

EI-1399

THOMAS J. CRONIN

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LEVINE: Today is November 5th, the year 2005. I'm here at—at Ellis Island in the Oral History Studio. And I'm with Thomas J. Cronin, who worked here at Ellis Island. The position started out as being one of a guard and then was changed in title to security officer. He worked here from the fall of 1944 to late winter of 1950. He's now 82 years of age and has come here today with nine, I think, [chuckles] family members, the Cronin Clan. And he lives in St. Albans, Vermont and they all came down from Vermont and other places to be here today. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And if we could start, please. If you would say your birth date for the tape and where you were born.

CRONIN: Was born on May 13th, 1923 in New York City.

LEVINE: Oh. And did you live in New York City for quite a while?

CRONIN: I lived in New York until I went in the military service when I was about 20 years old.

LEVINE: Wow. Okay. Now, what part of New York City did you live in?

CRONIN: Manhattan East Side.

LEVINE: Was it Lower East Side? Upper East Side?

CRONIN: It was 42nd—46th Street and Second Avenue.

LEVINE: Wow. That's kind of Middle East Side. Right? [chuckles]

CRONIN: Oh, yeah. The UN is there now.

LEVINE: Yes, right. Uh-huh. Well, what was your mother's name?

CRONIN: Her name was Lucy Thinba [PH] Buckley Cronin.

LEVINE: Did you say Thinba?

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay.

CRONIN: That's—that was a given name. Buckley was her maiden name. And of course, she's married to my dad.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

CRONIN: John Francis Cronin.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, on your mother and father's side, had they been living in New York or New York City for—for quite a while?

CRONIN: For a number of years. However, both of them had immigrated to the United States from Ireland.

LEVINE: Both your mother and father?

CRONIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Oh, h—were they married before they came or—

CRONIN: No, they were not. They were married after. They met here in the United States.

LEVINE: Did they ever tell you anything about their immigration?

CRONIN: Not—no. My mother arrived in Boston when she immigrated and my father arrived in New York. As far as I know, they never were—spent any time on Ellis Island, they themselves.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: You know, I might say though that in the subsequent 20 years, I did read my father's nationalization documents, as I continued after 1951 in the Immigration Service. I had occasion to read his naturalization papers. He was naturalized in New York.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did they ever tell you how they met?

CRONIN: I believe it was through family members that they met each other. I don't think that they knew each other very well in Ireland, although they came from pretty much the same area, which was Cork City in—

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: —Cork County, Ireland. My mother's, however, father had been a British military soldier. And my mother, in her early years, spent time in Nova Scotia and India and a few other countries around the world with her father and mother.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Were they—were they as—a religious—why were they going to these far-flung places?

CRONIN: Well, with her father as a soldier in the—

LEVINE: Oh, as a sol—

CRONIN: —in the British Army.

LEVINE: Ah, I see.

CRONIN: The fact is that he never rose above the rank of drummer.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CRONIN: So he wasn't much of a soldier. [chuckles]

LEVINE: He could march though. [chuckles]

CRONIN: Yeah, he could march.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Okay. Well, so—how do—when you look back on your boyhood in—in New York City right in the heart of Manhattan, what—how do you—what are the things you remember about it? How do you think it had its—its effects on you, the impact of growing up in New York City during the period that you did?

CRONIN: I think it had a good impact. New York City then is not what it is now. New York City in that—in those days were groups of neighbors. And they were like small neighborhoods. And people looked—took care of each other and looked out for each other. And they all knew one another. Now, of course, most of it is transient. And I haven't lived in New York for a long time. No desire to, really.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: But—

LEVINE: Was it—was there an Irish enclave around where you lived?

CRONIN: Not really. Most of my friends were of other nationalities, Spanish, Polish, Jewish, Italian. Not particularly. I—I wasn't brought up in that kind of an atmosphere where—where a group were all Irish or—or—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: So not really. And that may have had an influence on my later thinking in my life, because I—I enjoy all kinds of people.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you recall any immigrant children, like, coming into your school or neighborhood, and how—and how they were either accepted or not?

CRONIN: I don't recall any immigrant children coming into the school. I do recall relatives and their immigrant children coming, not great many of them. But they fit in very well with the neighborhood. That area that I lived in was not totally an Irish enclave. It was more—it was a mixture.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Now, your mother and father—can you say anything about the contact, or lack thereof, that they kept up with—with their relatives in Ireland?

CRONIN: Well, [clears throat] they—they—my father's family were a little difficult and did not seem to have a—a family relationship. They were distant. They were not hostile toward each other but they lived separately and apart from one another. My mother had only a brother here. She'd remained pretty close to him. They—they—but there wasn't—there

wasn't much of—I do remember that my—during the Depression, my father had a job as a supervisor at the American Express agency and worked throughout the Depression. And my mother and father did care for a lot of people during that period of time by supporting and giving food and so forth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: But it was not always just to relatives. It was to anyone who was in need.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. But as far as the relatives over in Ireland, th—was there a lot of communication on your mother's part?

CRONIN: No. There wasn't any—there wasn't that much communication on either of their part.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Uh-hmm. Okay. So you went into the service as a 20-year-old?

CRONIN: Yes.

LEVINE: And what branch?

CRONIN: The Army.

LEVINE: Army. And what was happening then? That would be what? 1943? Was the middle of the—

CRONIN: Yes, around that time.

LEVINE: —war.

CRONIN: I went in and I tried, actually, to go into the Naval services but I was turned down because of a physical condition. I had a hernia. And then I went into the Army and was discharged on a medical reason because I had a hiatal hernia, which I've had all my life. I was not—at that time, it was kind of rare. I don't think it was—many doctors would di—diagnose somebody with hiatal hernia. The pat answer was, "He has a nervous stomach."

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And I lived with that for a number of years until I found out that I did have a hiatal hernia.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So can you say anything about the buildup to the war? I mean, d—were you anxious to go into the Army or—or into the service, I should say? Or—

CRONIN: Yes, I was anxious to go into the Navy because almost all of my friends had already left for the service. And I—I didn't care to be left behind or—or anything like that. As to buildup, there was—it was very confusing time. And it was when—when Father Cocklin [PH] was on the radio with his social justice programs, radio programs. And people were looking up to Lindbergh, yet criticizing Lindbergh because of his pro-Nazi views. We lived near Yorkville. And Yorkville certainly had its share of German sympathizers. And maybe that had some influence. But I never—I—I guess—I almost always could see through them, or feel my way through that kind of a—a problem.

