

EI-274

DR. C. KNIGHT ALDRIDGE AND JULIE H. MURPHY ALDRIDGE

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RUNNING TIME:

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ABANDONED MEDICAL BUILDINGS ON ELLIS ISLAND

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1995

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

RESIDENT PSYCHIATRIST AT ELLIS ISLAND: 1940-1941

REGISTERED NURSE AT ELLIS ISLAND: 1936-1942

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: This informal interview was recorded by Kevin Daley as Janet Levine led the Aldridges through the abandoned medical buildings on Ellis Island. There is extraneous noise on this recording because of this unusual circumstance. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 2/22/1995.

ALDRIDGE: Do you want me to carry that, or you'll just follow me along?

DALEY: I'll just be, I'll be right next to you.

ALDRIDGE: Okay. (he laughs) I was here as a resident in psychiatry right after my internship from July of 1940 to January of 1942. Now, this is so familiar.

MURPHY: So Ward 17 was right down there.

ALDRIDGE: Right down there. And that's where we worked.

MURPHY: And then . . .

ALDRIDGE: And the T.B. was down that way.

MURPHY: 17 and 18, and 16 . . .

ALDRIDGE: . . . and psychiatry down that way.

MURPHY: 16 was the women's closed ward, and across the hall from that was your offices.

ALDRIDGE: And 13 was the disturbed section.

MURPHY: And 13 and 14 were the disturbed. And number 11 were the private rooms for Coast Guard officers, and . . .

ALDRIDGE: And where was the little contagious ward? Was that over on Second Island? The little one where we kept the Rubinstein children?

MURPHY: That was Ward 1.

ALDRIDGE: The (?) Rubinstein's children got mumps?

MURPHY: Mumps.

ALDRIDGE: En route, developed it en route, so they had to stay here until that was over with. I mean, that was sort

of ridiculous, because mumps, by that time, didn't amount to anything. We still had to do it, so we had the Rubinstein children in, what, 40? 41. Something like that.

MURPHY: Uh-huh.

ALDRIDGE: Yeah. We can walk down that way? Let's . . . Watch out for the, don't sink into the quick sand. (disturbance to the microphone) Julie, was this 17? I don't think you're gonna be, well . . . Do you remember a stairway right off? This is 17.

MURPHY: 17.

ALDRIDGE: And your office was right in there.

MURPHY: It was in here. And then the stairs up for 18, Ward 18.

ALDRIDGE: Ward 18 was up above.

DALEY: Where was the office?

MURPHY: Right, probably the third door on the left.

DALEY: It was the chief nurse's office?

ALDRIDGE: The chief nurse's office . . . Excuse me.

MURPHY: This was the kitchen for the ward. And I think (?),
we did the spinal taps . . .

ALDRIDGE: The spinal taps in there, and, uh . . . Was this
yours? Because this looks like . . .

MURPHY: No, that one was the office.

ALDRIDGE: This is yours.

MURPHY: This is probably the linen closet, as I recall.

ALDRIDGE: Did you have a sink in your office?

MURPHY: I think we did.

ALDRIDGE: This is where you brought me . . .

DALEY: Go on in and have a seat. (they laugh)
(voices garbled)

ALDRIDGE: Take a picture of us in the office.
(voices garbled)

: Now, what's this thing down here?

MURPHY: This is the patients' ward. This is where they
all . . .

ALDRIDGE: They're all lined up in the old-fashioned way, bed to bed.

DALEY: See, if you had six windows on the side, so you had twelve patients in here.

MURPHY: We had at least twelve.

ALDRIDGE: I had twenty, twenty patients.

MURPHY: Oh, I don't think that's similar . . . Those who were not so sick were upstairs.

ALDRIDGE: This was not the greatest place for suicidal patients.

LEVINE: How so?

ALDRIDGE: Well, that's a very fast current patient out there. And once the patient jumped in, there was no saving them. You lost a patient once, or we did, who then changed his mind and couldn't get back. Very sad.

LEVINE: Well, now, were the psychiatric patients in here?

ALDRIDGE: Oh, yes. This is all psychiatry.

LEVINE: Oh, this hall was the whole . . .

