

EI-235

SALLY VANDALL JONES

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 8/1994

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1995

DENTAL ASSISTANT AT ELLIS, 1946 [SIC. 1945]

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Significant contributions to this interview are made by Mrs. Jones' husband, Bill, who is also present. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 2/19/1995.

According to Dr. Burton Kane (EI-237), the dental clinic was closed in the fall of 1945, so that the employment of Sally Jones must have been in 1945. J. Levine
4/3/00

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today in Morris Plains, New Jersey, with Sally Vandall Jones. It's November 25th, 1992, and Mrs. Jones worked at Ellis Island when the Coast Guards were scheduled, were occupying the island. Well, I'm very happy to be here. I'm glad I made it. And I look forward to hearing what you have to say about your experience, and how that fit in to the whole evolution of Ellis Island. Why don't we start by your saying your birth date and birth place?

JONES: I was born on August 11, 1917 on Staten Island.

LEVINE: And prior to the time that you worked on Ellis Island, what were you doing?

JONES: I was teaching school, primary school, in Short Hills, New Jersey.

LEVINE: And how was it that you became involved with the Coast Guard?

JONES: I thought it was my duty to sign up and help wherever I could. I don't know why I chose the Coast Guard, because I went looking for something else and I just saw the Coast Guard office, so I went in and took the test and they accepted me.

LEVINE: And when was that?

JONES: Oh, Lord, I don't, 1944 some time. When did I go in?

LEVINE: September, 1944. And then what, what was your stint in the Coast Guard like? What did you do initially, and then . . .

JONES: Uh, we took our basic training in Palm Beach, Florida, which was very nice. We had one of those

huge big old hotels, and we were there for six weeks, I guess. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: What did the training consist of that you had?

JONES: We weren't trained very much there, except to be disciplined and to follow orders. We did a lot of marching and a lot of climbing stairs and a little bit of kitchen duty and (she laughs) not much of anything. We were trained to learn the workings of the Coast Guard mostly. We had to learn the names of ships and the names of the officers and get used to regimental life sort of.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of women in your training group?

JONES: Oh, yes, yeah. I can't remember. There must have been a couple of hundred anyhow in this particular group. We were divided into platoons and we had officers and leaders. And we, it wasn't, I did. It was very vague. It's, it was one of those things you (she laughs) you not look forward to, but it didn't turn out too badly, and then you promptly forget it, so.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember the feeling or the

attitudes of the women who were . . .

JONES: Oh, we were, everyone was very cooperative and very, we were all interested in doing something, some good. And this was just the basic training course to acclimate us to military life, I guess.

LEVINE: And then, so about how long did you spend . . .

JONES: We were there for six weeks.

LEVINE: Six weeks. And then, and then where did you go?

JONES: Uh, we were asked where we wanted to go. I said I wanted to go to California, and I was sent to Manhattan Beach in Brooklyn. (she laughs) So I guess they didn't pay much attention to us. And I was assigned to, well, I had to go into the medical corps. So I went in there, and I spent two years at Manhattan Beach.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what were you doing at that point?

JONES: Uh, I was a striker, for a pharmacy's mate. And we did six weeks of duty everywhere. We had six weeks in the office, and we'd just get used to that, and then we had six weeks' training in the hospital and

we'd just get used to that, and then they'd send us off somewhere to the dental clinic. I had six weeks there.

LEVINE: Now, this is all training, these six weeks?

JONES: This was all training, hopefully working for a rate, which the girls never got. They only, there were several girls there that were secretaries to the doctors, and this was a, Manhattan Beach was quite a large base, and we did have a dental clinic, and we had a hospital, we were affiliated with a hospital. And we had this bars, some of this bars, and about, I don't know, a couple of thousand men probably all on this base. And so we were the, we were the, (she laughs) we were the SPARS taking care. And, as I say, we worked, what?

LEVINE: Do you want me to stop for a minute?

MR. JONES: Ten thousand men.

