

EI-1444

WILLIAM MORRISSEY

BIRTHDATE: SEPTEMBER 1, 1950

INTERVIEW DATE: APRIL 13, 2007

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 57

RUNNING TIME: 39:12

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.S.

RECORDING ENGINEER: BUTCH JONES

INTERVIEW LOCATION:

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

AGE:

SHIP:

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

MORRISSEY: —was how he came over.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: He was supposed to come through Ellis and I believe he had to go through Boston because there was a storm. But my aunt, the original aunt, came through Ellis.

LEVINE: Oh, she came first?

MORRISSEY: And then the rest of them came over.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. All right.

MORRISSEY: I'm pretty sure he came through Boston but I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I'm almost positive.

LEVINE: Okay.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Today is April the 13th, the year 2007. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with William Morrissey, who worked on the restoration of the Ellis Island Museum and has a father who came, perhaps not through Ellis Island but through Boston, due to a storm, but nonetheless, immigrated to this country and [clears throat]—and so there's a history of immigration as well as restoration of this—of this island in this story. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. If we could start by you're saying your full name. Do you have a middle name?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay.

MORRISSEY: William Patrick Morrissey.

LEVINE: Okay. And your birth date?

MORRISSEY: 9/1/50.

LEVINE: Okay. And [clears throat] why don't you say, briefly, what your role was in the restoration of this island?

MORRISSEY: I was one of many construction workers that had worked on the island. I'm an electrician by trade and that was what we were doing out here. A lot of the guys had this strong—felt the same way I did. A lot of different people came from different countries, guys that worked on the island, their gr—parents, grandparents, great grandparents and what have you. They were very in—in—impressed to be working out here, very—it was very nice pleasure to be part of this part of history. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: Basically.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So in other words, a lot of people who were on the construction crew—

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: —had family members and had a connection.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: An emotional connection to the place.

MORRISSEY: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did—

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Did that make the w—doing the work any different?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, it made—made it very pleasurable, made it like our pride was in stake out here, our honor and pride and what we were as tradesmen.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And what have you, on this and also on the statue.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: We were on the statue just briefly, but most all our work was on Ellis.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Well, I want to get to that but maybe we could start—it's your father who immigrated from Ireland.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: Your mother was born here.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: Right.

MORRISSEY: My—my aunt had come over first to Wells [PH]. And on the way over, my father was coming over, ended up—from what I

understand, he ended up getting in a storm with the ship and they were blown off to Boston.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: So had your aunt come a—a while before that? Do you know?

MORRISSEY: Not that much longer before.

LEVINE: So did—

MORRISSEY: He came over in about—I want to say 19—let's say '26, '28, somewhere in around there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And the family came over in stages—

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: —as often—

MORRISSEY: Yes.

LEVINE: —they did. Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: His sisters and his brothers stayed back in Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: But his sisters came over—

LEVINE: And his parents—

MORRISSEY: —with different husbands.

LEVINE: —never came?

MORRISSEY: No, his parents stayed in Ireland.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. So what was your father's name?

MORRISSEY: William Patrick Morrissey, Sr.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Okay. And did he ever talk about immigrating? I mean, any stories connected with his immigration that he ever told you?

MORRISSEY: Well, when he was younger, he had a—because of the family—at that time, Ireland was pretty—you know, it wasn't—it was kind of like an oppressed—no, I wouldn't say an oppressed area but kind of like, food was hard to come by and stuff like that. Work was very hard to come by so he had signed onboard a trans-steamer when he was 13.

LEVINE: Wow.

MORRISSEY: And he sailed down through South America as a galley boy and worked his way that way and then came back up till he had enough money in passage to come back over—to come over to America.

LEVINE: You mean he—

MORRISSEY: So he was at sea for quite some time.

LEVINE: So he—he went from Ireland to South America back to Ireland and—

MORRISSEY: Back to Ireland. Right, and then—

LEVINE: And then—

MORRISSEY: —back, worked his way around on different ships, trans-steamers and stuff like that. So he worked as a galley boy. He used to work down in the kitchens, and he worked his way up to, like, a first mate. And then his sister had—had to sign the papers for him to come over.

LEVINE: So how old was he when he came over, roughly?

MORRISSEY: Oh, [sighs], let me see, '28; that would make him—he was probably around 20 years old, I'd say. Maybe 18, 20.

LEVINE: And then he met your mother over here.

MORRISSEY: Right, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your mother's name?

MORRISSEY: Mary Dillon [PH]. And she was—she was first generation, also.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Like I am.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And where did she se—where did your mother and father settle?

MORRISSEY: They settled in the Bronx up in a place, Throgs Neck up in the Bronx, after they got married. And then we were all raised at Throgs Neck in the Bronx.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Okay.

MORRISSEY: —it's pretty—pretty nice area, just up the river.

LEVINE: Yeah. Okay. So—so for whom did you work when you were working out here at Ellis Island?

MORRISSEY: I worked for the Electrician's Union, Local Union #3, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. They assigned us to work out here on the island—

LEVINE: And—

MORRISSEY: —for one of the contractors.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Y—can you—what year did you start out here?

MORRISSEY: I started about 1984.

LEVINE: Okay. And—and can you describe this place when you first came out and started work out here?

MORRISSEY: Yeah. The—the whole island was pretty basically gutted. There were few rooms. We weren't allowed to—the other side of the island was pr—pretty basically off bounds to us. We were basically with the Great Hall and whatever. The whole hall was—it was gutted and we started from there, coming up, working and so, one point of time, all the Great Hall was full of scaffolding. And like I said, at night we used to have to work late at night, shut off the lights and stuff, which made a pretty eerie place at night, especially at—on certain stormy nights. But on other nights when the moon was shining through the Great Hall, through the windows, you could not help but not think of

the people that immigrated through this island to come to America, the gateway—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: —to freedom.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: So it was quite a—it was quite an honorable experience to be out here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: As I felt myself, along with so many other guys—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: —and women. So—

LEVINE: Now, who else was out here besides the electrical union people?

MORRISSEY: Oh, the—we had the steamfitters, the ironworkers, carpenters. Basically, almost every trade that you could think of. No [unclear].

LEVINE: And did you—did you mix? I mean, was it—was there a kind of a camaraderie among the—

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. Yes, everybody was pretty—basically, everybody worked with one another. You know, if you needed to borrow something, there was no problem because everybody felt the same way, was part of their history, was part of something that we had to do.

LEVINE: So this—

MORRISSEY: Was part of our pride.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So you think what—what was true in the electrical union workers was true in the other workers as well?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes. Of course. Yes, definitely.

LEVINE: Yeah?

MORRISSEY: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: So, roughly, how many people were out here working? Just ballpark figure?

MORRISSEY: Well, without staff, I would venture to say there's probably about 125 to 150 people—

LEVINE: Wow.

MORRISSEY: —[unclear].

LEVINE: Wow.

MORRISSEY: Maybe with the staff, there might be a little bit more. On certain occasions, there'd be more.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: But there were a lot of events going on in the island out here back then.

LEVINE: Like what?

MORRISSEY: Oh, I remember one in—distinctly. They had Freedoms of Medal honor winners out, that they had on the other side.

LEVINE: Oh, Freedom Medals, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Yeah. And there was quite a few celebrities came through, but one in particular that stood out was Joe DiMaggio. Joe came over and shook everybody's hand, and he was like a regular standup guy, which is very much of what he is, is the man from what we hear about. But he was very—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: He was a standup guy who came over and shook everybody's hands. As a matter of fact, I have picture of him in—in my bag there—

LEVINE: Oh, great.

MORRISSEY: —of DiMaggio when he came.

LEVINE: Great. And you—and you have other pictures too.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: W—why don't you talk about some of these—some of these particular anecdotal—

MORRISSEY: All right. Okay. This one—this one picture—

LEVINE: —experiences?

MORRISSEY: What happened was when we were working out here, a lot of us felt a lot of pride. Like we said, as long as the rest of the country did, as well, like everybody, with all the Girl Scout cooking drives and car washes and this, that, the Cub Scouts and the Boy Scouts and stuff.

LEVINE: You mean to raise money to—

MORRISSEY: To raise money to restore the island. So turns out a lot of us felt pretty proud, like we said, and pretty honored to be out on the island. So we wanted to do a little something for the kids, the children, I should say, to try to tell 'em thank you. So we got a kind of—got together. We came up with the idea of Christmas trees. But where to put 'em was the problem. So at that point in time, they were—we were just finishing off the water tower. So it turns out that one of the Christmas trees went up on the water tower, top—the tip—the top of the water tower. And we had it lit. I have a picture of that. And we have it lit. We lit it and we put American flag, Old Glory, on top of it to thank all the children. So when they went in the statue, all—went around Long I—went around the island, they could see the statue. They could see the—the Christmas tree all lit and stuff with different color bulbs and what have you. And that was a pretty big event.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And—

LEVINE: N—now, but w—were there children coming out here at that time?

MORRISSEY: No, no. There was—it was off—off limits to the public, the island. But you could see—you could see it from all—all over. It was brightly lit. We had a lot of light bulbs on it so you could just—basically, you can almost make it look like a—a marker for Newark Airport.

LEVINE: [chuckles] So—so in other words, you could see it from the Statue of Liberty Island.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: And you could see it from New Jersey and New York?

MORRISSEY: Right, if you really got a—yeah, you could see the brightly colored, different colored bulbs and stuff. It was very bright. Very. Quite—quite lit up.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: As you'll see when—when I show you the pictures.

LEVINE: Great.

MORRISSEY: Some pictures. So I ended up with that and then, being that my father—I ended up putting up an Irish flag on Ellis Island for him on St. Patrick's Day to honor him, not only him but the rest of the Irish that came through and, like I said, all nationalities did a little something for their, for their own culture. And I was pretty honored to be, you know—to put the flag up then. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did—did your father see it?

MORRISSEY: I only—no, he wasn't—he never made it out to the island but we ended up—I p—got the copy of the picture—

LEVINE: Pictures.

MORRISSEY: —of it for him, the statue. And we ended up—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: —you know, coming out, so—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So other cultures did other things but we were pretty—

LEVINE: What else did other people do? Do you remember anything else?

MORRISSEY: Ah, not too much—

LEVINE: Besides the flags?

MORRISSEY: —[unclear] stuff.

LEVINE: The fl—

MORRISSEY: We had some banners hung up here at—you know, Happy this day and that day. Whatever.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: What have you.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: But it was a—quite a—it was quite an honor, like I said, to be here.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: You know. And then I said at night when—with the—how the island was very eerie at night whenever you'd walk around. Then the dark—

LEVINE: Well, why were you here at night?

MORRISSEY: We had—sometimes, we had to have equipment on that had to run all night to maintain it, so the water pipes wouldn't freeze and the different things, different components that were on the island—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: —wouldn't—you know, they had to stay running 24 hours and stuff. So couldn't just be shut down and then started up again the next day because the pipes might freeze, because we were here all winter, a couple of winters and stuff. So there were things that had to maintain, had to be maintained. If they were broke down, then you had to get right on 'em—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: —to fix 'em. So—

LEVINE: Yeah. Can you say anything about the state of—of this main building here and the museum building at Ellis Island, the state it was in when you started work on it?

MORRISSEY: Well, it was pretty well gutted all the way down to almost the plaster, except in certain areas where you couldn't penetrate the walls because of the writings that were there on the walls, like you would have—that would have—that would have [unclear] couldn't go through, penetrate walls and—because of the significance of the building, you weren't allowed to do any damage to it unless you had okay from somebody from the—the foundation or what have you to work on the island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: You had—you had to be very careful in what you did, what s—what tiles you removed and stuff like that. But they also had historians out here working, and they also had—the colleges used to have—they had—was a couple of colleges that came out, did—down in the basement, that they did a couple of digs down there for the original—what the original island was like and then they—they would put in a—what do you call it? Oh, what do I want to call it? Archeologists?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: Wanted to be archeologists. Yes.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And they would come out and they would dig underneath the foundation of the building or down into—down in the basement to take out the slabs of the earth and they found different things.

LEVINE: Oh, wow.

MORRISSEY: They found different, you know, like what areas were used for what for the natives that originally inhabited the island. So—

LEVINE: Like—like oyster shells and things like that?

MORRISSEY: Oyster shells in one spot, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Charcoal. There was charcoal for the fire that was [unclear]. When you went down a couple of feet, you could find charcoal where they would basically cook and sleep, you know. The oyster shells would be—and different other things, the places they used to have for—

LEVINE: Huh, yeah. So—so were there pe—other people out here planning for the opening of the museum that you remember?

MORRISSEY: It was pretty early then when I was out here.

LEVINE: H—you started in what year?

MORRISSEY: '84.

LEVINE: '84.

MORRISSEY: In fact, actually started, '83 or '84 when I—'85. And that's when I—so—wrote this—this poem that I've—

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, you started—do you remember what month you started in?

MORRISSEY: I want to say September.

LEVINE: And you think that might have been '83?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, give or take. Yeah, '83.

LEVINE: And then, so you worked all through '84?

MORRISSEY: Right, and into '85.

LEVINE: And into '85.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: Oh. And when you left, were—were all the other work—workmen—

MORRISSEY: There was still work being done in the island, so there was a lot of other stuff left to be done.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: What have you.

LEVINE: Yeah. And so what—what prompted you to write this poem?

MORRISSEY: Well, I felt like—like I said, we were proud. Oh, everybody had their own feelings about the island, and I decided to try to do something to convey our—what we felt. And I—and it was—I had ended up, the week before President Reagan came out to talk about the Contras, I ended up—finished the poem and I ended up handing it over to a Secret Service agent, who happened to be with this entourage that came out to see how they were going to secure the island for the next week when the president arrived. So in turn, he asked me if I wanted to meet the White House speechwriter. So I said it would be honor to meet her. So as we're standing there, he wanted to take me over to the meeting with—with the foundation people and Lee Iacocca's people. And as we went over to go to the meeting, the meeting was just adjourning. And she came over and she asked me if I s—could read the poem. So I said yeah. So I gave her the poem. She read it and she was like—she was pretty impressed with it, being that I was a construction worker [chuckles], that I wrote this poem. But it was my feelings and feelings of some of the other guys and women that were out here, that I decided to write it. So she had asked me if she could take it with her, to go give it to—give it to the president for the—because Saturday, that—this was a Friday. The next day, she was going to meet with the president, go over his speech, start working on the speech and she wanted to incorporate it. Well, nevertheless, I had asked her if she had any IDs to show me, that I could show the fellows, like a business card that I could show the fellows, because nobody would understand that I met—

LEVINE: [chuckles] They wouldn't believe you, right?

MORRISSEY: Right, right.

LEVINE: Yeah. [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: It'd be like—like they'd kid me about the lady with the red dress. They'd say, "Have you seen the lady with the red dress?" [chuckles] "Willy, what are you doing?" So I started laughing. I said, "No." I says—but she didn't have a business card so she gave me a telephone number to call. So I called him on a Wednesday. Of course, for first week I took a ribbing from everybody, all the construction guys about this poem and meeting this woman. Well, on Wednesday, I gave her a call up to the—the number she'd given to me. And I had to put somebody else on the phone, my foreman, the guy who was in charge of me, to verify it. Well, I called her and she said, "Yes, it's part of his speech." So I says—I says, "Well, Jeez, I won't be able to see it." She goes, "Do you have White

House clearance?” So I said, “No, not really.” Said, “Let me see what I can do for you.” So Friday comes and they needed a guy to be on the island to maintain all the lights and maintain all the power breakers and stuff like that. And this guy, Eddy, had recommended me because of—Eddy Mann [PH] was the general foreman that I answered to. And he had recommended that I do this work for the president to come out, to turn on the lights, make sure all the power was up on the island and stuff like that, but I didn’t have White House clearance. So he had to explain to Kevin Buckley [PH], who happened to be the superintendent, that point of time, about what was going on. So Kevin had called. I guess he had—must have called this Barbara Sedonik [PH], I believe her name was, to find out what the story was, the White House speechwriter. And she verified that it was true. And I got a phone call that they wanted to know a few things about me so I could get White House clearance on Friday. So I gave ‘em what had to be done and I went back to the—to the shanty, tell the guys. And all the guys were like, “Yeah. Well, yeah, sure. Yeah, sure.” Well, as it was, at that point in time, I had a big red beard and, you know, long hair and stuff. So when I went home and told my wife and kids that I was going to the island on Sunday, that I might see the president, they all kind of like, “Yeah, sure. Sure.” So Saturday morning, I got up and I went to the barber, got a haircut, got my beard shaved off.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: Came back in, had clothes in a cleaning bag—came back in. That Sunday, I arrived on a pier over to meet Kevin Buckley. So it turns out when Kevin took a look at me, he didn’t believe who I was, because everything was gone by this point in time. So I had to prove [chuckles] to him who I was, kind of. So he took me over. When I came over here, I ran into the same Secret Service agent. And I was talking to him. He didn’t recognize me till I explained that I was the guy with the poem. So he asked me about, you know, “Who’d you give it to?” And I told him and he went over and he took a look and he checked into it, and he came back and he said, “When the president arrives on the island, I’m going to—I’m told by my superiors to walk over and get you, sit you down front. He’s going to read your poem. It’s the second half of the speech and might acknowledge you and ask you to come up on stage.” So you want to talk about being nervous, I was pretty well nervous.

LEVINE: [chuckles] I was going to say, how did you feel?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: So it turns out, that day was like, kind of like a day like today, like gloomy and overcast, threatening to rain. Well, when the president arrived on the island, turned out that it was like a monsoon rain out here. And he only talked about the Contras. And my second half of the speech, my poem ended up to be put—you know, he didn't speak it. So I was pretty put out by it, kind of. I [unclear] go back and tell all the guys that, yeah, yeah, sure, sure. You know. Well, for a couple of days there, I was getting a ribbing left and right from all the guys on the job and—until I received the following—those documents that I showed you from the president. So from then on it was—I wasn't the guy—I was the president's man. He used to salute me, kid me around. You know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Break my—give me a good ribbing about it.

LEVINE: [chuckles] Well, had you ever written poems before?

MORRISSEY: I wrote—I dabble in it a little bit here and there. So, yeah, I—I have a letter in the briefcase over there that I just wrote something to President Bush about the 9/11. We experienced it, our whole family.

LEVINE: You wrote a poem?

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: About—about it and it was sent—sent to President Bush and was about 9/11 and my feelings towards it, you know, being we were there. And I—I was there. My brother was there. My son was there, like, later on that day. So we all pretty much feel the same way about, you know, along—along with other people and say—thank all the—the people, the common people that day that could—we knew they couldn't make it over to the other side where the Trade Center was. But you knew, working there, that your whole country was watching your back. That was pretty awesome feeling to know that your whole country was watching you. And—and you couldn't want for anything. So I would just like to convey to the people that, you know, that might see this that I was on the other side with my brother and my sons. It's a lot of good people. I saw the best in the nation that day—those days. I probably saw the

worst of humanity and about—I want to say that day, that very day, the exact event, I saw—was blessed to see the best of humanity.

LEVINE: Hmm.

MORRISSEY: Every race, every creed, every color, pull it together. So it was not—you know, that was another day to be very proud of this country.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Well, how about you—

MORRISSEY: [unclear]

LEVINE: —reading or reciting this poem?

MORRISSEY: You can—

LEVINE: I—I think in your voice and your—

MORRISSEY: Yeah. I might be a little nervous of it.

LEVINE: —with your words would be more appropriate than mine.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, okay. Right. All right. I wrote this one [unclear]. “We are the men, women and children of the 20th century and no prouder people could ever be. We have restored Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty for all the world to see, who once that come here from their countries far beyond the seas seeking freedom and democracy. So as for we, we’re proud to be in this small part of history. Where these two structures stand today in a country proud and free, which stands in the light—which stands in the bask and the light of sweet liberty.” Thank you.

LEVINE: Wow. Nice. So—and—and then President Reagan—do we have—

MORRISSEY: Yeah—

LEVINE: —the letter that he wrote to you? Okay. It says, “Dear Mr. Morrissey. Your poem has been passed on to me and I just wanted you to know how much it meant to me. I deeply appreciate the sentiment you expressed about Lady Liberty and Ellis Island. I feel, as you do, about their significance in history of this wonderful land of

ours. Again, thank you and God bless you. Sincerely, Ronald Reagan.” Well, that must have been a—

MORRISSEY: Yeah, pretty—

LEVINE: —a nice day—

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —to get that, huh?

MORRISSEY: Oh, yes, it was. Yeah. I thought—my—when I got home, my daughter said, “You had”—she was only four years old, Erin, my daughter, Erin. She was like, “Daddy, Daddy. You got something. You got something.” I thought it was—I thought I won the—won a ticket for the lottery. [laughter] But that was—which was very good.

LEVINE: Well—

MORRISSEY: But no, no.

LEVINE: Hey. [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: No, I’m glad I got that. [chuckles] I’m just saying that’s the way I felt, you know, after—after all the guys ribbing me all week. You know.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: I needed something to help my spirits. So [chuckles] I ended up—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: I ended up getting that in the mail. So—which was later on passed on—

LEVINE: And then he sent you a picture with it?

MORRISSEY: Yes, yes. I have the copy outside.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: That’s that, and that was those frames outside there.

LEVINE: Right. And it’s—and it’s—it’s to you—

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: —specifically.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: With best wishes.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: And then that was passed on to the foundation, which is part that you have.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, I—let's talk a little bit more about the areas you worked in. You—a—you worked in the Great Hall exclusively?

MORRISSEY: Pretty basically the Great Hall. The rest of the building wasn't under renovation, what—what do you call, the dormitories back into—back over here.

LEVINE: Oh, the—

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: The building—the—

MORRISSEY: I don't know what you call it.

LEVINE: The something in dormitory building—

MORRISSEY: Dormitory building, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: We worked—basically, we worked from underneath the Great Hall from the cellar all the way up to the top. And then that was pretty basically what we worked on, and then in the powerhouse, just to make sure we got the right power, and from Jersey to—power to the building.

LEVINE: And that's where you got the power from?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, Jersey. There's a high-voltage line running out the back.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. And the bi—and the bridge had been built?

MORRISSEY: The bridge was just being—the bridge was finished—just about finished when I got here. It was—the bridge came, I believe—might have come from England.

LEVINE: Oh, really? Why—

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —do you think that?

MORRISSEY: I'm pretty sure it came from England. There was talk of it, that it came—that they brought it over from England.

LEVINE: Hmm.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: And so then would—the bridge was used then? By the—

MORRISSEY: Right. Prior to that, we had to bring everything over on barges. They would load up a barge over in—and bring a barge up and tie it up alongside, and everything had to come off the barge. So you had to make sure everything that you wanted was on the barge, and they would send barges over full of equipment for different trades and stuff like that.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: And they would tie up alongside there, unload the barge.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, were you in contact with the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island Foundation? Were they involved out here when you were—

MORRISSEY: They had an office out here.

LEVINE: And what were they doing?

MORRISSEY: They were ba—pretty basically on the other side. They were—they were, like, overseeing what type of work we were doing and where—what we were installing and going over codes and specs and—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: —what have you and checking. Every now and then, you'd find an artifact and would turn it in.

LEVINE: Like what?

MORRISSEY: Oh, maybe an old mirror or something along those lines. We'd end up, found a mirror one time and we'd end up getting somebody. And they—they would take it and sign it and put it back, I guess, over at the other side. They had a lot of the—a lot of the old furniture and stuff that was left on the island over on that side. But we got the chance to walk through the—the hospital area over there and, oh, you know, the whole gamut of old buildings, the Garden of Tears, which was overgrown at that point in time, which made it even eerier to walk through in the middle of the night. But that was—yeah, it was all overgrown, sumac trees all over the place.

LEVINE: And what's the story of the lady with the red dress?

MORRISSEY: Well, apparently, for the way it goes is that this woman, she's supposed to haunt the island, for some reason. I don't know. But everybody seems to talk about her when she was—when we were out here. But like I said, at night, some nights would be a really stormy night and you'd be—have to be walking through the buil—through the Great Hall, and it was very dimly lit. And it was pretty—could raise the hair on the back of your neck, to take the—so many things, this island, about this island. It's quite—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: —quite overwhelming. And I—like I also said, at night there would be—you'd have occasions where the moon would shine into the big, round windows shining down on the Great Hall. And you could not help but think about all the people that passed beneath your feet, that came through the island off to places unknown, most of them—some of them. So—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: It's a whole different world and culture, which made it great, this country.

LEVINE: S—yeah. So not just ghost, but to the construction workers, it was a lady in a red dress?

MORRISSEY: Yeah. Apparently, it was supposed to have been—that was the—that was the rumor we heard. There was some guys that could have

sworn they saw her or felt her. But it was—like I said, it was pretty—it was quite—it'd be at night. Some nights we had—be total darkness except for just a little glimmer of light. You would—you'd hear a pigeon fly out and you'd be like, you know, "What?" You know. [laughs]

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: Come out from one of the—come out from behind you, one of the dark areas. So it was—you know, it was pretty—it was pretty unique.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you worked—like, did you work, like, for—you worked more than 40-hour weeks when you were here?

MORRISSEY: Well, sometimes. We'd work a 40-hour week but then like I said, at night, they'd be—might be weather front coming in where it's going to get ice, cold, so you ne—needed guys to stay with some of the equipment so it wouldn't freeze up or break down, what have you, so work could continue the next morning when the rest of the guys came. So something—

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: You know, blew a breaker or, you know, pipe broke or something along those lines, to be able to get on it and fix it and keep it running.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: So you had to maintain heat and power to the building to keep all the stuff going.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: So there was was—there was your foreman, you mentioned.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, Ed Mann. [PH]

LEVINE: Ed Mann. And then were there—was there somebody overseeing the whole thing, that you know of?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, there was a guy, a fellow named Phil. I don't remember his last name. He—the outfit overseeing the whole place was an outfit

called Lia McGI—Lia McGovern [PH]. That was the general contractor, which is now Bovus Len [PH] Leasing.

LEVINE: C—can—do you think you could spell those? Lamb McGI—

MORRISSEY: Lia McGovern. I don't—

LEVINE: Liam? Is that what you're saying?

MORRISSEY: Lia, Lia.

LEVINE: Lia.

MORRISSEY: Lia McGovern. Yeah, I don't—

LEVINE: Okay. Lia McGovern. And—and it's now called—

MORRISSEY: Bovus.

LEVINE: Bovus.

MORRISSEY: They had bought out the contract over that. Now, Bovus is the—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: One of the—which they'd taken over the rest of it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Yeah. So did you socialize with these people that you were working with?

MORRISSEY: Basically, some of the—the foundation people, they pretty—dealt with you on a format, kind of like a straightforward type of thing. But when we put up the Christmas trees, it kind of like started a little bit of a hornet's nest because we had put 'em up—we had asked them if we could do it. But they didn't think they were going to be put up in the areas they were going to be put up. So it was quite—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: It was quite a—

LEVINE: You didn't expect where it was going to go.

MORRISSEY: No, no.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: The construction workers, I think might have had one on 'em. You know what I mean? They were—they were paying people to promote the island and we were—we had one on 'em when we put it up on top of the water tower. They were pretty well [chuckles]—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: They were pretty well—I—I don't want to say irate. They weren't irate. They were just, that we had done something that—we pulled a stunt that, really, they d—I don't think they expected us to pull.

LEVINE: They didn't expect it. Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: But it was all for a good cause. It was all for kids so it was pretty basically—nobody really—you know, nobody really minded it. But it was pretty funny, how they—they had a—a staff of people, like could promote the island. And here's a couple of construction workers that ended up upstaging them a little bit. So they weren't too thrilled about it. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: To say the least.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, why don't we pause here? We'll turn the tape over.

MORRISSEY: All right.

LEVINE: And then we'll keep going.

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: Now, is there something—

MORRISSEY: What's that? Yeah.