LEVINE: Hmm, hmm. So—so—but—but people believed in the war and—and people wanted to go and fight and—

CRONIN: Yes, they did.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: They did.

LEVINE: Yeah. Oh. Okay. Well, so—so then, because of your—of—of your hiatal—hiatal?

CRONIN: Yeah, hernia.

LEVINE: Hernia—you couldn't—you couldn't get into the service. So—so what happened?

CRONIN: Oh, excuse me. I did get into the service. I was discharged—

LEVINE: Discharged.

CRONIN: —from it, the service, because of that.

LEVINE: Okay.

CRONIN: Okay.

LEVINE: Then what did you do?

CRONIN: Okay, I met my wife. We weren't married. We talked about our future. And I had been working for the Railway Express Agency, American

Express Agency, and I was in poor health with the hiatal hernia. And we decided that I should look for a job, a civil service job. I got to tell you, my wife was only 17 when we were married and I was 21. And she had more sense than I did and she was looking out for the future. And I haven't been sorry that I entered the service. But I went down to Civil Service Commission. I applied for a job as a customs guard. And when—

LEVINE: Customs—?

CRONIN: Guard.

LEVINE: Guard, uh-huh.

CRONIN: And was asked to be interviewed as an immigration guard. And I didn't know much the difference but I took the immigration guard. And I was never sorry for it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So when you took that job, wh—what was your first work site?

CRONIN: Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Ellis Island. Oh.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Okay. Well, when you—did you feel that you had some connection to Ellis Island because your mother and father had immigrated here? Or wasn't that really—

CRONIN: Well—

LEVINE: —a part of your thinking?

CRONIN: No, that—that never was a part of my thinking. It was—it was for someone from the East Side with a—with not too great an education, an opportunity for advancement and for future—future growth. I enjoyed working here. My father and mother had no relationship or association with Ellis Island. So there was no—no—nothing of the sort that you implied.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. So when you got here, was there a large work force?

CRONIN: No, there—when I got here, it was [clears throat]—just go—and it got toward the end of the war. And most of the guards who had worked here were older men, and, I mean, some pretty considerably older. My—I—I

got hired and about week later another young man got hired, Dante Rossi [PH], his name was. And because we were both in our very early 20s, we were assigned many of the difficult tasks, the tasks of escorting people for deportation and so forth, mental cases among those, and trips to Florida to deport Cubans and Jamaicans and what have you. An interesting story, and I think of it now as—we had, in detention—the figure fluctuated quite a lot. It could get as high as a thousand people detained here. These were not immigrants. These were people under deportation proceedings primarily. And one—there was a—an old guard by the name of Maxie Klein [PH]. And God love him, but he had such bad eyesight that he had thick glasses and he still had to use a—

LEVINE: Magnifying glass.

CRONIN: —magnifying glass to read the documents and so forth. And he was kind of in control of when people were going out. And I walked by his office one day and he and one of the other older guards were trying to handcuff a big, robust Englishman. And they were having trouble. So I and, I believe, Don Rossi, jumped in and we tried to help subdue the man so we could handcuff him to take him off Ellis Island. And by the time we were finished, somebody said, “Okay, I got him.” And actually, Maxie had handcuffed the other older guard instead of the prisoner. And we—

LEVINE: [laughs]

CRONIN: We all kind of laughed, as you do, and so did the guy that was being deported. He thought that it was funny too. And he went very quietly after that and we didn’t even need to handcuff him.

LEVINE: Oh, that’s great.

CRONIN: But that—that’s—they were older men—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: —there at that time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, now, who was being deported? What were the reasons for deportation pretty much at that time?

CRONIN: Pretty much at that time, and of the group that I’m talking about, the group which, required security [unclear], were foreign crewmen who were jumping the ship en masse in the United States. The—the—I guess the story has never been told about how many merchant vessels were sunk. Even today in Florida and from my own knowledge, you walk along the beach down there and you’ll pick up tar of—or tar and oil. And most of it

is from the vessels that were sunk in the Atlantic Ocean. And so most of the deportees were people who were detained because they had jumped ship. They had not been granted permission to stay in the United States on arrival. And they would be caught by the investigators and brought to Ellis Island. And there was a kind of an expedited deportation process in—in effect at that time. And they would—rather than deport, say, an Englishman or a—a Scotchman or an African or whatever it was, to their home country, they would effectively deport them by arranging for them to get employment and convoys and vessels leaving the United States. It wasn't pleasant at a lot of times. The shipping companies would call the supervisors here on Ellis Island and say they were looking for six able-bodied seamen and one apprentice engineer or something, maybe, for that. And so the people would go through it, find six able-bodied seamen and an apprentice engineer. And we guards had to take them to these ships that were convoys leaving the United States. And many of them, I'm sure—ships were sunk, as lots of ships were sunk during the war. That's the kind of deportation. It was an expedited process.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So you would take them, like, to a pier in Manhattan where the ship was—or Brooklyn or somewhere?

CRONIN: Yeah, we would take them—we would take them to a pier in Manhattan or Jersey or Brooklyn—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: —and wherever there was ships. As you might know, the convoys—the—the departure times of convoys was pretty much of a secret. It was not much of a secret to us when we knew we had to put crewmen aboard a ship. We knew they were getting ready to go. Sadly, and I don't look back with it with pride, but quite often those crewmen would be taken aboard the ship. And the captain or the first officer or whoever was in charge would tell us to put them in a paint locker, which is a steel structure on the deck of a vessel, which is locked and the reason it is a steel structure is because it had combustible paints in there. And so it was on the deck. And we would put these crewmen in these lockers and they would lock the door. And we would wait until the ship departed, because we had to visually document their departure. But they would—they would go out—theoretically, out—when they were out at sea and not able to jump ship or jump off the ship, the captain or the first officers would leave them out of the locker and put them to work. They didn't have much choice at that time, did they?

LEVINE: No. So was the reason they jumped ship in the first place to get—to get off of a vessel because they were being sunk?

CRONIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Wow. Hmm.

CRONIN: Many of them.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: I'm sure there were others. Now, that did—and I mention only Europeans and Africans. But that was quite true with Chinese too, as Chinese made up a great deal of the crewmen that were—that were jumping ship. And—and in Ellis Island in the facility, at least part of the facility, which I haven't been able to recognize as yet, there were dormitories and sleeping quarters for Asiatic—Chinese, primarily, and other than Asiatic with separate sleeping quarters upstairs. They would go up to the sleeping quarters. It was interesting—and I should be waiting for questions rather—

LEVINE: No, no, no. Please, go ahead.

