brought presents over, cowboy stuff, we were all into cowboys over there. And then he discussed it with him and sent money and we migrated to here.

LEVINE: So it was through him that you came here.

BURCH: Right, through him.

LEVINE: Is he the only one of your family that had come here before you did?

BURCH: As far as I know, yeah. He's the only one that I know of that was here.

LEVINE: You say that Frankfurt woolen mill...

BURCH: Yeah.

LEVINE: ...was in Michigan?

BURCH: No, that was in Philadelphia.

LEVINE: Oh. Philadelphia. Okay.

BURCH: Yeah, he lived in Philadelphia when he came over to visit us and talked my dad into migrating, and he said he could get him a job in the Frankfurt woolen mill. So my dad went, he was on an Italian ship, six months before us.

LEVINE: Oh. Now what did your dad do in Ireland before he came and worked in the woolen mill?

BURCH: He worked in the co-op, it was called. It was cooperation, or whatever –

LEVINE: Cooperative.

BURCH: Yeah, and it was like at Acme supermarket, or a food market. That's what it was. And he worked in there and did everything. He was a butcher, and he was this, he went out and collected bills that out due and stuff like that. And we lived directly across the street. All he had to do was fall out the front door and he was in work. Yeah so, that was that.

LEVINE: So okay, do you, can you remember what your expectations were before you came here? What you thought it was going to be like here?

BURCH: I thought it was just a Wild West. All I knew of it was through comic books and movies, they did take us to the movies, and every time we went there was a movie theater, and it was nicknamed "The Ranch" because all it showed was American cowboy movies. That's all they ever showed, and that's all we ever saw. So I just really thought it was the Wild West. And the comic books were Tom Nicks and Roy Rogers, whoever was out at that time. I remember Kit Carson, or

guys like that. That's what I was expecting, I didn't know from nothing. It was just amazing when we got here, I mean, when I got the on the ship it was amazing, because even when we went down to get on the ship you go down into Dublin, and from Dublin down to Cobh, and from Cobh the ship can't come in. So what you see on TV and everything is exactly what we did. They get these long whale boats, you get the whale boats, and then you've got to row out about five miles, the boats going up and down trying to get on the ship to come here. And it was a fabulous time on that ship. That I definitely remember.

LEVINE: What do you remember about that?

BURCH: Oh we met this guy, to this day I remember his name, Billy Butler. He was from New Orleans. And everything we did, we just ran all over the ship like it was the first time you were free, like Mom didn't care. It was not Mom...it was not like she didn't care, but I mean she was excited, too. But it wasn't when you were at home, "Go to bed, do this, do that, do the other." This time she knew you weren't going to get lost, because you were on a ship, and we used to, like first class is up there, we'd climb underneath, they'd have the passageway blocked, you know what I mean? With a gate, so people couldn't, and down where we were couldn't go up there. And we'd climb underneath it, we'd run all over the ship and everything. And I remember finding a buffalo head nickel. I had no idea what it was, Billy Butler said "Oh, a nickel!" and all that, "That's a nickel!" I didn't know what a nickel was.

LEVINE: Now Billy Butler was another kid?

BURCH: He was another kid from New Orleans. His mother and father came over to England or Ireland or wherever the ship came before it came to Cobh, and they were on holiday. So we met him on the ship and just made everything right. Until we got here.

LEVINE: Okay, so just to back-step a little bit, do you remember anything that you personally wanted to take with you?

BURCH: No. Honestly, nothing that comes to mind at all.

LEVINE: How about your mother? Did she bring certain things that you can recall?

BURCH: No. Ration books, from when we used to have ration stamps, I still have them at home that she brought over. And can't think of anything else that she brought over. No, not really.

LEVINE: Okay. So do you remember when the ship came into the New York harbor?

BURCH: Mm-hmm. Yes.

LEVINE: What was that like?

BURCH: Well we were up on deck, and it was in early morning actually when it came in. And we just were amazed, I don't know how to tell you, what would kids do? Your eyes get this wide, and you just look and say "Oh my God" – you don't say that because you're just a kid, but you say "Oh yeah, we're here!" and the whole bit. And I don't know if my mom was awake or not, but we ran to her and said "Here it is!" and the whole bit. And it didn't pull into port. I mean it pulled into port but it

anchored. Never pulled up to a pier. It anchored. And we couldn't figure out why it was anchoring. And then they were saying that they had to anchor off the piers and everything until the National Health or whatever came out to inspect people. So they wouldn't let, you know, get close. So, it took all day.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of others ships in the harbor at the time?