LEVINE: —that we should be—

MORRISSEY: That—

- LEVINE: Okay. We're on the second side of the tape now and we were talking about you—you mentioned that, here and there, people would find artifacts.
- MORRISSEY: Right, yeah. Every now and then, you'd find an artifact and you'd—you'd turn 'em in, and they found bottles, old—kind of old stuff, what have you. And then at one point of time, we were digging down in the basement, they had come across some remains. And it turned out that the remains they thought that was down in the basement, something happened, went on years ago. So it comes to find out when they—I guess they carbon date 'em and they took it to Washington to be carbon dated. But they couldn't do it because they were so old. And they sent 'em to Arizona. And it comes to find out that the remains were the original—one of the original inhabitants of the island. So—
- LEVINE: Hmm.
- MORRISSEY: —it was quite—it was quite—like I said, it was quite—we found bottles, dishes, coins, stuff like that. The guys would turn it in because they knew it was part of history.
- LEVINE: Yeah.
- MORRISSEY: So they were proud to, you know—when we'd find stuff. And when we dug, we—we would have a—we would have a—people from the foundation, like, looking in certain areas. If we'd find something, we'd alert them to whatever we found, an article, and they would send a, you know, a team out to take a look and write it down, document it and dig it out the rest of the way and not disturb it. So—
- LEVINE: Do—was there anything about the original inhabitant that was found that—that you know? I mean, did they give you any information about—
- MORRISSEY: Apparently, they found some bones, from what I gather, from what I recall. That was—we're going back over 20 years ago, but they had found it and it was—it was down on the left hand corner of the building down there. There was an area down there that they found in.
- LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Was it a Native American, do you know?
- MORRISSEY: Yes. I believe—yeah. That's—that's what they figured, that it was a Native American. So—

LEVINE: Hmm.

MORRISSEY: I think. I'm not a hundred percent sure. I'm pretty sure it was.

LEVINE: Oh. Well, now, would there be areas in this building that, if you were to go with us to, you could point out things that were done? Or i—do you think the pictures serve—

MORRISSEY: No, I can probably show you some stuff.

LEVINE: Yeah?

MORRISSEY: Yeah. Yeah, I could probably—

LEVINE: Okay. Okay.

MORRISSEY: [unclear] on the other side. You been on—what's—the other side was pretty off limits to us, but we had occasion to go over to the other side also, by the hospital area over there.

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: You mean, to do work or just to see?

MORRISSEY: Well, every now and then, one of the rangers would take us over if we were interested, because we worked on the island. We were basically on this side but we—

LEVINE: Right.

MORRISSEY: —also wanted to see what the other side was.

LEVINE: Right, right.

MORRISSEY: So the other side was pretty—you know, pretty off limits to us. But every now and then, you'd find a ranger or somebody would be—because we pretty basically worked hand in hand with everybody.

LEVINE: I see.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, were the rangers giving tours here during the course of the time you were here?

MORRISSEY: No. No, the island was shut down.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So nobody was coming out here?

MORRISSEY: No, no, no.

LEVINE: Except for workers.

MORRISSEY: Just the construction workers. Right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: And some of the staff that they had out here.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: But like I said, they would—they would—once they got to know you, some of the guys, they'd end up giving you a walk on the other side.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And how about, like, socializing with these other people who were working out here? Did you—did you get together when the job was done? Did you celebrate—

MORRISSEY: Yeah, they had—well, every now and then, we'd have a big barbecue, you know, when the weather got nice. At Christmas, we had a, you know, Christmas party. We'd invite people at—they'd have like six-foot hero parties and stuff like that and so, yeah, we—everybody pretty well gelled together, because everybody was—like I said, everybody was here to do the right thing and to think that, you know, we were part of something that was part of your family.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: You know, everyone—everybody has a story to tell, just basically.

LEVINE: Really.

MORRISSEY: We had guys here from Ohio and they remembered their family coming through the doors and going—leaving on the—they were told when they were kids that they left on the railroad, which the railroad station was, like, dilapidated when I was out here. But they—they restored it beautifully.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: So in other words, there were people—in other words, it wasn't the—just the New York Electrical Union?

MORRISSEY: No. No, we had different trade—we had men from all over, working.

LEVINE: Why—why were they coming from all over?

MORRISSEY: Well, the work—the work situation in the '80s in New York was such—so—the work—there was so much work in New York that we had to get men from other jurisdictions to come to work in our jurisdiction that was slow. Like, in other words, they would be—a lot—a couple of guys were from Youngstown, Ohio. And when the steel mill shut down, they had—they were out of work. And because they were in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, they would—they would come out and then would—out to my union hall. And then they'd end up hiring 'em on and send them out on a temporary work basis.

LEVINE: I see.

MORRISSEY: So they would come out and work, which could last a year, two years, three years. So—

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you think that was true in the other unions too?

MORRISSEY: Yes, there was some of the other unions that—

LEVINE: That they were hiring from other places?

MORRISSEY: Right, right. We just couldn't man all the jurisdictions in New York at the time.

LEVINE: I see. So there were people from all over the country—

MORRISSEY: Right, right.

LEVINE: —then who were on this work team?

MORRISSEY: Right, right.