ALDRIDGE: This, from the nurse's, down to the end, was all psychiatry. This was a sort of main ward, wasn't it?

MURPHY: Yes.

ALDRIDGE: Or, at least this is the administrative ward where you worked from . . .

LEVINE: What were the most common psychiatric disturbances?

ALDRIDGE: Well, it was very much similar to . . .

MURPHY: The merchant seamen. And a lot of them were alcoholics. There were some drug addicts.

ALDRIDGE: And at the time we were there, there were some who were . . .

MURPHY: There were some . . .

ALDRIDGE: Who had been on an open boat after being torpedoed, on the (?) run, and . . .

MURPHY: And we had a lot of depressed people.

ALDRIDGE: Yeah, a lot of depressions, yeah.

MURPHY: The Merchant Seamen are a different breed sometimes. They're loners, and they have a hard time, I think,

living with people, kind of a . . .

ALDRIDGE: Very controlled. And they, they were uneasy when they would get ashore. They always said, "I want to, I want to get enough money so that I can get a little, a few acres and a farm on Long Island, when they had farms on Long Island. The problem was that they were really so uncomfortable away from the controlled environment of the ship, and then have to lose all the money in order to justify going back. And they got these big bonuses from the Mermask Run and so on, so they really spent money like, quote, "drunken sailors," which indeed they were.

LEVINE: So that accounts for drunken sailors.

ALDRIDGE: Now, the reason that these little slots are, that these were for disturbed patients. I can't remember where this was . . .

DALEY: A staircase.

ALDRIDGE: No, that's right. But why did they have it on the, this part of the ward.

LEVINE: This is really hard to see. (disturbance to the microphone)

ALDRIDGE: Nah, I can't see it. I doubt it, I doubt it. Press the button. (Dr. Levine laughs)

DALEY: Well, I guess this was a special area, because you had to ring yourself in.

ALDRIDGE: This is the disturbed ward. This is the . . . Julie, this is 13, I think, Ward 13.

MURPHY: Yeah, probably.

ALDRIDGE: The disturbed, because that would have been 15, 16, and this 13, 14. And that one up there 17 and 18. Yeah. This is 13.

MURPHY: This is the step down here. This is, these were . . .

ALDRIDGE: 13, the disturbed patients.

MURPHY: Yeah. And where was your, your offices, then, were . . .

ALDRIDGE: We're on what would have been fifteen, on that. My office was in there. I don't think that door is open, is it? Is that door open?

DALEY: We can make it open. (they laugh)

ALDRIDGE: Push it. (disturbance to the microphone) And the staff room was at the . . .

DALEY: It says 15.

MURPHY: 15.

ALDRIDGE: Does it?

DALEY: In chalk. I mean, that's not left over, but . . .

MURPHY: Yeah, yeah, that's it. This is from Fran's, Francis.

ALDRIDGE: Francis, oh, yeah, that's it. The whole set of offices in . . .

MURPHY: In there.

ALDRIDGE: In there. From (?) to Fran, everybody.
(disturbance to the microphone)

DALEY: Oh, it is locked.

ALDRIDGE: Yeah. (they laugh)

DALEY: Let's try the stairway door.

ALDRIDGE: That's to the upstairs. I don't even, holy smokes. We can go to see the office. Uh, maybe. Yep. I have to keep track of Mr. Daley, or I'm going to

be . . . Daley, is it? Ah-ha! Was that his office?

(voices off mike) One office after another, and here's the, the doctor's bathroom. No, here! But the, Julie, the staff rooms, down at the end here. Uh, ah, let me take a look at this next one to see which . . . No, Jimmy, I, was it out here?

(voices garbled)

DALEY: Watch the glass there.

ALDRIDGE: This must be where we had our, oh, yeah. This is where we had our staff meetings. We staffed every morning at eleven o'clock.

MURPHY: I never even saw it.

ALDRIDGE: Every morning at eleven o'clock, sat on these chairs, maybe. (he laughs)

MURPHY: One of my nurses could come each time.

ALDRIDGE: And we had a, we had a, uh, a table. Vesty sat behind the table here, and interviewed the patients, and we all sat here. And there was a library. Wasn't there a library? Book were all there.