BURCH: No, I don't remember any, believe it or not. I don't remember another ship being there except ours. Of course, I wasn't paying attention either. I'm running around the ship saying "Yeah yeah yeah!" and I hadn't seen my dad in six months, so I was looking forward to seeing my dad and everything.

LEVINE: So after a day anchored in the harbor, then what happened?

BURCH: Well then they told us that we couldn't go any place. We didn't understand why. They must have told my mother. And we didn't even know she was sick, me and my sister, and at this time – we find all this out later on, you know what I mean? You don't know nothing when you're a kid – but as they took us on a boat, a little small boat, and said we have to go to, we didn't even know it was called Ellis Island. They just said you gotta go here and stay here.

LEVINE: Were you the only ones that they took on the boat, or did they take a lot of people?

BURCH: No, just us.

LEVINE: Because you had had your examinations in Ireland I would assume.

BURCH: Yeah, right. I had to get needles because – now here's a strange thing for you. When they gave you an examination, don't ask me how it happened, but somehow they found out that I don't have any TB in me. Everybody's got a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little bit of the other. This is what they tell you. So they injected it. Fine. Then we come to find out my mother had tuberculosis in her lung, and it died, wasn't even alive in her. Supposedly. Now I'm telling you what I hear. I'm not a doctor. And they said it had died there and it's just a growth fungus, whatever, half the lung wasn't any good, but they couldn't let her into the country. But yet they were injecting me with it supposedly to make sure I had some in me, and then they, like that. And as far as I know, when we left...I know she had x-rays and everything, because when my dad was coming, six months beforehand, the same thing for a physical. I remember him going and his teeth were real bad, he had a real problem with his teeth. So in those day there wasn't nothing you could do, and he had something like 16 teeth and they had to all come out, they told him, so he could get in the country. Well he went down and they couldn't, they didn't have novocaine back then, all they had was gas. For some reason he wouldn't go under with the gas. So they sat one day and pulled 8 teeth out with nothing. And he came home, and he sat in front of the fire, and we had no electricity, there was no ice, no nothing, and he just sat there – and this is the only time I've seen my dad cry – and he just bled into a thing. And the next day he went back and had the other 8 pulled out. I swear to God. And he came home that night and did the same thing. And he had one bone chip up here all his life, and he would never, don't blame him, he would never go to a dentist again, you know what I mean? It took him 30 years before he would finally get false teeth. He would eat steak and everything, just with his, he would never go back. But that's how perfect you had to be.

When we got here, they gave my mother another x-ray, and somebody made a decision that she couldn't go.

LEVINE: So in other words – I guess you had to piece this together later – but she must have had the TB in Ireland, and it must have been detected.

BURCH: I don't know if it was detected.

LEVINE: You mean it was detected until here.

BURCH: Right, that's it. See we didn't have doctors like they have here and all that. We lived it day by day, and you didn't go to a doctor. Unless you were dying.

LEVINE: Then she must have become ill on the ship, and that's why they...?

BURCH: No, nothing wrong with her.

LEVINE: Well then why did they bring you here if they didn't...how did they come to believe...?

BURCH: When they came out, they had to give everybody a physical.

LEVINE: Oh, on the ship.

BURCH: Right. Now either my mother had to, the x-rays that she had taken before she left to bring with her, or they gave her an x-ray on the ship before she got off and then they discovered it then. I kind of think she had x-rays taken in Ireland and they just handed them to her and said, "Take these with you."

LEVINE: And so when they saw those x-rays they realized something was wrong.

BURCH: Right.

LEVINE: That makes sense.

BURCH: That's what they did.

LEVINE: But for you, you were just getting a regular inoculation, which is always a little bit of the disease.

BURCH: Right.

LEVINE: That's what it is, to build up the antibodies to fight it, so that makes sense.

BURCH: Yeah, okay, so that was that.

LEVINE: So she had to go into the hospital here?

BURCH: Yes, she went in the hospital, yeah.