CRONIN: But it's interesting in that the Chinese—we—the other crewmen would have taken advantage of the Chinese. So that's why they were kept separately.

LEVINE: Why would they have ta—just because they were lower down on the totem pole?

CRONIN: Maybe lower down on the totem pole. But Chinese—many of them are not robust as, perhaps, the European were or the African or Jamaican and so forth. But in the Chinese room, they would have a lottery. One of the—all of these groups seemed to have leaders grow out of the groups. And one of the leaders of the Chinese group would write a certain number or letters down on a piece of paper, tie it up with a piece of rope, throw it up on a pipe and pull it up. And that would be the lottery number for the day. And the Chinese could bet on that number and be awarded the prize in the nighttime, in the evening. We—we didn't have any riots with Chinese. We did have riots with the other groups. [unclear]—

LEVINE: Which groups would they be?

CRONIN: The Europeans, the Jamaicans, the—none—Asiatic groups. They'd have fights and we'd have to stop card games. Of course, we never allowed any alcohol. Allowing alcohol was—was—but it caused our—our own detriment because that would have made them brazen or—or angry and—and fighting. We did have a good share of riots here at that time.

LEVINE: Hmm. Now, what would—do you have any sense of what would cause a riot?

CRONIN: Well, the riots would start sometimes over gambling. While I couldn't specifically tell you the—that sexual situations might have arisen, boyfriend and girlfriends, similar to the—what they had in prison, although I must tell you that, in my experience, I had not seen that—very, very, very infrequently it happened. Card games. Somebody might say something that was—offended their nationality, or their color, or their race and it would start. And we would have to stop it.

LEVINE: Now, were all the men in one area and the women in the other?

CRONIN: They—what I've been talking about as crewmen as all men.

LEVINE: Men.

CRONIN: The women—that was a different section and a different hold. But the—the division of what the island—what I was talking about is primarily ship jumpers. The other detainees were different categories of people, including civilian enemy aliens that were held here, Germans. When I was here, I think just the—about the time I came, they had—had sent the Italians somewhere else.

LEVINE: Oh. Japanese, were they here then—when you were here?

CRONIN: No. But there were some people—there were some—I don't think Japanese but I believed them to be Siamese—Thailand—Thailand that may have been here. But I have no knowledge of them. I just—from he—hearing the other people talk. The Germans that were interned was—it was a very easy process for the Germans. I'm going to only guess because my m—memory is a little rusty. There might have been 70, 75 German enemy aliens detained. Some of them bore mustaches exactly like Hitler's. They—the Geneva Convention, which I had never even heard of before I came here—the Geneva Convention was adhered to strictly in the relationship with the enemy aliens that were detained here. They had their own supervision of the group. I was trying to think last night. I don't even remember where they used to go to eat. The others went to a large room where they had a restaurant and a food area. Whether they ate in their own pr—area or not, I don't know. They used to do wood inlays. [unclear] for example, cocktail tables and so forth with exotic woods, which, when visitors—their visitors came to see 'em, they would give them—and they'd sell 'em to help them support themselves a little better.

LEVINE: It's rumored that they had Nazi rallies and that kind of thing. Was that anything you ever saw?

CRONIN: Well, you see, if you think in terms of the Geneva Convention and the—the—totally—totally—the word—I'm trying to think of another word besides ruling. But the process of—of taking care of themselves was done by their own group. Were they Nazis? Were there? Yes, there sure was. They—I mean, the mustaches alone could tell you and the salutes could tell you. But they were not hostile toward the security officers here. And since we never had any—any riots with them or any situations that they couldn't handle themselves, we had very little factually to do with them.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Do you remember anything about their visitors?

CRONIN: A little, but—

LEVINE: Nothing—nothing that stood out—

CRONIN: Nothing that stood out.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: There was a man who was detained here and, oh, his name was William Gerald Bishop. And I—I want to just briefly tell you about him because I will be writing to you about him specifically. He was a—he was a man who claimed birth in Holyoke, Mass and had been a member of the State Guard, New York State Guard, was arrested as a youth in Ireland and deported by the British to Germany. I'm talking about 1917, 1920. As a result of that arrest, the U.S. government believed him to be a German. But he always maintained that he was a United States citizen. But he was the most radical individual you would ever meet. He had to be guarded one on one. He was not allowed to be guarded by Jewish guards because he would pick a fight with them. Or if they fell asleep on duty while they were watching them, he'd steal their badge and throw it in the bay. And at that time, when you lost a badge, you get an automatic [unclear] without pay suspension. At one time, he had a infected tooth. And rather than go to a Jewish dentist, he cut his tooth out with a razor blade. And there was a man who was my supervisor and who was supervisor of many of the guards. His name was Benjamin F. Nolan. Benjamin Nolan had been in the Border Patrol, went into the military during the war, became a military policeman, an officer. And then when he was discharged, he became in charge of the guards on Ellis Island—

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

CRONIN: —while he studied law. Actually, I think the job may have been created for him. I don't know. He was a good man but the—the truth is that there never had been a position like that before. Well—but he did study law, became a very good friend of mine, was a fine man. Eventually, became a judge in New York City and died a few years ago. And there is a street named after him in New York called the Benjamin F. Nolan Way.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: But Benjamin Nolan was assigned very secretively one night to escort William Gerald Bishop to a military base and fly with him back to Germany. And Ben did it as head of the security offices. And—but Ben had been in the military and had—had asked some of the military intelligence people to keep an eye on Ben—on William Gerald Bishop. Now, mind you, you know, we occupied Germany and Italy and all tho—we didn't have to ask anybody for permission to send somebody there. We could go ahead and do it. They followed him around for about a week. And after about a week, he went to a house in Austria and knocked on a door. And a woman came out and hugged him and they found out it was his mother, so he really was a German. I've done some research on it and found that Bishop allegedly was a colonel in the German espionage group sent to the United States to create havoc in this country.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: I had—I guarded him often alone.

LEVINE: What kind of a personality? How would you—how would you describe his—his temperament, his—his person?

CRONIN: If you were not Jewish, and I'm not saying this to be offensive in any way.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: If you were not Jewish, if you were Christian or—he would be a gentleman when he was around him, talk—carry on a conversation.