MURPHY: Through here.

ALDRIDGE: And the books were all there, huh. Gosh.

MURPHY: These were (?) now, from, coming from the staff room, I think Dr. (?)'s office is . . . Can you help us with this?

ALDRIDGE: I can't remember who was where.

MURPHY: Hewitt was either that one, or Fair was that one.

ALDRIDGE: Hewitt and Fair. Fair you can't interview, he's dead. Huh? Vesty was . . .

MURPHY: Up on the ledge.

LEVINE: What would be, like, a typical staff meeting?

ALDRIDGE: A typical staff meeting is one of the residents, I, perhaps, would present the case and say, "This is a forty-two-year-old Merchant Seaman who was depressed and made a suicide attempt and so on." And I would give all the kind of data. And then Dr. Vestermark would interview the patient for about twenty minutes based on some of the things that we hadn't covered in the, uh, in the, uh, background material. And then he had this system which I now use, which I abhorred, in which he had a dictaphone, and he would shove it

one of us who didn't know in advance. And then what we're supposed to do was dictate the whole, uh, what we thought was wrong with the patient, and what we thought the patient should, uh, should be done. That is, should the patient have psychotherapy, or should the patient this or that. And then, uh, Vestermark would dictate a final summary. And almost every patient got staffed in that way. And that's one of the ways we learned how to do psychiatry.

LEVINE: And so were you learning when you were here, or you were already . . .

ALDRIDGE: Yeah, I wasn't, no, I just finished interning. I, I was a, uh . . .

LEVINE: Resident?

ALDRIDGE: A resident, yeah, a resident for a year-and-a-half, and then I got transferred to Kentucky.

LEVINE: So what would be, what would be the, what options did you have for recommendations as to what you could do for somebody?

ALDRIDGE: Well, psychotherapy, medication, continued hospitalization, discharge. Uh, if we were going to

do psychotherapy we should investigate this aspect, that aspect, the other aspect of the particular patient. And as sort of an estimate of what we thought might happen. Now, it was quite different with immigration cases, which you're more interested in. There were fewer. Immigration cases would very often be, well, remember the fight we had about the addict from Germany? You don't remember that. Well, this patient would come in and we'd be, for some reason or other either picked, well, give you an example. Immigration was called one day, or police were called because this man was making peculiar statements to the Countess Tolstoy, who at that time lived in Westchester. And it turned out he was a Latvian merchant seaman who had the delusion that he was part of the Russian royal family, and he'd heard that the Countess Tolstoy lived here. He was going to go over and state his claim. So he did, rather forcefully, and the police picked him up, and he ended up here. Then the problem was what to do in the first place. The problem was how to understand.

I can tell you this anecdote. The interpreters from the main island, from the first island, were a mixed breed. Some of them were very good. LaGuardia, you

know, had been one. Some of them were not so good. But when they got down to the Latvians there was, there weren't very many. And I can remember sitting this guy with a patient, this very psychotic patient, and I, the three of us, probably in this room, and saying, well, would you ask him why he went to see the Countess Tolstoy. And the eyes are back and forth, I couldn't understand him, and then he stopped. And I said, "What did he say?" He says, "Oh, you wouldn't be interested, doc. It's all crazy." (they laugh) But, of course, I have to be interested. That's my job. But then one of the jobs we had to do is, with the immigration case, is are they, should they be, not exported.

LEVINE: Deported?

ALDRIDGE: Deported. But Hitler, in those days, was not taking very good care of the people that returned. So we weren't, in actuality we didn't deport people, but we had to certify them as deportable, as mandatorily excludable. And then the machinery would, somebody would come to the rescue and put up bonds so that they could, so they would be sure they wouldn't become a public charge.

LEVINE: So they'd just be sent back to New York? Only they would be . . .

ALDRIDGE: Somebody . . .

MURPHY: There would have to be a relative of someone to take them. Or for those Merchant Seamen who had gone to Spain and fought, it would be, uh, challenged by the American . . .

ALDRIDGE: By the American . . .

MURPHY: Spanish American . . .