LEVINE: So did –

BURCH: She didn't stay in the hospital long now, mind you. She was only in the hospital, they only kept her in for about a week...in the hospital. Because she wasn't sick. That's what I'm saying. They said, I find out later that it had died in her. For some reason, the TB didn't spread throughout the whole body. So when they found out, and of course when you get off they said, "This woman's got tuberculosis," boom, we

got to put her in the hospital, quarantine and that kind of stuff. And then after a week when they seen she was just a regular person like everybody else, they just let her out of the hospital.

LEVINE: But she was staying over on the other side, or she was staying with you? And your sister?

BURCH: She stayed with me and my sister.

LEVINE: As I understand it, what they did at that time is they really didn't have much to work with...well, I'm thinking earlier actually. But they must have made sure she had fresh air, and that seem to be what they did for TB.

BURCH: Yeah but they didn't do anything. And once they found out she was okay...

LEVINE: And that took six months?

BURCH: Oh no no no no no. They knew she was okay as far as she wasn't invalid. They kept her here, just living with us in the bedroom. We had all had, in a room upstairs, from the...the...

LEVINE: The Great Hall.

BURCH: Yeah, the Great Hall.

LEVINE: Right up here off of the balcony.

BURCH: Yeah, right there. Of course, they had a big stairway going down when we were here. Anyway, even though there was, they figured it

wasn't a problem, back then you still for some reason had something done about it. So they kept her here. My dad had no money, like I'm telling you. So she lived here with us until my dad got in touch with some kind of politician – through my grandfather, who had been here a lot of years – and he in turn, I don't know how they did it, but they hooked up a Jewish hospital in Denver, Colorado that had just opened up or whatever. So they Jewish hospital said that we'll take your mother, your wife, whoever, my mom, right? And if you can pay the fare out – the train fare – out and back, we'll do the operation free of charge. So it took that long I guess for my dad get train fare and everything, you know what I mean?

LEVINE: So in other words, the TB wasn't active in her, but she still had to have an operation to remove the lung that was defective.

BURCH: Half of her lung. Yeah, the part that was infected and died, they still had to remove that piece of lung.

LEVINE: I see.

BURCH: That's how that came about.

END OF SIDE A

BEGINNING OF SIDE B

LEVINE: Do you remember anything...you know we have a hearing Room here, where it's like a chamber, a judge's chamber. Did someone have to come with your father and speak on her behalf to have her take this trip to Detroit?

BURCH: I wouldn't know, honestly. She went to Denver, Colorado. But no I wouldn't have no knowledge of that. We were kids, that was it.

LEVINE: So you think it took the six months to get that all arranged?

BURCH: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: That's why you were here.

BURCH: Oh yeah, definitely. More than likely if he had enough money, she'd have been out the next day on an airplane, without having to wait for train fare and everything. But I think through politics...And plus he had to find, he didn't know nothing about this country. He was just in it six months. So he didn't know there was a Jewish hospital, or a Presbyterian hospital, whatever, in Denver, Colorado. He didn't know where there was a hospital. And he had no health benefits. In those days, you had to sign before you came here that you would never become a ward of the state, you'd never become a ward of the country, or you could be deported. So if had no health benefits and she had to go into the hospital in Philadelphia, and there was no way to pay for it, they would just say, "See ya, go on back to Ireland." So you had to, I think it took the six months for him to get in touch with people and line things up and talk to a politician and all that kind of stuff, I imagine. Now all this is supposition to the fact that I was a kid. Our family, we never sat down and discussed the whole thing.

LEVINE: Afterwards, you mean.

BURCH: Oh afterwards, yeah. Even as I got older, it wasn't a big deal. You never think, that's why I'm saying the records today, where are they?

And you're saying...because car.. nobody knew this was going to be history. It was just part of life.

LEVINE: That's right. You were just coming.

BURCH: It's just part of life, part of life, that's all.

LEVINE: Could you describe in as much detail as you can remember what your living was like here for six months?

BURCH: Well, it wasn't fun; that's for sure. When we first came, it was different. There was no doubt about it. First of all there as electricity that we never had. There was indoor plumbing, we never had indoor plumbing. So these things were new. The first night in particular, just looking at New York all lit up. It just amazed, you just sat there and looked. I don't care how cold it was, we just, we were totally amazed. One of the strangest memories – don't ask me why – but one of the strangest memories is when we were here in that time, I'd say 50% of the people here were Asian.