LEVINE: Right.

CRONIN: Never—I'm not speaking in favor of him either but I'm telling you—

LEVINE: Right.

CRONIN: —he was not a difficult man to—to watch.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: I remember he one time gave me a book. We weren't allowed to take anything from anybody. But he gave me a book by Bennett Serf, the comedian and—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: I remember that. One time he wanted me to read it. And [unclear] used to encourage me to get—move ahead and so forth.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: But he sure didn't like Jewish guards or anything Jewish. But he never associated with the Germans that went in detention either.

LEVINE: Wow. Just a—a question from earlier, w—did you have any association with the Marine Hospital, with the merchant marines who were—[clears throat] who were hospitalized here?

CRONIN: Yes, a—a little bit. They—they had a tubercular ward in the hospital, which was—which was made up of people who—who should have been in our custody. But because they had tuberculosis or transferred over there to the hospital, we used to have to guard them. Very hazardous to their health, incidentally, but we used to have to guard them in—and—and also, when people went insane we'd have to escort them over there. They'd be taken care of by the public health [unclear]. But we would have to bring them to ships to deport 'em after the war, or bring 'em to airports and put them on planes with es—escorts. I mentioned to you that we could deport anybody we wanted to Europe after we conquered them during Second World War. Well, Mussolini and Hitler would never agree to recognize many of their nationals that were in insane asylums.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: So they would not issue documents for them if they sent back there. And after the war was over and we occupied it, we started to clean up our mental hospitals [clears throat]—these aliens who were un—deportable. They—one time, they contracted with the Flying Tigers group out of California. And they set the—the—a plane, cargo planes, more than one, I think, up with cots and with—that they could strap the people in. And we went out to all these various [chuckles] hospitals in the New York

area, picking up these mental cases. Many of them were given tranquilizers—

LEVINE: Sedatives.

CRONIN: —be—before we'd pick 'em up. But quite often, the tranquilizers would wear off before you got back. So it wasn't easy to do. But we brought them all here and then moved them, some public health services hospitals on Ellis Island. They were held there and then they were coordinated to have Flying Tigers come in to the airport. We would get busloads of these people—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: —and put a guard in the back and a guard in the front, had them all tranquilized, and moved them from the airport—moved them from the hospital here up to the airport and put on board these transport planes. Wasn't like—I'll give you an illustration. One of them was a—had apparently been a seminarian in the Catholic seminary—seminary. And during—we had—the Ti—Flying Tigers flying in here were late, which made it difficult for us because here are all these people hallucinating and everything else on the buses. And then we—they had to be taken care of. They had to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water and we'd take 'em one at a time to the bathroom. I think there were four or five buses. So [unclear]. And I remember going into the airport; it must have been LaGuardia. And this man took care of what he had to do. And then he come out and he thought I was a priest because I was a authority figure. And he knelt down in—in the room in the toilet asking me to bless him, please bless him, and so forth. Anyhow, I went through this thing and then helped him up.

LEVINE: Blessed him.

CRONIN: Yeah, I blessed him. [chuckles] Couldn't get him out of there.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CRONIN: People were looking at me, you know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: And—but it wasn't—but—and the first man I ever seen drown I saw over there. Someone escaped from one of the wards over there, jumped off the seawall. And I was on guard duty and walking and I saw him. He was floating in the—in the bay.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, it sounds like you had a lot of people who were mentally—

CRONIN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —disturbed.

CRONIN: It was a—a basis for deportation, you know. Likely become a public charge or a—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And of course, I guess the people who jumped ship, I mean, they had been through a lot, right?

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: So that—

CRONIN: They were.

LEVINE: —could bring about—

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: —mental imbalance. Yeah. Well, [clears throat] so [clears throat] were they giving electroshock treatment th—that you know of to the mental patients at that time here?

CRONIN: I don't know. I don't know.

LEVINE: Hmm. Did—

CRONIN: You know, the—the closest I came to any of the treatments over there was in the TB Ward.

LEVINE: I see. So you didn't deal with psychiatrists or—

CRONIN: No.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Okay. Now, at night, did you, like monitor—guard the—the wards? The sleeping quarters?

CRONIN: Yes. They were—they were—they were on two floors, one, a day room with a large room that they walked around. There were tables, chairs, benches in there, access to outside area, which was fenced then and I see is not now. And when it came time for them to go to bed, we would count them from the day room and they would go by, as we'd have a clicker—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: —and count them as they went upstairs. So we knew if—we used to keep very close—remember I mentioned [unclear]? We used to keep the records and we knew what the counts always were. We didn't know the individual names of the prisoners but we knew how many were supposed to be where. Even when they went to dinner, breakfast and lunch, we counted them out of that dayroom into the—they went to the lunchroom. Then they would come back. It was a long walk. They'd come back through the corridors and we'd count them back in to make sure we got—if one was missing then we'd—obviously, we knew somebody was—had wandered off. There were very few escapes from this place, you know.

LEVINE: I was going to ask you that.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Were there any escapes while you were here that you know?

CRONIN: Only one German that I know of that, I think, escaped. But—but we kept pretty close watch on that count. I want to tell you a little interesting story. I don't know if these things are of any value to you. I was counting the European group of crewmen, pri—primarily, they were crewmen—back from lunch. And all of a sudden, some guy, one of the detainees, come running toward me and says he's been stabbed. And I didn't know what he was talking about but this Indonesian crewman walked by me. And the ba—whole back of his shirt was blood. And I looked to see what had happened and the guy was—was not—he was desperate. He was a little—I looked and there was a guy with a hunting knife in his hand.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: So I don't know. We used to be issued blackjacks. That was the only armament we ever had. We never had guns or anything. Blackjacks was the thing. And I reached in my pocket for the blackjack because I was going to have to take this guy down, and I forgot it in the locker. And so I ran up to him—ran 10 feet up to him. And I reached down and the knife had a—a finger card on it. You know how knives have the guards on the end of them. Fortunately, I was able to grab that guard—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: —and I pulled it out and I pushed him down, brought him back to Post A and sat him down. I was always discouraged. Nobody asked how he

had been disarmed, you know. But I told him he had stabbed an Indonesian crewman. We later found out that that guy, and I think I briefly mentioned this to you before, was an English subject who we never identified, who came to the United States with the papers of a serviceman who had been murdered in London, England. So, theoretically, the man who had the papers may have been the one who murdered him; I don't know. But anyway, we—we—the—the Indonesian man recovered. We put the—the Englishman into a—we had separate cells, you know, here at one time where we kept people. We put him in one of those cells. But then we brought him out and put him back in the general population. And he created another problem. And I don't know if you know that in the basement of this building there was a Coast Guard brig where they—

LEVINE: Well, I knew there was a little structure onto itself.

CRONIN: In the basement?

LEVINE: It—it was—no, it's back by a—it's—it's actually a docking area.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: And I—and I was told that was the Coast Guard brig. But—

CRONIN: It may—may be the same thing; I don't think so. But the Coast Guard brig that I remember was bars cemented into the floor and up into the roof. And it was in the basement.

LEVINE: Wow.

CRONIN: Well, we put this Englishman in the basement but we had to put a guard with him. And we put this guard down there and the—theoretically, was supposed to urinate in a bucket or something. And the Coast Guard guys did that, but this guard was soft hearted and let him out. And then he'd break his arm, broke the guard's arm—

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: —trying to escape. Well, he was sent to an insane institution. And as far as I know, the guy's still there. I don't think they ever identified him.

LEVINE: Wow.

CRONIN: Isn't that something?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: But that was s—some of the things of the—with the medical was the deportation of the mental cases. We used to fly mental cases down. The government, in effort to save money, would hire cargo airplanes for us guards to ride with people that we were deporting to South America, Jamaica, Cuba and so forth, with bucket seats on 'em where you sit along the side of plane. And you could look down and see the—the ground below. None of us thought much of it until one guy says, “How did we do—our insurance is invalid if that planes goes down.” So some of us objected to it. Then they started sending us on regular airliners, as opposed to—but I was on the plane when—when we had pretty violent patients. We'd sometimes send as many guards as we had deportees. And I was on with one and he was a Jamaican. And he was—he got matches somewhere; I don't know where he got 'em. But he was trying to light the fabric in the inside of the plane to put the plane on fire. It scared the hell out of me, you know.

LEVINE: Mmm!

CRONIN: But—

LEVINE: So in other words, you'd be with mentally insane people in a bottomless plane—

CRONIN: Well—

LEVINE: —going to South America?

CRONIN: Well, the plane had—it was metal on the bottom but you could see—

LEVINE: See through—

CRONIN: —holes, you know, where rivets had fallen out—

LEVINE: Oh, my gosh!

CRONIN: —and so forth, you know.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And it wasn't—it w—

LEVINE: Wow! That's a hazardous job.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: So did you make many of those trips?

CRONIN: I made ma—you know, we didn't always have insane. We'd have—but—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: —if we have Cubans to be deported that were not insane, we'd go down—we'd fly down there. Yes, I made many trips to Florida in those days, loved it. You know, [laughter] how—how else would I get to [unclear]?

LEVINE: Did you—did you get to stay a little bit after you got rid of your—

CRONIN: Yeah, once in a while.

LEVINE: —charge?

CRONIN: I called back and say I got sick.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, now, I imagine most people being deported did not want to go. I mean, th—they really wanted to stay here, so th—

CRONIN: Yeah, that's true. But you know, there wasn't that many that really created situations, really. It was inevitable. They knew they couldn't stay and they—

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

CRONIN: —and they—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: —were gonna go.

LEVINE: Did you ever have instances of people who—who were deported and turned up again back here?

CRONIN: Oh, yeah. Yeah, as the strongest man I ever met in my life was a Jamaican. He was a one-eyed Jamaican. He was in a—crewman. He had only one eye. He had been held on Ellis Island a number of times and was deported by being allowed to board vessels as a crewman to leave the country. Always come back. Whenever he'd come back he'd jump ship because he had a young wife in Harlem that he loved very dearly. And he'd get caught and he'd—he was very simple-minded guy. But not unpleasant but, as I say, the strongest man I ever met. And he would sit for a couple of days. And then he would want to come up to the

front office to talk to somebody about getting 'em out so—you know, and back again to his beautiful wife in Harlem. And Customs—the brass didn't always want to have him up there. They—we'd have to keep him down on the bottom. Well, one time I saw one of the g—guards pull a blackjack and rap him right on the head with a blackjack. If you get hit with a blackjack you're going to do down. The guy took his raincoat. He had his raincoat with him. The dropped his raincoat, says, "You want to fight?" [chuckles] Oh, my God! So we kind of quieted that down. And then one day he was there and he decided he knew where to go and he was going. And he ran away from Post A and ran down the corridors, which were all tile, white tile in those—those days. And Don Rossi, who was the—my friend who started just a short time after I, was running after him. And he tried to bite John—Don Rossi's ear. And Don Rossi avoided him but, as they came to corner, he gave him a shove right into the wall. And the guy was running down—and he ran full force right into that wall. Well, it did knock him out and it would have knocked anybody out but didn't hurt him very much. In an hour or so, he was back down talking about his pretty wife.

LEVINE: Wow.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Huh. So how did he—how did he get—in other words, it wasn't—he would get to see his pretty wife before he got picked up again and brought back here?

CRONIN: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: I see.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Oh, and then he—that's—now I understand what you're saying. Yeah.

CRONIN: And you've got to understand too that the guard force had not three shifts but four shifts, the security offices. One would work midnight. One would work days and one would work 4 to 12. And the other one would take people off the island. For example, a crewman who might have been employed in a restaurant, McDonald's Restaurant, had money due him. He also had an apartment where he had some clothes. That fourth group of guards would do those—what we used to call them details, take them out. They'd also be the ones dur—during that week. They'd be selected to take them to the ships for deportation, or take them to Florida, or take 'em out west or take 'em somewhere like that.

LEVINE: Well, that fourth group, was that—was that something that the guards liked being—

CRONIN: Yeah, they liked it.

LEVINE: —having that one? Th—

CRONIN: Yeah, they liked it because it—it was—it was a change, a tremendous change of routine.

LEVINE: Yeah. And how did you get back and forth to the island?

CRONIN: By the ferry.

LEVINE: It wasn't a Circle Line. It was just a ferry that took who? It took—

CRONIN: It was an Ellis Island ferry, serviced only Ellis Island. No one else.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: It'd [unclear] between Battery Park and Ellis Island once every hour. And then it would—the nighttimes it would—it would stop running.