ALDRIDGE: Abraham Lincoln brigade. No, in the Spanish war. Abraham Lincoln became.

MURPHY: Abraham Lincoln debating (?). And then there was a group called Americans for Spanish Democracy.

ALDRIDGE: Friends of Spanish Democracy.

MURPHY: And they would, a lot of them would . . .

ALDRIDGE: They put up bonds.

MURPHY: They put up the bonds for these.

ALDRIDGE: One time, while we're doing this recording, I'll have

to tell you about Dr. Dellatore. I was called over there to first island because they had a man who had been taken off an Egyptian tanker because he had made a suicide attempt. And presumably, which it is, bring them over here and treat them and so forth, for depression. He didn't look depressed. I mean, the way a pathologically depressed person is. And he didn't look like a seaman, and he didn't look Egyptian. Otherwise, it seemed standard. So they wouldn't say anything, zilch. Wouldn't say anything at all. And at first we thought it was because we weren't talking his language, you know, the Egyptian, they couldn't talk. And it looked sort of Spanish. The Spanish didn't, French, English, whatever. So finally somebody got the bright idea of saying to him, "Your ship has left, gone back," in eight different languages. Whereupon he was willing to talk. And what he was, he'd been the second in command of the medical corps of the Spanish Republican Army. And when Franco won, he had to leave, and he and his family went to Marseilles. And then while they were there Hitler, the Germans overran the south of France, and he stowed away on this Egyptian tanker. And then when he got to this

country, he said, "Well, now, you know," or he got outside Gibraltar, and he gave himself up. They put him to work. When he got here, he said he wanted to get off. And they said, "Well, look, let him off in, when they stop in New York." And they kept him in the brig, in Baltimore or in Philadelphia or whatever. Finally they got to New York, they put him in the brig. And he realized what they were doing with Shanghai and back to Europe, because they didn't have enough hands. So he was a surgeon, and he very carefully made a kind of incision a surgeon makes for gallbladder disease in himself, which bled a lot and looked bad, but wasn't going to do any serious harm.

So then he called and they got scared and they sent him off. And that's what he was trying to do, was to get away from being sent back. So once he was, but then we were stuck because he was record, listed that he had made a suicide attempt. And, again, it was the Friends of Spanish Democracy that put up money for him. And last we knew he was happily engaged in surgical practice in Mexico. And that was a kind of, that was perhaps one of the more dramatic, right after, right after Pearl Harbor they used First Island as a bullpen for, uh, Japanese, German and

Italian aliens. And we had some that didn't like others. One made a suicide attempt because he was afraid he was going to get a knife in his ribs over there. And one, that poor guy, Keith, he held himself under the bathtub until he passed out. And somebody happened to find him, because he was an Americanized Japanese, but he'd been born in Japan, and he couldn't stay. It was a lively, lively time. But this really brings it all back.

MURPHY: It looks as though somebody moved in here and used this, lived here.

ALDRIDGE: Oh!

MURPHY: Lots of dressers.

ALDRIDGE: Dressers, yeah.

MURPHY: It must have been used as a room.

ALDRIDGE: I bet you this was Vesty's office, because this has two windows.

MURPHY: It's the bigger one.

ALDRIDGE: The big office. And, uh, what's his name was across, his assistant.

MURPHY: Fransen.

ALDRIDGE: Fassen. (disturbance to the microphone) Okay.

MURPHY: The newspaper had been here. 1941 was the big (?).

ALDRIDGE: It was deconditioned in 1940 . . .

MURPHY: '54. I was on (?). I'm not sure.

ALDRIDGE: (?) you had your baseball cards. (voices off mike)

MURPHY: Rang the bell.

ALDRIDGE: It doesn't seem to ring any more. Who was in charge?
What was the name of that guy?

MURPHY: Oh, what was his name?

ALDRIDGE: Well, there were two, the tall Irishman, and . . .

MURPHY: So (?) was a (?) . . .

ALDRIDGE: McCarthy. He was that guy we met this morning at the
desk.

MURPHY: Oh, right.

ALDRIDGE: Is this Woody's ward?

MURPHY: No, is this 11. Woody's ward was right there.

ALDRIDGE: Right there. Nine. 11 was for who?