LEVINE: Really.

BURCH: And all you got to eat, at least four times a week, was rice. And we're potato people (laughs). That's the only way to say it. But we had no, we were young. And even to this day – I don't mean to sound like I'm going to say – but we had no prejudice against anybody. I never saw a black person until I came here. Never. I lie: I saw Tarzan, so we saw them on there. But I didn't know what a blank person was, and that's the truth. Or a Chinese person, or whatever. You're a kid anyway. But when I came here, I was amazed that there was so many Asians, and even to this day I say to myself, "Wouldn't they

come in by San Francisco? How did they all get in here to Ellis Island?" And if there was any record, you check the records out, and you'll see how many Asians were here. Now they may not all been Japanese, but there was Japanese, Chinese, Hong Kong, whatever. They were here.

LEVINE: Now were these people being detained? The Asian people?

BURCH: As far as I know they were, yeah, they lived here.

LEVINE: Were numbers coming...In other words, anybody who was here when you were here were not simply arriving and being processed, because they were being processed in their country of origin.

BURCH: No, they were living here, yeah.

LEVINE: They were here because they were being detained. Just roughly, what were the numbers like of people who were here? Do you have sense?

BURCH: I'll be honest with you...

LEVINE: I mean I probably wouldn't as an 8 year old. But...

BURCH: No, as a rough guess, I'd say there was at least 100 people. I'd say that many.

LEVINE: And what did you do on a typical day?

BURCH: Nothing. Me and my sister would go outside and play hide and go seek and run around and get in people's way. We'd go in the kitchen...everybody knew us, we were the only kids here!

LEVINE: Oh, you were the only kids.

BURCH: We were the only kids. We knew everybody on the place.

LEVINE: Was there a library going on? Do you remember that?

BURCH: Not that I remember, no. I don't remember any library.

LEVINE: How about a play place on the roof?

BURCH: Nope. Don't remember any play place on the roof, no. I just remember there was a lot of bugs. We'd used to get up every morning, we'd have to take our shoes and shake to get the roaches out.

LEVINE: Roaches?

BURCH: Oh yeah! It's the truth. That was an automatic. You'd pick it up and go like that and knock them out. We'd get up and breakfast was like, I don't know what it was. Gravy on grits or something. Something that we didn't eat. We were from Ireland so we would just eggs and bacon or something. And the food was complete difference to us. And I remember one time, like I started to say as strange as it was...and the guy had – this is funny but it's the truth – he had a fingernail clipper. I never saw one in my life. I remember I came running over to mother, and asked my mother, he wanted to sell it to me for 50 cents. I didn't know what 50 cents was. And my mother, she wouldn't give me the money, I remember that. "You're not having that! I've got scissors."

And this and that. But that sticks in my mind. Something that silly. And to this day I look at a nail clipper and I can remember that like it just happened yesterday, honest to God. But where we came from we were still using farthings as a quarter of a cent. And **hateneys (???)** which is a half a penny and like that. So 50 cents was a huge amount of money.

LEVINE: Was there anything here that required money?

BURCH: On here? No. Not that I know of, no.

LEVINE: And so people were generally...well you were probably, being the children, you probably were treated nicely.

BURCH: Oh yeah! They didn't bother us, they just...well we weren't rowdy, either. My mom made sure of that. She'd definitely put you, like I told you, she was a disciplinarian, and if you were running around...you couldn't be running around yelling and whooping and all that. She'd put a stop to that real quick, send you outside. So we paid attention and we were quiet. And most of the women – well I don't remember a whole lot of women being on here, to be honest with you – most of them were men. Most of them were Chinese descent, or Japanese, or whatever. Asian, put it that way. But the women that were on here, if there were 20 of them, they would all just sit and knit and talk to each other, and the whole bit.

LEVINE: And could your father visit?

BURCH: Oh yeah. He came up every weekend. Matter of fact, I remember him getting off the ferry, and he was pointing to his legs. And my mother thought – back in them days it was a big thing – my mother

thought he was bringing her nylons. He was bringing me long pants. That's the first pair of long pants I ever had, because when we came here...in Ireland you wear shorts. And I remember the first pair of long pants he brought me. And he'd come up every weekend, when they had the trains running, matter of fact. But then he'd come up to New York – I forget exactly – but then he would take the ferry over, naturally. He had to get off the ferry.