LEVINE: Hmm. Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: Say, maybe seven, eight o'clock it'd stop running. And the only people around that were pe—immigration people or visitors or people that had just been arrested and were being put into detention.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you ever have to guard the visiting room?

CRONIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Where was that, by the way?

CRONIN: Well—

LEVINE: Do you remember?

CRONIN: It's over in that area where I told you they had the sleeping quarters for the—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: It was a big room, a relatively big room. It had benches on either side with a—a board partition going down the center of the room. It was one of the things—one of the places—that's where they used to hold the religious services too.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: There when they—

LEVINE: Did they have every denomination or—

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: Every—every denomination that wanted to be here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. Did they have any kind of entertainment for—

CRONIN: Never.

LEVINE: —people?

CRONIN: Never.

LEVINE: No.

CRONIN: Never entertained. Nothing.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: No social activities like that.

LEVINE: Yeah. Did you ever have to use your—did you use your blackjack much?

CRONIN: Not very much. Hardly at all, actually. It—you know, a few—if people know you have a blackjack, they're not going to fight you. And that's pretty much—blackjack was more psychological than anything else. No, I did not have to use my blackjack.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

CRONIN: You know, because the blackjacks are very, very dangerous. They're heavy weighted, you know. And they would have—they'd put a hole in somebody's head. You know?

LEVINE: Yeah. Were—would you have described yourself at that time as a very tough, in shape [unclear]?

CRONIN: I was in shape but my advantage was I was very young at that time.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CRONIN: You know? And I was working with old men. And we—if—for example, if we saw in the day room a card game had ended up in one of the corners of the room, you know, where they had tables and chairs, the other guards would always tell me to take off my jacket. And I would, and take off my tie and just sloulder around the room, and then jump on the table and grab the cards, because if we got the cards away from them there'd be no card games, you know. And they'd come running to help me. And I didn't mind that; it was fun, you know, at that age.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: N—nobody was going to hurt me. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: Nothing was going to happen.

LEVINE: Well, wh—what was it about you—I mean, it sounds like you were very well suited for your job.

CRONIN: I guess I was. I—

LEVINE: What was it about you that—that—that you would say, your temperament or your personality that made you s—you know, good at that?

CRONIN: Well, I—I—I was never frightened by it.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: By the job. We used to come to work sometimes. We had five or six men. They're guarding 4 or 500 people, you know. We'd make ourselves appear at different places. Nobody ever knew how many people were working. It never frightened me. The—dealing with the people, even the people that were being deported, was not—they were not difficult people to deal with. They were not all that difficult. Occasional things happened, like I might have mentioned in the story. But they were only occasion, you see. You know, on occasion.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: I was pretty well rewarded. Maybe [clears throat]—how do I say this without sounding egotistical? But I was—I wasn't well educated at that time, as I should have been. But I was more practical in my approach to things. And the—the older guys that were there, they were—maybe some of them kind of bitter and—and frustrated with the job. I always seemed to have some fun. I was rewarded by—especially by this guy, Ben Nolan, who I mentioned before. He brought me up and had me doing office work, which I learned a great deal from. There was a woman here on Ellis Island. Her name was Molly. I can never think of it. Molly Jeosa [PH], I think her name was. She was in charge of deportations. And they got me to be the passport officer. I would take all the documents of a person that was in detention to the British Consul, or the Israeli Consul, or the Columbian Consul and leave these documents and discuss maybe getting a passport for that person, you know. So it became a little bit more—the—the—they didn't let the routine—just—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: They kept—made it a little bit more interesting for me. When we had a population one time that approached a thousand, we had some boarder patrolmen sent down from the northern border to help us in keeping order here, because they were afraid that if anything went wrong, it'd be a real mess. My first time that I realized the Border Patrol even existed, and from that day on, I decided I wanted to be a boarder patrolman. And I did. I became a boarder patrolman. I became a deputy chief in the Border Patrol. I had a number of men working for me. I've been an investigator. I've been an intelligence officer. I've been an undercover officer in Canada. And so, you know, and all of these things, and so the career—and I must say, at this retirement and so forth, my wife says every night—I thank God that I left working for the Railway Express Agency to take this job. I was earning \$64 twice a month, 48-hour weeks.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And today, I'm living on retirement. We're not—we're comfortable. We have a comfortable home. We have a good car, got good kids. They're kind of crazy kids but they're all good kids.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: And we thank God for the Immigration Service.

LEVINE: Wow! Well, [clears throat] we're getting close to the end of this tape but I'd like to put in another one. And maybe we could just talk about a half hour. That's about all the time we've got left. Okay, so—

CRONIN: I might run out of stories [unclear].

LEVINE: [laughs] I have the feeling you could go on for—

CRONIN: Yeah. [chuckles]

LEVINE: —days. But all right. Okay. We're going to stop here with this tape and then we're going to start again with another tape.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

LEVINE: This is tape 2 and I'm speaking with Thomas J. Cronin and [clears throat] we were talking about—well, we were talking about all the different aspects of—of your work here and then what it led to for you [clears throat]—excuse me—as a Border Patrol and other—other positions. We didn't speak at all about women who were—who were here. Did you—were—were there only women—I guess you call them matrons—who were guarding the—the women? Or did—or was that part of your duty as well?

CRONIN: Well, if—if—they didn't have too many matrons. And occasionally, if one was ill or something, one of the security officers would take over the position of guarding the women, wasn't too often. Quite often, there would be deportation parties, leave to—t—for example, to take people back to the Caribbean countries. And there might be women among them so that the secur—curity officers and the matrons would make trips to Florida or North Carolina, what have you. The front of the building where you get off the ferry today, or where we get off the ferry today is—to the best of my memory there was—there was never an entrance or exit at that point. It was a fenced in area that kept a—that was a kind of a recreation area, or a walking area or a fresh air area for the women and family detainees that were held on Ellis Island. And the whole thing was fenced with high—high fence. When the brass from the—the Immigration here at Ellis Island—the district director was in New York City, at Columbus Avenue in New York City. And that's where the Immigration Office was, the head office. This was just a small portion of the Immigration service. But there'd be occasion when the brass from Columbus Avenue would make a trip to Ellis Island to—for—for any number of reasons, whatever reason. They always insisted that there should be a matron or a guard with the women detainees. Well, we

didn't have that many people working here that we could have a guard with them constantly when they were in the outdoor area. But when they used to board the ferry at New York, the girl over there would give us a call, say, "Mr. So and So is coming over." And Ben Nolan would send me down into that recreation area to stand and make sure, as the ferry rode by, they could look over. They'd see that there was a guard watching the women there. Well, as I mentioned to you earlier, and I don't know if it's on a tape, there were a number of stowaways, females, some of whom were promiscuous hookers, and some of which were pretty—pretty nice young ladies that were detained here. They had been brought over on troop ships toward the end of the war by our military. So these had been discovered and brought here and detained. I guess that the most we ever had at one time were about 15. They were difficult to— to get documents to deport them, because most of them left there with— with nothing or—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: —had come from an environment where the parents or their families didn't care where the hell they were. And when—Ben Nolan used to say, "Tom, go down and watch the girls. So and so is coming over on the ferry." I'd run down the stairs and I was a young—very young man and some of them would grab me on the stairs and hold me and throw me against the wall. And I blushed like hell all the time. I'd not really fight my way out, but make my way out to be sure that I've seen wh— additionally, with that Coast Guard brig that I mentioned to you earlier, we somehow learned, or Ben Nolan learned that the—some of the girls that were more promiscuous were having affairs with the Coast Guard people that came, that were down there. And he and I went down to the cellar one day and the cellar used to be a dusty old place, dark and—and dirty with old machinery and files and papers and documents that were just so old that they were just dirt covered. But there was one larger closet there, looked like a big chifforobe, if you know what a chifforobe—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: I mean—and he said, "Tom, you can hide in there and catch these gals as they come in with their Coast Guard." Well, I've always been pretty—pretty nice with my bosses. But I quickly told him to go to hell. I wasn't going to [chuckles] sit in a dark closet and try to catch some gal coming in with her boyfriend. But other than that—I don't know if it's on the tape about the—I

LEVINE: No, it isn't on the tape.

CRONIN: I think some of the—the—where the red room is was the area where the families and—and women detainees were. And directly below them was where the dormitory—the day dormitory—day—even the night dormitory was where the German enemy civilians were held down there. And I suspect that somehow or other there was some way that they could get together. But I never did know and I don't think anybody else ever found out. But one of the young girls that was brought over by the soldiers fell in love with one of the German civilian attorneys that was there. And when we finally—you know, when the service finally got the documents for her, she jumped off that balcony down onto the red floor. Well, if I'm—I think she—if I remember correctly, she broke her pelvis. And of course, they delayed her deportation because of the medical. But I think she was eventually deported back to England.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: And that's pretty much with the women. Other than that, we didn't have much to do—and we were pretty religious about it too, you know. It—it isn't like—like today, when they talk about the Geneva Convention they—they seem to be finding ways to circumvent the Geneva Convention. My memory is that the treatment that was received by the people here was that they were treated with dignity.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: And—and certainly within any conventions that we had.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm. Now, you mentioned the Coast Guard brig. Did you—were you aware of the Coast Guard's being stationed here—

CRONIN: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —and what they—did you have any trek with them or—

CRONIN: None—none at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: Hardly at all. They never used the ferry because they used to come in their own boats and stuff. And there was never a very large group, you know. I couldn't tell you how many but I know it was not a large group.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: I couldn't even tell you where they [unclear]. It must have been somewhere close to the hospital, because on this side of the island I don't think they ever—

LEVINE: Yeah. And just a point of information. You said that [clears throat] when you were here you don't believe people came in the entrance that people use today. Where did they come in?

CRONIN: Well, you know where the ferry slip is, where the V is?

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: Facing the old ferry, drove right in there.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And everybody'd get off—

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

CRONIN: —and walk to the right.

LEVINE: I see. I see. Uh-huh, uh-huh.

CRONIN: And there used to be—that's where the officers of the HIAS was, the National Catholic Welfare Conference. And there was a Protestant woman there that took care of religious immigration needs of—

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: —these people. It's also the place where I have been given to understand that many of these people got their names changed. You know, when they had an odd name, it was changed pretty close to down there. They had railroad agents down there that would sell tickets. And maybe it's in some of the documents you see.

LEVINE: Well, were you aware of the immigrants coming in to—

CRONIN: Oh, yeah. But see, that—it never occurred during nighttime. That was over by the time I got here.

LEVINE: Well, actually, some did come in—well, you were here—well, till '50. Some did come in after World War II.

CRONIN: Yeah, yeah. Those were the ones I said were in the ar—well, were in the area where your quarters are now.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: That's what I—yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: Th—those were repatriated people that were—some of whom claimed they were United States citizens. Some of them claimed some kind of a equity in the United States. And they were brought here, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: And I can't remember the name of that ship that they were brought on. It was a famous ship. I think it was French line of some sort.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, I know they re—they reused some of the troop ships—

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: —after the war to bring people here.

CRONIN: Yeah. And this might have been—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: —[unclear].

LEVINE: Yeah. [clears throat] Let's see. Oh, gee. There's so much; I wish we had more time. [clears throat] Why don't you say briefly—well, was there a camaraderie amongst the staff who worked here? Or did you just go your separate ways at—

CRONIN: There was a kind of camaraderie. In fact, I guess there was more than just a kind. We used to have a softball team among the guards. We used to go bowling about once a month off the island.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: We'd go out to dinner and so forth. Yes, but they—there was also a lot of scandal among the guards too. There was a lot of graft and I had a lot of graft. There was graft that was involved. Prior to my coming here, they used to tell me that the Ellis—that the Ellis Island ferry was a very—it was almost a trap. They'd have personnel investigations on people for having accepted gratuities. And the way they would finally catch them was when they were coming to work. And so when the ferry—and I

never saw this now—the ferry used to fill up in the morning, or fill up with [unclear] staff. On would come these investigators and they always wondered who was going to be next, you know. And they'd just escort the people out and fire them or bring them up on criminal charges.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: So—

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well, I guess it's like a prison guard—I mean.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Right? Everything?

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Yeah. [clears throat] Well, we—we don't—oh, wait. We've got a little bit more time. So is there anything else that you can think of about this place, about the physical—physical building and—and grounds that is different from y—what you remember that y—that y—I know we just had a quick way—look around—

CRONIN: Well, I think—I think that the place is much better maintained. The floors are clean. The tiles are white instead of gray. And I think the exhibits, what I had an opportunity to see, are excellent. I wish I had more time to do it but I—my kids have to let me know. I think that whoever is running this place is doing an excellent job.

