

**EI-167**

**HARRY NORBURY**

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**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

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**ENGLAND, 1923**

**PORT: SOUTHAMPTON**

**SHIPS: SCYTHIA AND BERENGARIA**

**AGE 21**

**RESIDENCES: ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE**

**US: BEAVER FALLS, PA**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with Harry Norbury, who came to the United States from England in 1923 when he was twenty-one years old. Today is June the 9th, 1992, and we're here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio. I'm very happy to be with you here today, and it's a pleasure, an unexpected pleasure, to have a chance to talk with you about what you remember.

NORBURY: Oh, thank you.

LEVINE: Let's start out by you telling me your birth date.

NORBURY: My birth date is October the 8th, 1901.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And where were you born?

NORBURY: I was born in England.

LEVINE: Where in England?

NORBURY: Ashton-under-Lyne, and that's in Lancashire, kind of the north of England.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you live there until you left for the United States?

NORBURY: That's right, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Then maybe you can describe to me the town you lived in.

NORBURY: Well, the town was around, it was about forty-thousand people, forty- to forty-five thousand people. Uh, I was, my father died when I was five years of age. He left six of us. At that time there was no welfare, there was no food stamps or anything like that. And everybody had to go to work or you just didn't eat. So everybody was working till one Saturday morning I was ten years of age, and I was the only one that wasn't working, being the youngest of six. I was playing marbles, and a man came. He said, "Would anybody like a job?" I said, "Yes, I would." Because ( he laughs ) I was interested in getting to work. So he took me to the farmer. He said, "This is the farmer, and we want a boy delivering milk after school or Sunday mornings." I said, "Well, I'll

take Sunday mornings to begin with." So I took the first few Sundays. I got fourpence, that's about eight cents, for the Sunday morning's work. So I got home and I said to my mother, "Mother, you don't have to work any more." ( they laugh ) "I've got a job." So anyhow, I went from there, and then they put me on every night after school, and I worked every night after school. And Saturdays I used to clean the harness after delivering the milk. Until 1913, and then I was through school and the war was coming on. And I was working steady on the farm then. I had my own horse and my own wagon and the government took me off of the farm and put me making small parts for guns, working from six in the morning to eight o'clock at night, four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. There was long hours. And in the meantime, of course I had an uncle in the United States, Uncle Sam. He lived in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and he joined the United States army, and he came over to England with the United States troops. Anybody that had relatives there, they would give them a furlough. So he came to stay with us. And he told us about the United States, all the good things about the United States.

LEVINE: Do you remember what he told you?

NORBURY: Oh, he said he had a nice home, and he had a pretty good job, and I said, "Well, I'd like to come to the United States sometime." But my mother was still living, Father was dead, and I didn't want to leave home. And my mother wanted to live until I was twenty-one. But the war years had had a terrible effect on people, lining up for

potatoes and we had one egg a month, no bacon. We had food stamps, powdered milk. It was hard on the old people. So my mother died when I was nineteen. So it left us at home. So we thought about, and I had a job then as an apprentice in a plant. I'd been working there. And I thought I'd finish my apprenticeship, so I did, until I was twenty-one years of age.

LEVINE: Now, this was an apprenticeship for what?

NORBURY: For tool making.

LEVINE: Tool making.

NORBURY: Yes. So I finished my apprenticeship and I thought, well, I didn't want to do that kind of work. I wanted to really be a salesman, but there was no opportunities, no chance. So in 1923 I read that the Ford Automobile Company was paying five dollars a day in the United States and I thought, "Oh, my golly, I'd like to go to the United States." But I wrote to my uncle, and he turned me, he said he had a friend in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, and he said, "This friend of mine," he said, "he's a preacher, and he'll help you if ever you want to go." So finally I decided to come to him. So we left England in September, at the end of September 1923.

LEVINE: Now, who is "we"? Who left with you?

NORBURY: My two sisters.

LEVINE: What were their names?

NORBURY: One was Hilda, Hilda and Nellie.

LEVINE: And how was it that the three of you came and not the rest of the family?

NORBURY: Well, the other part of the family, Fred was married, Sis was married, and there was just, one of the other girls, so there was just the three of us. Like there was six in the family, but there was three of us left. So we decided to sell off the home and come to the United States.

LEVINE: Okay. Before we continue, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

NORBURY: It was, my mother's name was Mary, and her, it was Mary Broughton, B-R-O-U-G-H-T-O-N. Broughton.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

NORBURY: Samuel, and he died in 1907. It was 1907.

LEVINE: And did you have grandparents?

NORBURY: Yes. I had grandparents, and they were both dead. They were dead, so I never remembered them at all.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Okay, so you decided to come to Beaver Falls?

NORBURY: Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. So we left England on, we sold up the furniture and that, and we left England about the last day of September 1923 aboard the Scythia. That's about a twenty-two thousand ton ship owned by the Cunard. And we left Liverpool, and of course I left my girlfriend and her father and mother on the dock in Liverpool.

LEVINE: Do you remember the goodbyes?

NORBURY: Oh, yes, I remember the goodbyes. ( he laughs ) And anyhow, as soon as we left, about seven o'clock at night we were in a thick fog, but we were supposed to be in Ireland by nine o'clock on Sunday morning. But at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning we hadn't arrived in Ireland to pick up passengers, and we were still, every two minutes the siren, the fog siren, was going all night long, and they say how it carries over the water, you know, the siren like that. And Hilda and Nellie, we were walking along the deck, and I saw something coming towards us, and it looked like a race course, and then I realized it was a ship, and it was the Cederic, the White Star liner, heading right for us in the fog. And it hit us almost at the point of the ship. If it had come in the middle it would probably have cut us in two. And our ship went over and come back again, and then they both come alongside, back again. And everybody was scattered all over the deck. Well, we hadn't had a lifeboat drill because it was too foggy.

So they announced to go for your life belts. So we went for our life belts to the cabins and lined up, and they let the lifeboats down level with the deck. And we had women and children first while they was examining what damage was to the ship. There was a big hole in the ship. So my sisters of course were with the ladies in front, and it wasn't long before they came around to me and they said, "Harry, if we're going down, we're going down together." So I was pretty sad, you know, to do that. But luckily we didn't leave, we didn't, we just still there. It was still, you could just hear the water lapping around the ship. You could hardly see the water. And then, that was eleven o'clock Sunday, and five o'clock Sunday we started to move, and we were in, back in Liverpool on Monday morning. And then they started to divide, all the crew was divided up into different ships. Some come into Philadelphia, some come into Boston, some come into New York and Canada. And there was about a hundred, a little over a hundred of us left on Thursday. So then they shipped us down to Southampton, and we got on board the Berengaria. That was a big German ship. It had been a German ship during the war, and it had been taken over by the British. So we left Southampton. And it was crowded, because they crowded us in, you know. It was booked up in the first place and they crowded us in. So we came to the United States. And we got here on the following Friday, Friday about four o'clock, and everybody got off but us. They wouldn't let us off. So . . .

LEVINE: You mean, you and your sisters were the only ones?

NORBURY: No, there was a hundred of us. All the ones that had been . . .

LEVINE: On the other boat.

NORBURY: On the other ship. So they kept us on board, and that was on Friday. Saturday we were still there, Sunday we were still on board, and on Monday morning, why, the announcement we were going to move. So they put us on a steamer and brought us to Ellis Island. Well, there's always a joker amongst the crowd. But when we got on Ellis Island his jokes was finished. ( he laughs ) We all lined up in the hallway, you know. There was chairs on each side, and we lined up till we got to the head, and then after they got all the information I went this way and my daughters, my sisters went the other. And they opened a door in a cage and pushed me in there and that was it. And some of the other fellows was in there too, but everybody was quiet. So we went down, when the gong went we went down to eat supper and as we sat at the long table they cut the bread, they didn't cut it clear through. They cut it part way so, but you couldn't touch it until the bell went, and then you grabbed a piece of bread. And then they poured something in the bowl for us. And I saw my sisters leaving. They'd had their dinner. So the old man that was with me, why, a Scotsman, I was trying to take care of him. I said, "Why, there's your two daughters and my two sisters." And we waved to them, and my sisters were crying. So we got up and left, so we went with them. And they put us up on this balcony. On that, where we were, on that balcony

there. And we sat there, granted we hadn't had anything to eat the whole day. So, anyhow, this Scotsman and I was with the ladies there and there was, I mean, some kind of an affair below, some kind of entertainment below, and we could hear all the things going on, you know. And at nine o'clock they came and they said, "Now," a guard came and he says, "you can't stay here." But he was giving the women milk and crackers. So I had my hand out. He said, "We don't give it to men." So, so he said, "You follow me." So the two of us followed him, and he took us to a place, I don't know where it was there, and there was big doors there. And they gave us a black blanket and a piece of soap. And he said, "Now," he said, "you get settled because we're going to open the doors and there's going to be a lot of people coming here. So we got settled and I didn't know what to do. There was the springs and there was all this piping and all the chains hanging down, you know, and you could look right down there. And I thought, "My God, how many people is going to come in here?"

LEVINE: Was it bunk beds or cots?