LEVINE: Now when he came on the weekend, could he stay with you?

BURCH: No. He just came up and went home.

LEVINE: In the same day?

BURCH: In the same day. Yeah. Came up like on a Saturday and went home on a Saturday night. Or he'd come up a Sunday, go home on a Sunday night. One or the other. He'd come up day, that was all.

LEVINE: Now you had a little room just for you, your mother, and your sister.

BURCH: Right.

LEVINE: Were there other people, it doesn't sound like there were, were there couples? Were there other people who had rooms along the balcony?

BURCH: Yeah.

LEVINE: And were they just people who didn't know each other put in one room? Or do you know what...

BURCH: No. As far as I know, it seemed like they knew each other. But I really...honestly, I would be lying if I said yeah. I was a kid. I was just worrying about me, my sister, and my mother. I didn't pay much attention...I was a bit afraid to – like I say, it's a rotten thing to say – but these are people I don't know, and the whole bit, and it was just me and my sister, with no other kids on here, nobody to play with or talk to. And we had just gotten off the ship with Billy Butler from New Orleans, and he was heaven sent because he would teach us this and do that. And we thought that was great. Broke our hearts whenever we got off and he got off and went his separate way, and we said, "Now what?"

LEVINE: Did you ever see Billy Butler again?

BURCH: No, I never did. Isn't that strange? And I actually did go down to New Orleans a few years back and looked up in the phone book. And I said to myself, "You know, I could call up, and if it's the right guy, he probably wouldn't remember a thing." So I let it go. I figured I'd keep the memory up here.

LEVINE: As far as you know, were there any people being, sleeping in another building, like right behind this one?

BURCH: Mmhmm.

LEVINE: Called the dormitory, it's called.

BURCH: Yeah, there was, that's where most of them-

LEVINE: Most of them were sleeping there.

BURCH: Yeah.

LEVINE: But you were up here.

BURCH: Most of the men would go over there and go to sleep at night, yeah. Because there wasn't enough room. I bet you there wasn't 10 rooms here or something like that. If there was that. But most all of them slept in the dormitory.

LEVINE: And what was going on in the Great Hall?

BURCH: Nothing. That's what I'm saying, there was nothing. They didn't even really have newspapers that I can remember, because, well I was too young, didn't worry about any newspaper, but the people that were here, they couldn't read English anyway. We were fortunate. There wasn't that many people that spoke English. Us being from Ireland, we spoke English. But a lot of them, like I say, Asian and whatever, they didn't speak very well. And I remember, and there was no need for newspapers because nobody read them anyway. There was no TV, there was no radios, there was nothing.

LEVINE: How about movies? Did they show movies?

BURCH: I don't even remember.

LEVINE: You'd probably remember that.

BURCH: I know, and I don't remember them showing any movies. Now I'm not saying they didn't. I'm just saying I don't remember.

LEVINE: Or performers? Did they have people come out and...

BURCH: No, they definitely didn't have none of that, no.

LEVINE: They didn't have anything like that.

BURCH: I know they had a big, a nice big Christmas tree. Giant Christmas tree, because we never saw one like that. With electric lights on it, you got to be kidding me!

LEVINE: Did they celebrate Christ – were you –

BURCH: Oh yeah.

LEVINE: Were you here during Christmas?

BURCH: I was here. We were here. My dad came up and brought presents. I had 3 aunts which were his stepsisters. They all lived together with my grandfather. And they all came up, you know, the family came up and had a Christmas Eve thing together. Christmas day they came up actually, now Christmas Eve but Christmas day. And we spent the day together. And then they had to leave that evening and go home again, because there was no facilities.

LEVINE: Right. Yeah. How about the Statue of Liberty? Did that figure in your experiences in any way?

BURCH: No, not really, because we didn't know what it was, as usual. We never learned, we didn't go to school long enough in Ireland to know about the Statue of Liberty. And it was just looking at it and saying, "Wow, look at that sight." But mostly, I remember, I haven't been here in awhile, but you could see most of the back of it, instead of the front

of it. And I'd say, "I wonder what the front looks like?" (laughs)
Because no matter, you run around this island, which isn't that big,
and all you see is it right over there. And we never got off of here to
go see it, that's for sure.

LEVINE: Can you remember your mother and father's feelings or attitudes
about being here so long?