MURPHY: Coast Guard officers or the VIP's.

ALDRIDGE: Oh, the VIP ward.

MURPHY: There's a single room. Oh, wait a minute! There's a staircase there.

ALDRIDGE: Well, there has to be a second floor to all this.

MURPHY: I don't know what (?). Oh, 12, it probably would have been up there.

ALDRIDGE: That was women's?

MURPHY: Uh-huh.

ALDRIDGE: Because, clearly, most of the cases were male. Now, what in the world is that? (voices off mike)

DALEY: Oh, the morgue is down there.

ALDRIDGE: It's the morgue. That's pathology. Right, that's pathology.

MURPHY: Down to there, down to the cafeteria.

ALDRIDGE: Down that way, yeah.

MURPHY: And that's the part of the tunnel that I'm familiar with. That's the tunnel from third to second island. That part that we came through, it was not . . .

ALDRIDGE: And you'd better tell him the story of Mrs. . . .

MURPHY: I don't think we need to do that. (they laugh)

ALDRIDGE: Oh, in the tunnel.

MURPHY: Mr. Howard.

ALDRIDGE: Mr. Howard, who used to wear tall . . .

MURPHY: High white shoes.

ALDRIDGE: White boots. And Julie wondered when she first started working here why the high white boots, and thought it was just because he was so eccentric, and found no, it was not, it was because of the rats in the tunnel. And although there were a great many cats on Ellis Island, there were not enough of them to completely take charge of the rats.

MURPHY: I must say, I never saw a rat, but we talked about them.

ALDRIDGE: We heard about them. (they laugh) Maybe that's, maybe the cats had finally done their job. Pathology was hardly ever used because we didn't have any deaths after the surgery and medicine had pretty well gone. This was not an acute hospital. So I don't think that was used much.

MURPHY: When I was here at night, there was not many (?), but it was for . . .

ALDRIDGE: So they were still, did post-mortems there when you, between '36 and '40 when I showed up.

DALEY: They also cleaned the mattresses and things down there, too.

ALDRIDGE: Did they?

MURPHY: Oh, the laundry room probably was . . .

DALEY: Well, it's more of a disinfecting room. It has those big steamers that steam the clothing and . . .

ALDRIDGE: We kept away from all that. (they laugh) What I want to know is what this little building is here. Well, that's probably a maintenance.

MURPHY: Oh, the laboratories are over here somewhere.

ALDRIDGE: Somewhere, the laboratories. Maybe, Julie, I think the laboratories were in the morgue.

MURPHY: Well, the laboratories were somewhere where they could see over to Ward 12 because a patient once closed me in a room in Ward 12, and there was a little window in there, and I had to call to somebody over in the lab to come and, you know, tell someone to get the key and get me out. (they laugh)

ALDRIDGE: That was embarrassing.

MURPHY: It was very embarrassing. The patient got very frightened, because he couldn't get in with me, and I couldn't get out of there. What did you decide this little cot is?

ALDRIDGE: Could that have been the laboratory? And you, yeah, Julie, because you were up on 12, upstairs, and the laboratory was here.

MURPHY: Yeah, okay.

ALDRIDGE: And you were shouting at somebody in the laboratory.

LEVINE: Well, where did you do your courting? Have you passed that part?

ALDRIDGE: That was on the second island. There wasn't any place here for that. Now, where did, when you lived on Third Island, where did you live?

MURPHY: I lived on the . . .

ALDRIDGE: Oh, on the top (?). Here's the real, (?) . . . This is . . . (voices off mike)

MURPHY: Yeah, this is the tunnel.

DALEY: This is the tunnel.

MURPHY: Yeah. (they laugh) (?) windows, but . . .

ALDRIDGE: Yeah, that's right. I thought, at first, the tunnel was under, underground. But it wasn't, was it? Who was that, what was it, the obese lady who was the occupational therapist.

MURPHY: I've forgotten her name. Bailey.

ALDRIDGE: I don't know whether that was in here or down further.

MURPHY: We had a, there was a chapel somewhere here, because there was a priest who used to come, Father Donovan, who used to come and serve Mass. I don't know where

the hospital chapel is.