NORBURY: No, they were beds. They were all hung on chains, you know. And so I had this piece of soap and a blanket and I thought, well, I'm going to sleep on the springs. I'm covering myself with the blanket, but I'll sleep with my clothes on. So I put my shoes together, you know, like that, and I made my pillow, you know, there, out of it. And that's where we went to sleep. Ah! So in the morning the old man said, "Harry," he said, "let's get up early because," he said, "when all these people get washing, trying

to wash themselves they said we're going to be in a mess." And, you know, there was arguing till about two or three o'clock in the morning, you know. All these people, and a lot of them couldn't speak English. Sad, you know. We were lucky we could. But they couldn't, and arguments about it. And then a lot of them were still sleeping when we got up. So they had a big bar on the bottom of the piping, you know. And you ought to see those people get out of bed. They just flopped over, you know. ( he laughs ) And we went down for breakfast. And, of course, we sat in those long tables and they brought in a wagon with something. I don't know whether it was soup with a scoop and put it in for us, you know. We had that. And then they put us together with special badges on. The people that had come from the ship. And they put us in a cage all together, a long one, just us. And we stayed there, and then we had, we had lunch. And then they said we were moving, but nobody would tell you where you were going, you know. It was just guesswork. So first thing, you know, we were put on the steamer. And I saw my luggage coming back again, rolling the luggage out, you know. And we had a tea service in there, one that was china, you know. I made a box to put it in. And I thought, "Oh, my God, there goes the china." But anyhow it must have been packed pretty good, because it still weathered it." ( he laughs ) But anyhow, we got back, and they took us back to the docks. And we said, "Where are we going?" "Well, you're going back on the Berengaria." Washington wouldn't permit us to come in because of the quota. It was full. And we had a choice either keeping us there for another month or sending us back to England. So we decided, we went back to England. And when we

got on board ship they said, "You can eat anything you want, because we know what you've gone through." So we went back to England. And . . .

LEVINE: How did you feel?

NORBURY: Oh, it didn't feel too good, but a law's a law, and they just wouldn't do it. But when we went back to England most of them didn't come back again. They'd had enough. But, you see, we had no home. We'd sold our home, so we didn't know what to do. So we stayed in Southampton, and they put us in hotels until we came back again. So we came back the second time, and we arrived in New York. And everybody got off the ship.

LEVINE: Did you stay in a hotel until the month was up, until you came . . .

NORBURY: No, the ship was coming back. The ship was coming back in about two weeks.

LEVINE: Oh, I see, because it took about two weeks to get here.

NORBURY: Yeah. About two weeks, yeah. So we stayed in hotels until that time.

LEVINE: I see.

NORBURY: And when we got back into New York, why, everybody got off the ship again, but we couldn't get off. It always landed, it left on Saturday and it always got in

New York on Friday. The Berengaria was a fifty-two thousand ton ship. It had a pretty good speed. They wouldn't let us off. So finally, why they don't let us off because Washington had all the reports, and we had to wait for them coming back. So we thought, "My God, what are we going to do again? Are we going back on Ellis Island?" But anyhow they let us off. The day following morning, why, they let us off the ship. But I could never, I could never forget Ellis Island. It was, it took, the time we left England and the time we got to the United States, why, it was almost six weeks. So it was a long trip. Now it's seven hours. Hasn't it changed? Hasn't the world changed? But the United States, well, I went for a job. I landed on Sunday noon and I said, I made my mind up I was going to take any kind of a job. So I went out on Monday looking for work. Of course, in 1923 there was a reaction here from the war and a lot of the places, especially the big plants, steel plants, they were, they had big signs up, you know, "No Help Wanted." So it was pretty hard, then, to get work. So on Tuesday morning I went out again. I hadn't got a bite. I hadn't got an interview. So on Tuesday morning I didn't get again. So Tuesday afternoon on 15th Street in Beaver Falls I went down to Moltrup Steel, Moltrup Steel. And the guard there, he says, "Can't you read that sign?" I said, "No, I don't have my glasses." Of course, I didn't wear glasses, but I had to say something. So he says, "Get the hell out of here." So I walked away and I got halfway up the street, and there was a man coming down all dressed up. And I said, "Sir, could I speak to you a moment?" He said, "Yes." I said, "I've just come from England on Sunday and I'm looking for work. I need a job." I said, "Do you know where I could get

one?" He said, "Well, I'd like to know a little more about you." So I had a reference from the plant that I'd left in England, so I let him read it. He looked at me, he said, "Young man," he says, "follow me." So he took me back to grouch that had told me where to go to, you know. ( he laughs ) So I, the fellow said to me, he said, "You, take care of this man till I come back." So the guard said, "You know who that is?" I said, "No." He says, "That's Frank Moltrup that owns the plant." ( they laugh ) So about ten minutes after he came back again, he said, "This is going to be your foreman." And you know something? That was in 1923, and you know I've never been out of a job since. But in 1929 I started with the Met Life in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. And I had an interview with them, and I'd just bought a car. I had a car, my first car. And I was afraid they were going to ask me about a car, and he said, "Now, you have an automobile?" I said, "Yes." I said, and I was afraid he was going to ask me to look at it, because I bought it at the junkyard. I paid fifty dollars for it at the junkyard. And it was an old Oldsmobile touring car. And there was, it was a cloth top, you know. And somebody had that, and it had been ripped, and they'd sewn it with thread, and when it rained it dropped in on me on the front. And that ( he laughs ) when I, in the insurance business sometimes before I got the curtains up I was wet through. So, but I started with the company with nothing, and, you know, I was promoted in 1936. I was promoted to Oil City, Pennsylvania. I had other opportunities to go different places, but I went to Oil City, Pennsylvania. And I started as an agency manager at that time. And I've never looked back since that time. And after thirty years I retired at age fifty-nine, and I've had

a wonderful life. And the United States is a great country to be here. I love England, sure. I've been back, my wife and I have been back to England. We have made ten crosses back. And we've toured, we've been in Russia, we've been all over, and that's what it's done for me. It changed my life completely around, and I'm thrilled. I came back again.

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful. Let me just ask you a few questions. How did you meet your wife?

NORBURY: I met her in England at a church social. At the churches over there they wouldn't let you play cards or dance or anything like that, so they had to hold it at a hall, like. So I, we played cards. West Drive. It was like five hundred, we played cards. And the losers stayed and the winners went up, you know. And I lost, and there was four at the table, you know, with all these tables. And a girl came and sat next to me. She had curls. She was sixteen. And I looked at her and I thought, "Oh, my golly, what a nice girl." And I was eighteen and she was sixteen. And you know, we've been going together ever since. And it will be fifty-eight years this Christmas Eve since we were married. We were married in Beaver Falls at seven o'clock. We didn't know many people, because she came to me. I sent for her in 1924, and she came at Christmas.

LEVINE: You sent for her before you were married?

NORBURY: Yes, before we were married. And she was here a week, and we were

married at the church in Beaver Falls, and it was Christmas Eve and it was deep in snow. And we went to the parsonage. We didn't know many people. I got a couple to come, you know, to stand for us. And we had snow boots on, and we were married at Christmas Eve. And I took her to the Regent Theater on Seventh Avenue in Beaver Falls, and we saw Captain Blood, and that was our honeymoon. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: And then did you have children?

NORBURY: Yes, we have two daughters. This is one of them I have here. And this is my grandson, Kevin. And he's the fellow that he presented me, and Agnes, my wife, he presented us with a gift for Christmas, and it was to come to Ellis Island, and that's his Christmas gift. And he couldn't have given us a better, I've just remarked of it so much.

LEVINE: Isn't that wonderful. Okay, well, why don't you tell me your wife's maiden name?

NORBURY: Uh, Dawson. Agnes Dawson.

LEVINE: And your two daughters' names.

NORBURY: Two daughters, one's not married. She's, uh, she was in charge of education at the Franklin Hospital, and she's just retired. And my youngest daughter here, she's retired now. She was a schoolteacher. And she's retired, and she has three children. This is Kevin I have with us now. And when I stand alongside him I think I

never grew up. He's six-two. ( they laugh ) Oh, we've had a wonderful life together.

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close about starting out as an Englishman, and the decision to come, and the decision to bring your . . .

NORBURY: Well, one advantage we did have, we had the language, of course. You know, against a lot of other people, it's more difficult. But we bought a home. I hadn't been here too long before we bought a home in Beaver Falls, and we had all kinds of free trees. We lived up on a hill. We had grapes and pears and apples and quince and peaches and all like that. We had a wonderful life there. And we went along very good. My wife helped me there. She got a job as a stenographer in a plant in Beaver Falls. And together we, before we had any children we got that home. And we were sorry to leave Beaver Falls because we had a nice home, but we've enjoyed Oil City. It's small, it's nice and we've made a good living. And I've been retired now for what, since 1957. Although in 19, about two years after I did retire, they asked me if I would take over, they were organizing a United Fund. You know, a United Fund? The United Way, where they go out for money. They'd been failing for so many years, and I, they asked me if I'd do it, and I thought, "Well, I'll try it for a year." And, you know, I went into there and I organized it, and I raised several million dollars that never failed. Millions of dollars for the crippled children and the nurses aides, and all those Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and all like that. And I only went for one year, but they kept me there for ten

years. Oh, it's been a life of pleasure.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, it's been a pleasure speaking with you. I really appreciate your coming in today. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service signing off.  
Thank you. That was just wonderful.