BURCH: No. I really don't...

LEVINE: Were they anxious?

BURCH: Oh of course! They wasn't upset. She just kept asking, "When are we
getting off, when are we getting off?" And he'd just keep saying, "I'm
trying my best. I'm working at it." This and that. And they
probably...you never think of this when you're a kid now, but they'd
say, "Okay, youse too go out to play." And out in the island, we'd go
out, and I'm sure they went up to the room.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh huh.

BURCH: (laughs) Took care of business or whatever. I'm not thinking that
when I'm 8 years old! But I know... Sure they were anxious. They
wanted to get off. She wanted to get it done. She was really worried,
I know that, about, when you're having an operation. And it's bad
enough being here, and people are close, but you can't get to them in
Philadelphia. But then they telling you that you're leaving here and
going to Denver, Colorado.

LEVINE: You're going further away.

BURCH: But where's that? You have no idea where that's at. Now she's got to go to someplace else by herself, without her husband or anybody to at least go there and get her acclimated a little bit, for a week, and then say, "Okay, I'll see you when .." She just went on her own. And they had people there at the train meeting her because she would have no idea. You know, where do I go? She would have no idea what's the money. Because she didn't use money here. She had no idea how to use money or anything. Frightening experience, I'm sure.

LEVINE: Was there a period of time when there was the question that you might be sent back?

BURCH: Not that I know of, no, not that I'm aware of. Nobody ever said that.

LEVINE: Uh huh. Well I guess once they saw that it wasn't infectious-

BURCH: Right. That's what I think did it.

LEVINE: When you think back on that period of Ellis Island for six months, how do you think...how is it? What kind of a phase in your life, how do think about it, feel about it?

BURCH: I don't...I look back on it now, and I just say, "Geez, how did I make it?" I'm glad I was 8 years old. I think it was tougher for anybody else like my mother, an adult. Kids can go to their own mind and make up fantasy worlds. Even if you're sitting on a bench looking at New York and you can invent stuff. Adults can't do that. So it's tougher for them if there's nothing to occupy your time. I'm sure they would get more depressed than a kid would. Kid could pick up a stick and play guns and stuff. They can use their imagination. So I look back on it and just say it was an experience that we went through. The mind is a

wonderful thing. It makes you forget all the horrors. You always remember the good. If anybody went to school, and you say, "School's terrible." But today you remember all the good parts. You remember all the wonderful times you had in school. But all the bad parts, like if you didn't do this test right, you forget about it. And that's just what happens with Ellis Island, the same way. You forget about it. More so the remembrance comes up now when other people talk about it. More so than myself. Other people will be talking about this and that and the whole bit. Then they'll say, "Well you came from Ireland." And then I'll start telling them, just like I'm telling you, "No kidding! Well what about this, what about that?" And then there's other ones that say, "You couldn't have been there. It closed in 1930." But as far as being here, I look back on it, and I always just...part of my life. Just...no hard feelings. I'm here. I'm glad I got through it.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay well just a thumbnail sketch, because we're getting close to an hour of tape here. Where did you go? You went with your father, you and your sister went with your father to Philadelphia.

BURCH: Yeah. To my grandfather's house.

LEVINE: To your grandfather's house. And then did you go right into school?

BURCH: Yes. Right into school and into **Pastorius (ph.)** elementary school.

LEVINE: How was the school by comparison with the one you had gone to in Belfast?

BURCH: Piece of cake. Are you kidding me? They treated you with kid gloves. Even then it was tougher than it is today. But you didn't have to worry about getting your hands beat and the whole bit, slap behind the head.

I went to public school. Here Catholic schools still did that in those days, but I didn't have to go through that. Plus, I'll tell you, in my opinion, is that the way they taught in Ireland was very strict. But you learned. Now when I came here and went to school, I couldn't believe how the kids here, at my age, didn't know how to spell or count as good. You got to beat into you, no doubt, but you learn. Because they skipped me two grades and my sister two grades. Because we were that much ahead of the other kids. But it wasn't because we were that smart. It's just because repetition, getting hit meant you're going to learn it, rather than get hit. That's the way it was.

LEVINE: Did you ever get treated like – the word “greenhorns” may have gone out of fashion by the time you came here – but did you get, did the kids tease you?