LEVINE: So it was kind of like being in the military. [laughs] Right?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: But they all had different stories to tell, you know, of their parents, their grandparents, German, Irish, Italian, you know. You name it; they were there. [chuckles]

LEVINE: And you th—do you think the—the—the quality of the work that was done reflected this fact that they had more of their—more of themselves and more of their, sort of honor on the line—

MORRISSEY: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: —in—in the course of doing it?

MORRISSEY: Oh, most definitely. Yes, they would be—you know, you—you—like I said, you'd hear the stories of different things. And guys would come back and it'd be—you could take pictures of cert—certain spots and bring 'em back to show their loved ones back home in Ohio or wherever they were from, Virginia, what have you. So—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: It was quite—

LEVINE: Yeah.

MORRISSEY: They were pleased to be here.

LEVINE: Yeah. So was that a high point in your life?

MORRISSEY: Yeah, I would say, when President Reagan—yeah. Yeah, it was—it was quite—Ellis Island was—I was quite enthralled by being here, working out here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: You know, being part of a—you know, with history.

LEVINE: Yeah? And how about your mother and father? Did—were they impressed that this was what you were doing?

MORRISSEY: My father was a lot. My mother more—were younger. But my father was very impressed about working out here. As a matter of fact, he gave me the biggest ribbing when I didn't meet the president. [laughter] He was—he was quite the—he was quite the Irish—you know, he had a lot of Irish pride in him. But when I told him I was

going to meet the president, he was like—you know, he thought the—the moon shined over me, or the sun shined on me 24 hours.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—but then when I didn't meet him, he was—it was of my biggest—

LEVINE: Relentless, right? [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: Yeah. [chuckles] Until I got the pictures.

LEVINE: Ah.

MORRISSEY: So he was good. He was—he backed off.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Because then he could show the neighbors. At least he had something. [chuckles]

LEVINE: Now, was he still in the Bronx then?

MORRISSEY: No, he passed away about 10 years ago.

LEVINE: No, but I mean when you were working out here.

MORRISSEY: Well, yeah. Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: Yeah. He lived in the Bronx.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there any other aspect of—of your work out here that maybe we haven't touched on that I didn't know enough to ask you that you can think of? Anything else you want to say about it or—

MORRISSEY: No, I just—like I said, the pride. I mean, you could—you could—every now and then, you'd come over—well, the guys come over from New York. You'd come over on a boat and you could picture that—what the immigrants must have thought of the statue and everything, you know. There were days, you would be out there, be the fog. You couldn't see, like, five feet in front of your face and you had to rely on the skippers. You know, there was a couple of boats that were running over and they would—they'd be on the radar and you'd have the tugs going back and forth and what have you. So

you could pretty well picture what they must have felt like, the immigrants coming to this c—New World.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

MORRISSEY: But I'm [unclear].

LEVINE: Have you visited this place since it's been open?

MORRISSEY: Well, last time when I come up to talk to you, that was it.

LEVINE: Okay. Yeah. I mean, you've got—

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: —a stake in it. Right? [chuckles]

MORRISSEY: Yeah, yeah. Well, when we're here today, we're going to walk around.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: We're pretty—my sister's in from Arizona so—

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

MORRISSEY: And my nephew, their son—their son wants to see the Statue of Liberty so bad. So I guess he's going to see it firsthand now.

LEVINE: Great.

MORRISSEY: So—

LEVINE: Great. And you're here with your brother, who's—

MORRISSEY: My brother.

LEVINE: —being honored too, right, today?

MORRISSEY: Yeah. My brother's going to be honored for the New York City Fire Department, [unclear] Society of Man of the Year. So—

LEVINE: Wow.

MORRISSEY: And I'm here with my son, who's a cop in New York City Police Department. So—

LEVINE: Great.

MORRISSEY: We're all pretty basically involved in either law enforcement or the fire department. So—

LEVINE: Right. Okay. Well, I think we can close here. And I'm hoping that we can get some video.

MORRISSEY: Yeah. Right.

LEVINE: Little video snaps of places within this building that you have some memory about—

MORRISSEY: Yeah. I'm—yeah.

LEVINE: —working on. That would be great.

MORRISSEY: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, we're going to have this material, some photographs and the poem and the president's picture and his—and his letter all on file under your name.

MORRISSEY: Yeah, okay.

LEVINE: And eventually, your—your interview will be in our listening room.

MORRISSEY: All right.

LEVINE: And—

MORRISSEY: Very good.

LEVINE: —we'll have also some videotape o—of you—

MORRISSEY: Right.

LEVINE: —showing us different places in this building. Well, thanks very much.

MORRISSEY: Okay.

EI-1444/MORRISSEY

LEVINE: And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, signing off.
Great.

MORRISSEY: Okay.

LEVINE: Okay.

MORRISSEY: Hope it went all right. [chuckles]

LEVINE: So we need to—and I—here's what we need.

[END OF INTERVIEW]