LEVINE: Hmm. Yeah. Okay. Can you give me a kind of thumbnail sketch then? I mean, you alluded to it earlier but w—why did you leave here? What was the circumstance of your leaving here and going elsewhere?

CRONIN: I—I took the Border Patrol examination and at that time the Border Patrol rarely hired anybody from the east or the north. It was a good old boy outfit of cowboys. Somebody'll give me hell about that but it's true. And I took the exam. And two years after I took the exam, I was notified that I was accepted in the Border Patrol. W—we—I didn't have the money to pay my fare to Texas but I had to pay to report to El Paso, Texas. We borrowed the money and I went down there and worked down there. And I still had the wife and two children. They couldn't join me. And all of a sudden, they were having trouble in the Cold War. And ships like

the Batori [PH], vessel—passenger for vessels, and the Sovietski [PH], which were a Polish line of ships, were taking people out of the United States who had been indicted as—because of subversive act—activities or suspicions. They brought the Border Patrol—they brought a Border Patrol office to New York City.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And I was one of the ones selected to be in that Border Patrol office. We used to guard those ships because the members of the crew were not permitted shore leave. And we made sure they didn't go ashore. And whoever went on board we would document and record it. We were creating—it was a Cold War problem and we were helping our government in—in trying to resolve these issues. And—but shortly thereafter, the Sovietski and the Battori stopped coming to New York Port. They went to Canada and they didn't come to the United States. So they—we used to do a search for aliens, illegal aliens on—in the streets in New York.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And—

LEVINE: What was that like?

CRONIN: Oh [chuckles]—

LEVINE: It's like being a detective then?

CRONIN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: Yeah. The only thing is, we were—we were not allowed to work on cases in which there had been a report of the alien being illegal. That was an investigative function. We were now called and stopped people on corners and streets and restaurants and all over New York, all over the area.

LEVINE: Well, what would—what would [chuckles] provoke you to stop a—a particular individual?

CRONIN: Well, you'd go into a restaurant and ask the guy for something. If he speaks to you kind of funny and you ask him where he's from. And he tells you. "Well, you got your passport with you? Where is it? Let's—go

get it.” And then they’d go get it and the guy was a ship jumper. We used to make a lot of arrests.

LEVINE: Really?

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Th—there must have been a lot of ship jumpers then.

CRONIN: There were a lot of ship jumpers but a lot of non-immigrants who violated the status too.

LEVINE: How so?

CRONIN: Have somebody come for a B1 visa or a B2 visa that overstayed their time that they were allowed to stay here, students that were admitted as F1s that were—never went to school, got a job in Wendy’s or in McDonalds and this was all they did.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

CRONIN: You could find them in—find a lot of them in employment agencies.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: A lot of overstays.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

CRONIN: All you had to do was to go down to the East Side and stand outside an employment agency.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

CRONIN: You were bound to pick up somebody. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Wow.

CRONIN: And—and a lot of Caribbeans, Cubans, Central Americans and so on.

LEVINE: Did you work in pairs or you worked alone?

CRONIN: Pairs.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

CRONIN: Almost always pairs.

LEVINE: Yeah.

CRONIN: And always with a radio communication to the headquarters.

LEVINE: And did you have a blackjack?

CRONIN: Had guns at that time.

LEVINE: Guns.

CRONIN: We were border patrolmen then.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Okay. So then—now we're really getting—but what—what n—just give a thumbnail sketch—

CRONIN: Okay.

LEVINE: —of the rest of your career.

CRONIN: Okay. So they—they terminated the Border Patrol in New York and I was transferred to a little town in Vermont called Swanton. I stayed in Swanton for a while. I became the senior Border Patrol agent with five, six men working for me or under me. And then I became what they called a—a anti-smuggling agent. And I worked in Canada trying to identify people who were smuggling aliens into the United States from Canada. And then I went to—I—I became a—an assistant chief for the Border Patrol with some 30 or 40 people working under me. I left that and became a regional intelligence officer for the entire eastern region of the United States, which includes Puerto Rico, San Juan, went—took a job at San Juan, Puerto Rico as an immigrant—supervisor of immigrants back there for a couple of years, then went back into the Border Patrol as a deputy chief in the Border Patrol in Swanton, and then became a criminal investigator in the Office of Public and Professional Integrity in Washington investigating crooked Immigration officers.

LEVINE: Oh.

CRONIN: And then got into a fight with the commissioner and retired. [laughter]

LEVINE: Well, looking back over your—your career, or looking back over your life, what do you feel very satisfied with having done?

CRONIN: I feel very satisfied with having—having accepted less money than I was making when I was getting married and coming to work on Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: Because it was the beginning of a lot of other things.

LEVINE: Right.

CRONIN: All the other things were great too. But it would never have occurred if I hadn't come here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So what are you looking forward to now?

CRONIN: I've come [chuckles]—I'm looking—I'm going to Las Vegas next month. [chuckles] I'm looking forward to hitting—hitting the jackpot.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

CRONIN: No, we—we—I—I—I—this is not probably a place to put it, but I'm very active now in trying to make people aware of the sad situation that exists, particularly in the southwestern border in Arizona, New Mexico, parts of Texas with the flood of illegal immigrants that enter the United States, many of whom are fine people who work hard, but many of whom are pedophiles, criminals, rapists, people that have no respect for the country that they're living in, who'll accept every dime they can get. Seventy-seven hospitals in California are bankrupt because they have to treat illegal aliens. Just heard about a veterinarian who lives in Arizona. Within a hundred yards of his wife—of his house, a Mexican woman was raped and murdered by illegal crossers. And he's a veterinarian. He can't even leave his wife because he's afraid he could be next. It's a sad situation. I fight with my congressman all the time. Doesn't do any good. It's really tough, trying to win that battle.

LEVINE: Hmm.

CRONIN: But that's my next battle.

LEVINE: That's—that's your—what you're focused on.

CRONIN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I want to thank you so much for a wonderful interview. Is there anything you can think of that maybe you want to say before we close?

CRONIN: Not really. I will send you a—that portion of the report and maybe the stories will look a little different. But at 82, your mind gets a little rusty, you know, and so—

LEVINE: Wow. It doesn't sound rusty to me. And I want to say, just for the record here, that [clears throat] you had written kind of a memoir and—and—and a section of it is on the Ellis Island phase.

CRONIN: Right.

LEVINE: And—and so we're going to have that in your file here at Ellis Island.

CRONIN: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you. I've been speaking with Tom Cronin and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service and I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]