BURCH: Oh yeah. When I first got here, yeah. I had an accent, just like anybody else. And the one guy up the store, used to go up there all the time, he called me Limey. It was a nickname he had. But it was in good nature. And all the kids would just laugh because I had an accent and you're from Ireland, and back then even if they had heard of Ireland, they were just thinking Ireland was some place where fairies live and all that. The pot of gold is there. They can't imagine at that young age that there are cities there, and railways, and all that stuff. But it was all good-natured. I can't remember anybody as I was growing up ever being mean because I was from Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

BURCH: No, I can't remember any of that stuff.

LEVINE: Well, so what did you do? You went to school, and you got out of school, and what did you do then?

BURCH: Well I got out of school and I became an American citizen. I had to become an American citizen. I joined the Navy, and I was going on submarines. And to go on submarines you had to be a United States citizen. So I went down and got my citizenship papers and my picture and all that on it and I joined the Navy, went into submarines, did 4 ½ years in the Navy. Went to Vietnam, came back, in the Navy. And then after I got out of the Navy, I was getting disability pension because I got hurt in the service and the whole bit, and they told me, "Why don't you go to the Post Office?" Which I did, and I worked in the Post Office. And I retired from the Post Office after 36 years and one month, and went to Florida. And that was the story of my life(they laugh). And I loved the Post Office, the best job, everybody should be a mailman. It's just a wonderful job. And I got up every morning, and never once did I say, "Geez I got to go to work today." And I hated cold weather, and it gets cold in Philadelphia like crazy. But I didn't mind it. For some reason I didn't mind it.

LEVINE: That's wonderful.

BURCH: Yes, I really enjoyed it.

LEVINE: You're blessed.

BURCH: I really was. I really enjoyed it, there was no doubt about it.

LEVINE: Well how do you think about your Irish and American sides? How do you think about yourself in terms of being Irish, being American?

BURCH: Well, I for one, when anyone asks, I'm an American. I have 3 sons, 3 grandsons. And I tell them they're American. "But Dad, you were born in Ireland!" And I said, "Yeah, but you were born right here in America." I said, "So you're American." I argue with people that when you accept a country, it's your country. I fought for this country, it's my country. I love Ireland. My whole family still lives in Ireland. But I'm an American. I'm not American-Irish. I'm not Irish-American. I'm American. And I keep telling my kids that even though they'll go to different places and say, "Yeah, I'm Irish-American!" I say, "No, you're not. You're American." How long does a country have to be before they recognize it as a nationality? This country has been around, just use 1776. That's 200 and some years old. You don't go to France and they say, "Yeah, let's see. Genghis Khan came, so I'm half this, and half..." They say, "No, I'm French." It's just the way it is. You can't go...but this is the only country where everybody say I'm Italian-American, I'm African-American, I'm Irish-American. The only time they'll admit they're American...let them go to Germany or France or someplace. And God forbid they get in some type of trouble. First thing they say is, "I'm American, I want to see the American consulate." They don't say, "I'm an Irish-American, I want to see the Irish consulate." Or I'm German-American...oh they're American, right then and there. But when you come here and you go in and talk to people, what nationality...I'm proven this to people. You ask them what nationality, well what nationality are you?

LEVINE: You're asking me?

BURCH: Yes.

LEVINE: I say American.

BURCH: Okay. But you go and you ask 9 out of 10 people will say I'm Irish-American, Italian-American, African-American, whatever. 9 out of 10.

LEVINE: Why I say that is such a mixture of so many things that I'm not clearly Irish-American, you know what I mean?

BURCH: Yeah well nobody is, in my opinion. Some of these people I talk to have never set foot in Ireland. They'll turn around and trace their family back, "Well my family came here 300 years ago." But they still want to maintain they're Irish-American. I don't know why. So the answer to your question is I consider myself American. I really do. I love Ireland. My family lives there. I just came back on Tuesday from there after 3 weeks. It's a wonderful place. But I'd never back. This is my country.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

BURCH: So there you go.

LEVINE: Do you think, did your mother maintain certain things about her Irishness when she came here? Where there things she held on to that were strictly Irish in this country?

BURCH: I wouldn't know. Her cooking, if you want to call that. We still always had the Irish food, the Irish stew, Irish meals. She never would become an American citizen.