JONES: Ten thousand men. (they laugh) I'm just making it smaller. Are we back on again? (referring to the tape recorder)

LEVINE: Yeah.

JONES: Okay. It was ten thousand men. (she laughs)
Didn't seem that many. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Where were these men coming from or going to, the
men who were on the station? They were just
stationed there?

JONES: They were there temporarily. Better get Bill again.
He was there, too. That's why he comes. (break
in tape)

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming here, having stopped the tape
because it's become apparent that Mr. Jones was
stationed on the base at Manhattan Beach from 1943.

JONES: Yeah.

LEVINE: So perhaps you can introduce yourself, and tell me
your birth date and birth place, just so we set you
in time.

MR. JONES: All right. December 16, 1922. Born in Wales.

LEVINE: Oh. (Mrs. Jones laughs)

MR. JONES: But my parents were citizens, so that I was an
American, but I was born in Wales. I enlisted in

the Coast Guard early '43, and was sent to Manhattan Beach as a boot camp. I was a trainee. And I went through the training, and at the end of the training we were allowed to choose what branch we would want to go into, and I went to try to be an electrician's mate and they asked me if I knew anything about refrigeration, and I knew nothing about it, so they turned me down. And I noticed all these fellows going off on a liberty, and I was still a boot, and they all had little red crosses on their arms. And I asked them, "What are they?" And, well, "They're Pharmacist Mate Strikers." They're training to be pharmacist mates. Well, I said, "That's a good idea. I can get out of Liberty anyway." So I applied for that, and they took me. And I was then transferred to sick bay, and went through much of the same training as Sally did.

LEVINE: Together?

JONES: No.

MR. JONES: This is before the ladies came. And . . .

LEVINE: So you would do six week stints at various posts . . .

MR. JONES: We, yeah. And we even got to work in the O.R. for three months. It was quite good training. And they were preparing us for duty.

JONES: You went to pharmacy school, too, which we didn't.

MR. JONES: Well, we also were sent to pharmacy school, Columbia College of Pharmacy.

LEVINE: Oh. Now, maybe you can fill us in on the background of the base itself.

MR. JONES: It, at one time in sort of a summer resort with little bungalows. (Mrs. Jones laughs) They converted those bungalows into places for us. They would take a bungalow, which was about the size of this house and put fifteen men in it, triple decker bunks. And it was not the greatest thing in the world, but then they built proper barracks. They had a big drill field. Next to it was a hospital run by the Public Health Service. Our doctors were Public Health, who were commissioned. They were not Coast Guards. And then right next to that on the other side of the hospital was a Merchant Marine training base, so that we treated Merchant Marines

and Coast Guards in that hospital.

LEVINE: And how, how many people did you have coming through there, would you say?

MR. JONES: Oh, at the height of it I would say maybe five or six hundred a day would come through. And go through the training, but they were also shipping out four or five hundred a day to various stations throughout the country or, well, the Coast Guard did a lot during the war when people didn't do a lot of stuff.

LEVINE: Like what?

MR. JONES: They ran troop transports. They ran, well, the landing craft in the South Pacific. They had patrol boats. They had, they did convoy work. They had Coast Guard boats in, during D-Day, in the English channel doing air/sea rescue. So they did quite a bit. I think at the height of the war the Coast Guard probably numbered close to two hundred thousand personnel, and when they started things like the WACS and the WAVES, they started the SPARKS. And the bar name I think came from the Coast Guard motto, Semper Paratus, Always Ready.

And I think what they, when they got the women in, they didn't, as Sally said, they didn't quite know what to do with them. They were so new. And there was an, there was an awful lot of prejudice among the old timers. You know, "What are these women doing here?" But they went through much the same training. They had to do marching, I don't think they ever carried a rifle.

JONES: No. (she laughs)

MR. JONES: But they marched. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Now, were there military people being treated?

MR. JONES: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh, and in what numbers were they?

MR. JONES: Uh, I think the hospital capacity was maybe, oh, I'd say maybe two hundred beds. And a lot of it was, each base had its own sick bay, which was more or less like an outpatient clinic. Then each of the barracks had a small sick bay where one pharmacist maybe would be assigned. And he would treat cuts and scratches and bruises, things of the sort. And also weed out the ones that should go to the main

sick bay, and they would weed out the ones that had to go to the hospital. And if there was something that was really serious, they'd end up going to, uh, what the heck was it, Stapleton, Staten Island, where there was a big U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, which I think is still there.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, good. Well, Sally, did you feel the prejudice being a woman?

JONES: Oh, yes, yes. Yes. We did, as I said, we, none of the girls that were there when I was there, we were among the first, I guess. We were the first ones on Manhattan Beach, and they did not want to give us any rates. None of the girls that came when I did that didn't have secretarial jobs got any rates, and we were there for a year-and-a-half.

LEVINE: By rates you mean any job?

JONES: Any rating that your, of course, if you got the higher rating . . .

MR. JONES: Like Corporal, Sergeant, First Class, Second Class.

LEVINE: So did you feel, I mean, was there anything akin to

a sort of feminist feeling among the women?

JONES: Oh, I don't know. We were busy and we were, it was, it was a marvelous experience because it was, especially in the sick bay, because it was like living with a great huge family, and we were all doing the same thing and had the same annoyances and griefs. And, but we did, the girls did, we had certain tests to take. It had something partly to do with the Coast Guard. Not much along the medical lines, and we would take the test and pass the test, and still keep our low-grade rating, which was, you know, we didn't really like that too much, but there wasn't too much we could do about it. We couldn't resign everything. So, but most of the girls that I knew got a third class pharmacist mate rating when they went to a new station.

LEVINE: Is that the lowest rating?

JONES: No. Well, that's the, no. They, a striker is the lowest, yeah.

MR. JONES: It's one stripe.

LEVINE: One.

JONES: It's like being a sergeant.

MR. JONES: No.

JONES: Oh, excuse me. (they laugh) I didn't pay much attention to it, as you can see. (they laugh)

LEVINE: So how long were you at Manhattan Beach, then?

JONES: A year-and-a-half, I think. Yeah.

LEVINE: And your idea was you were just there, you were just feeling this was a short time out of the usual teachings?

JONES: I don't know. We were there to do whatever we could. We didn't, You know, we had no idea how long the war was going to last. We were there for the duration. It just happened that it came to an end while we were still there.

LEVINE: Well, did the war come to an end when you were at Manhattan Beach?

JONES: Yeah.

LEVINE: And do you remember, maybe each of you could answer this, do you remember the feeling or the experience

of the war ending when you were on base?

JONES: I certainly do. It was a very, very exciting moment.

MR. JONES: Yeah, yeah. That's right.

JONES: I can remember they had a huge parade on D-Day, was it, or when the war ended?

MR. JONES: VE-Day.

JONES: VE-Day. And everyone on the base was out there marching, and the band was playing, and the flag was flying, and I tell you, it was a, it was a very stirring moment.

LEVINE: Do you remember it also, Bill?

MR. JONES: Yeah. It was euphoric, and also a little disappointing.

LEVINE: In what way?

MR. JONES: Ah, because I'd never, I'd never been shipped out. They shipped me out afterwards, and sent me out to the North Atlantic to do weather patrols. But, yeah, it was sort of an ambivalent feeling because,

as Sally said, we made such good friends, and you all of a sudden realized that, look, the things going to come to an end.

JONES: (she laughs) Well, we were pretty safe there, too. We weren't in any danger of any kind.

LEVINE: I imagine when you were all working together for a common good cause, and then you realize it's over.

MR. JONES: Yeah. Well, many times it got almost like M.A.S.H.

JONES: We just got hysterically silly, because we would go on weekend duties, and you were on duty continuously from Friday night until Sunday night. And, you know, long about two or three o'clock on Saturday morning, why (she laughs) things got a little silly. (she laughs) We were all very good. We didn't do anything naughty, except throw things. (she laughs) But . . .

LEVINE: Yeah. How do you feel being there at that time, during the war? How do you feel that has affected you, that particular experience in your life? Do you think that's had ramifications since that time?

JONES: No, I don't think so, no.

MR. JONES: No, not really. Actually, if anything it was a regret that they were my formative years. I put in four years in the Coast Guard and, you know, there was a lot of things I could have done in those four years. But everybody else was in the same fix as I was. But I don't think it had any traumatic effects.

JONES: Actually, we have several friends with whom we still correspond, and I saw a girl that I was rooming with last fall, last spring, and her husband who was also in the Coast Guard there with us. And it was just like seeing family. We got very close, as you could imagine.

LEVINE: Okay. So then the war was over and do you remember sort of the disbanding of the base or people there?

JONES: Oh, I certainly do. They threw things in the water.
(she laughs) Typewriters and blankets and everything, anything went in the, what was . . .

MR. JONES: Sheepshead Bay.

JONES: Sheepshead Bay, I couldn't think. And . . .

MR. JONES: The reason for that was, whenever a department was disbanded everything had to be inventoried. And, you know, if you had yeoman's office with six typewriters, and each one with identification numbers and so on, the easiest thing to do was pick the typewriter up, dump it off the pier, and you didn't have to put it down.

LEVINE: This wasn't our choice, though, we . . .

MR. JONES: When we, the ship that I was on when we re-commissioned down in Charleston, South Carolina, I was the pharmacist mate aboard, and I had to inventory the whole sick bay, which means count every pill. Well, bottles of a thousand APC were dumped over the side of the Charleston River or whatever it is down there. It was the thing to do. They did it all over the world. I think they probably drove tanks off into the water somewhere, too. (he laughs)

LEVINE: So then how did you, how did it happen that you went from there to Ellis Island?

JONES: I was being discharged, and they were disbanding the, uh, help me out here, if you can erase some of

it. They were breaking up the base and everyone was being sent off. And they sent, we went, the girls went into, into a hotel in New York City, and then we had a certain amount of time before they could process us to get through, so we were, (there is a disturbance during which the microphone is dropped)

Let me put this back. A breakdown in communications. (break in tape)

LEVINE: We're continuing, the cat having pulled the wire and the microphone out. (they laugh)

JONES: We were stationed, I guess at the Embassy Hotel in New York, and then we were sent out for different jobs.

LEVINE: Now, how long were you at the Embassy?

JONES: A couple of months, that's all. Just long enough to get your discharge papers in order and be processed and have you wait your turn.

LEVINE: Were you free to do . . .

JONES: Oh, no. We had to work, well, I was sent to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Oh, you were staying at the Embassy.

JONES: I was staying at the Embassy, and then we commuted over to the island on the ferry.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. So were there other people also sent to Ellis Island who were not staying at the Embassy? I mean . . .

JONES: Yes, some of the men from Manhattan Beach were there. And I would say there must have been, oh, maybe twenty of us, maybe not that many, but about.

LEVINE: Now, were the men from Manhattan Beach, were they . . .

JONES: They were all, they were all pharmacist mates. The only contact I had, there may have been other people there, but the only people I remember were part of the medical corps.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And were they all staying in Manhattan?

JONES: I don't know where the men were stationed. They must have been in a hotel somewhere, too.

LEVINE: And, so what? Were there like Coast Guard boats that took you there?

JONES: No. We went over, there was already a ferry then that went over and went into a slip, which I apparently, which apparently is gone now, but it was already a, like the Staten Island Ferry, only smaller. And it was rather a bumpy ride, if I remember, in March.

LEVINE: And so were, there were more than twenty people . . .

JONES: We were, that came in. Now, there may have been other people there doing clerical work that I didn't know anything about. We just came in and went down to our little offices which was, I don't know where. I can't, I couldn't find it, and I can't picture it in my mind. I don't remember going through the middle, the way you come in now. I think we must have gone around the outside and gone into the back part of the building there, because there were a whole series of small, they were equipped with dental equipment. And we just, we just worked as a regular dental unit.

LEVINE: And what were your duties when you were . . .

JONES: I just assisted the dentist, that was all. Just a

regular dental assistant.

LEVINE: And were there military personnel then who were living in the dormitories there who you were working on?

JONES: No. They were men that, help me out, dear. You said they were . . .

MR. JONES: Who you were treating?

JONES: Yeah.

MR. JONES: They were treating Coast Guard personnel and Merchant Marine personnel.

LEVINE: And they were living in the dormitories at Ellis Island?

MR. JONES: No.

LEVINE: No.

MR. JONES: No. They were all . . .

JONES: We were so isolated that . . .

MR. JONES: I don't think there was anyone. I wasn't there.

LEVINE: Right.

MR. JONES: But as far as I understand, there wasn't, there were no immigrants.

JONES: Oh, no. There was nobody.

MR. JONES: There was no one living there except possibly a small base personnel for maintenance and security and so on.

LEVINE: I see. So probably the people you worked on came by ferry also.

MR. JONES: Probably.

JONES: It was just one of those things you never looked into. People would come and you'd treat them, and that would be the end of it.

LEVINE: Do you remember the main building with the Great Hall in it?

JONES: I remember going past it. It was absolutely dreadful. Everything was, the furniture was all broken and rusty and the cobwebs. And it was just very devastating to see such a, when you realized what it, what it had been. And I must say they've done a marvelous job of (she laughs) restoring it.

We were so impressed last year when we went. We'll go back because I just, Bill's family, Bill's mother came over as an immigrant. My people were here, but . . .

LEVINE: So it had that abandoned, dishevelled look.

JONES: Oh, it was dreadful, just filthy. I guess they just closed those doors and just let it rot. There was no reason to keep it intact or keep it clean.

LEVINE: And do you recall any people coming from New Jersey who either, who worked there or . . .

JONES: No. As I say, we came in, we went around to the dental clinic, we worked all day. I guess we probably worked from nine until five, a regular day. Then we got on the ferry and went back to our hotel. And we didn't, we never saw anyone else. We were just contained in these, I don't even remember where we ate or anything of that sort at all, which is funny. You think you'd remember.

LEVINE: You brought your lunch or . . .

JONES: No. I'm sure we didn't do that, but there must have been a mess hall somewhere that we ate.

(she laughs)

LEVINE: And were you, like, wearing uniforms?

JONES: Oh, yes, yeah.

LEVINE: And, so then what happened? Your discharge papers came through?

JONES: Uh-huh. And that was the end.

LEVINE: And where did you go?

JONES: I just went home, back to, I was staying with my aunt in New Jersey, in Summit, New Jersey. So I just went, I just went back home. This was in March, and we got married in September.

LEVINE: Ah! So you knew each other from Manhattan Beach?

JONES: Yeah. We met in Manhattan Beach.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah.

JONES: You get all kinds of things going out of your job.
(they laugh)

LEVINE: Let's see. So now, do you keep contact with any of the people?

JONES: Yes. One of the girls, I went through boot camp with her, and she was also at Manhattan Beach, and she stayed a good friend all these years. They'd come and visit us. We'd see each other quite frequently. And it's just like, as I said before, it's just like taking up where you left off with a very good friend.

LEVINE: And how about on Ellis Island? Are there any people you keep contact with?

JONES: No.

LEVINE: And the doctor, did you assist one particular doctor?

JONES: One particular doctor, yes.

LEVINE: Do you remember his name?

JONES: Yes. His name was Seymour Loren, L-O-R-E-N. And he was, Public Service?

MR. JONES: Public Health Service.

JONES: Public Health Service.

LEVINE: Dentist.

JONES: I had never seen him before, and we did see him a bit afterwards. We used to go and visit him.

LEVINE: Where did he live?

JONES: In The Bronx.

MR. JONES: In The Bronx of New York.

JONES: We used to go up and see him occasionally after we were married.

LEVINE: I see. So he was commuting from The Bronx, do you think, when you were working at Ellis Island?

JONES: Apparently. A nickel subway would get you a lot of places in those days. (she laughs)

LEVINE: Let's see. Well, is there anything else? I mean, do you feel like that Ellis Island experience had . . .

JONES: It didn't mean much to me at the time. I had been brought up in Staten Island, so I was very aware of Ellis Island. But I had never been there before, and during the service, as I say, we just, we just went in our own entrance and did our work and went back. Occasionally we'd wander around, but

everything was so dismal and so dirty that there wasn't any incentive to look. And I don't think we were allowed down on the further end of the island.

Don't they have officers' quarters or something down there?

LEVINE: They had housing for personnel.

JONES: They did then. Perhaps that's where the, where the officers from the Coast Guard lived. I don't know. It's one of those things you don't bother with if you're . . .

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, as far as you can tell, you know where the main building is, and then there's the ferry slip, and then there are some hospital and administration buildings. And then, that's called Island Two, and then there's yet a third island. Do you remember which island you were working on?

JONES: I don't know. Well, I remember you came into the main slip, and for some reason I can't seem to recall anything after that.

LEVINE: Do you recall where the Statue of Liberty was in, relative to the offices?

JONES: No, because we were in the back part of whatever building we were in. We couldn't see anything. It was just a building that I, it seemed to be sort of an "L." And I can't even remember how many offices there were there.

LEVINE: But there were about twenty people coming in to work.

JONES: I think. I have a picture here of the, you want to turn this thing off?

MR. JONES: Show her the picture.

JONES: No, I have another picture here. Do you want to get that book so I don't pull this thing off again?
(referring to the microphone) The red one there on the top.

LEVINE: Okay. We're stopping here for a second. (break in tape) Okay. We're resuming again, having looked at some pictures. And the new information is (they laugh) that the Embassy Hotel was probably around 72nd and either Broadway or Columbus. That's where you were staying.

MR. JONES: I think probably Broadway.

LEVINE: Broadway, uh-huh. And there's a picture here of the, outside the dental clinic, which appears to be one-story buildings with just a couple of stairs up to it, and you walk through arches.

JONES: It was a, it was a, they were a long series of rooms, as I recall. A single building, a one-story building.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. Is there anything else that you can think of to say relative to the Ellis Island stint in your military career?

JONES: No. We didn't, I don't think we achieved any great works there. We were there just such a short distance. And they were, we were all being discharged, so we weren't paying too much attention to what we were doing. (she laughs) We were anxious to get home and get back to normal life. But . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, so you were really . . .

JONES: We weren't working very hard, I remember that. We didn't work half as hard as we did over at Manhattan Beach.

LEVINE: Did a lot of people meet at Manhattan Beach and later marry? Was that . . .

JONES: There were quite a group of us. There must have been ten couples or so.

MR. JONES: I'd say something like that.

JONES: I don't know. We don't keep in touch with any of them, except this one couple who are still together. Whether the rest of them are or not, I don't know.

LEVINE: Well, unless you can think of something else, I think this has been very interesting and thank you for contributing your part. (referring to Mr. Jones)

MR. JONES: You're welcome.

JONES: (she laughs) Get the serious details. (voices garbled) (they laugh) I'm not too good with numbers.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

JONES: You're very welcome.

LEVINE: This is a great contribution to this phase of Ellis Island, which isn't usually as recognized, of course, as well as the immigration phase. Okay. Well, this is Janet Levine, and I'm here in Morris Plains, New Jersey with Mr. and Mrs. Jones. And it's November 24th and I'm signing off.