ALDRIDGE: Could that have been it in there?

MURPHY: Maybe just in the social services.

ALDRIDGE: The Social Service Department.

MURPHY: Yeah.

ALDRIDGE: No, this doesn't look. (voices garbled) A little
(?) for a chapel there.

DALEY: Could it have been in the new immigration building?

ALDRIDGE: No.

MURPHY: The patients wouldn't have gone over there.

DALEY: Oh.

MURPHY: They were pretty separate from that first island.
(voices garbled) We were quite separate from the
(?).

ALDRIDGE: Some were prisoners, too. The immigrants (?) were
often prisoners. That is, they were in custody of
the Immigration Service. What do we have here?

DALEY: This is the movie theater, gymnasium.

ALDRIDGE: Oh, dear. I tell you, we're not going to get into this mess. (?) combination.

DALEY: They store artifacts in here now.

ALDRIDGE: Oh, yeah. It's all filled with stuff. It's all filled with stuff. This was the gym and the movie theater. And I bet you they (?).

MURPHY: Oh, and then we had dances in there.

ALDRIDGE: Dances. For patients.

MURPHY: No, no. (they laugh) Do you remember coming over here?

ALDRIDGE: Yeah. Not often, but . . . (voice off mike)

MURPHY: What is going to happen to all this, these two islands?

DALEY: There's no firm plans as of how. A lot of ideas.

MURPHY: Yeah.

ALDRIDGE: Can we go out this way, or . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, I think this would be a good . . .

ALDRIDGE: Oh. I've never thought I'd see Ward 17 and Ward 13 again. (voice off mike) The second island, yeah.

LEVINE: I thought that one of these buildings was for the . . . (disturbance to the microphone)

MURPHY: Yeah. We had (?) wards there, and open wards.

ALDRIDGE: That was, that turned out to be the contagious ward, didn't it? When I was here. It was all that was left of contagious. Because women upstairs, men downstairs.

MURPHY: This could have been . . .

ALDRIDGE: It could have been the closed psychiatric ward.

MURPHY: The closed psychiatric, yeah.

ALDRIDGE: Before it moved over to thirteen.

DALEY: I think there's also a stenciling on the wall that says "brig."

ALDRIDGE: That says what?

MURPHY: Brig.

DALEY: Brig.

MURPHY: Oh, really?

ALDRIDGE: Well, maybe that's, maybe that's for prisoner patients.

DALEY: Well, they also had, in there, uh, bars underneath the sink and bars over the lighting fixtures so people couldn't get at them. (an airplane is heard overhead)

ALDRIDGE: This looks like an old State Hospital.

MURPHY: Well, we haven't done this (?). (?) seven up there.

ALDRIDGE: That should have been one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, and then eleven over here. See?

MURPHY: Although I don't think that . . . (break in tape)
No, I don't think they combined it that way because (?). (voice off mike) Oh, you can't . . . (an airplane flies overhead)

ALDRIDGE: That was, Ward 1 was Ginsburg's ward.

MURPHY: Yeah, and 2 was.

ALDRIDGE: And 2.

MURPHY: And 3.

ALDRIDGE: This was either contagious or, I don't know.
(disturbance to the microphone) Seven, eight,
nine, ten, yeah. Then they ran up to 17, and the TB
wards were up to 23 or 24. They were the ones on
that side. 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23.

LEVINE: Was Hoffman Island or the other island that was once
used, I think, for contagious diseases, was that
being used when you were here?

ALDRIDGE: We sort of had our own contagious disease area. It
wasn't, very few. The occasional peculiar one, just
ordinarily (an airplane flies overhead) I guess we
saw some meningitis from (?). (voices off mike)
Pronosel is the original name for Sulfanonen.

MURPHY: Yes.

ALDRIDGE: It's the German name.

DALEY: He had meningitis?

MURPHY: Yeah. (break in tape) (disturbance to the
microphone) (voices off mike)

ALDRIDGE: Metrasal was originally used for (?), because the guy

thought that if you had epilepsy you didn't have
schizophrenia. It turned out that that was wrong, it
was (?). We used Metrasal until (?). (disturbance
to the microphone)