LEVINE: She didn't want to. She wanted to remain-

BURCH: Nope. Her whole life she remained...She loved the Queen, she loved the King. Things like that. Now my dad became a citizen, I became a

citizen. My sister never became one until – well she did actually, but that was last year, after 50 years. But as far as anything else. We went to a neighborhood naturally where there was a lot of Irish people. Catholic and Protestant. We never had any prejudice that way like they have these days. And I can remember being here and having Saturday night and no one ever went to a bar or anything because they couldn't afford it. So this Saturday night they'd have a party in this house. Next Saturday night they'd have a party in this house. And so on and so forth at everybody's house. So that was the Irish way of doing things. Me and my sister ended up babysitting for everybody else because we were the oldest, so we'd end up...Matter of fact, one of the guy we babysat for, he's still a good friend of the family, Shamus McCaffrey, and he's a judge in Philadelphia. And he grew to become a judge. And he's from Belfast, too. But the Irish, Irish stuff, no, I can't, you leave it behind. And we came in such a whirl world, world, will, whatever which way you pronounce it there, is everything was happening so fast in the fifties and sixties, with the inventions of here, and cars. And we never had anything. I mean nothing. A lot of people came here had nothing. And even back home we had nothing, like us. But to see electricity, a telephone, we didn't know what a telephone was – that's the truth. Like I say, we didn't even have indoor plumbing. I used to stand...In the olden days, at my grandfather's house, you press a button on the wall, instead of the switch, and the light would come on and you pressed the one below and the light would go out. And we'd just stand there pressing the buttons, on and off, on and off. And television. He was lucky enough to be one of the first ones to have a TV this big.

LEVINE: 8 inches or something.

BURCH: Yeah, whatever it was. Wouldn't even have to be on. We'd just sit there and look at it. (they laugh) It's amazing. Good times.

LEVINE: What would you say in your life has been like a high point, or has given you a lot of satisfaction?

BURCH: I don't know. Just...there's nothing in particular that I could actually point to. I guess the best thing is, I can honestly say, is retiring from the Post Office with 36 years. Actually working, when I didn't think...I mean I got turned down by the police because of my injury with the Navy and the whole bit. And just lasting that long in the Post Office delivering the mail and loving the job.

LEVINE: Yeah. That's wonderful.

BURCH: That's the only thing I could relate to. And making it through life. That's all. Like anybody else.

LEVINE: You say you have 3 sons?

BURCH: Yeah.

LEVINE: You want to say their names?

BURCH: William, Paul, and Robert: Those are my 3 sons.

LEVINE: And you have grandchildren.

BURCH: Yeah I have William, Matthew, and Michael.

LEVINE: Uh huh.

BURCH: And Kelly Ann is a granddaughter. So there you go, that's the whole family. I still memorabilia at home. I still have the books that you got on S.S. America. The passenger list, with everyone's name on it.

LEVINE: That you got on the ship?

BURCH: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh wow.

BURCH: I still got that. And I still got, what else do I have? Brochures inside, folded up, excuse me a minute, inside like this here you take out and it tells you when you're in New York what the taxi fares should be, and what this is done, and the whole bit. And it's got the day plan, the movie tonight will be such and such. I got all that stuff at home. I saved it. I'm a saver for all that stuff (laughs). If they ever need anything from the S.S. America. As a matter of fact, the sister ship from S.S. America is sitting in Philadelphia. So if you ever go to Philadelphia you look for it. The S.S. United States.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh huh.

BURCH: And they're going to refurbish it. But that's the sister ship to the one I came over off. It used to be the fastest ocean liner in the world in its day. 1952, matter of fact. And it's sitting there in Philadelphia rusting away: S.S. United States.

LEVINE: And can you go on it?

BURCH: No. They're trying to refurbish it now, and hopefully they will. But it's a monument from the fifties. And it's still sitting there.

LEVINE: Okay, well we're just running an hour here. Is there anything you would like to say before we close?

BURCH: No. I'm just surprised that I'm being interviewed for this, that's something. And I just hope to find out more information about my family being here. I hate to see the archives just stop at 1924, or even go up at...it says on the wall that they have ships' registries up to 1957. But I don't know where to locate 1952. So I'm hoping-

LEVINE: I think I can help you with that.

BURCH: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay. Well I just want to say that I'm speaking with Robert Burch, and he came here in 1952 with his mother and his sister, and was detained for six months, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW