

EI-35

WILLIAM HALE BAKER

BIRTH DATE: AUGUST 21, 1944

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 28, 1991

RUNNING TIME: 24:52

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

**TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.,
1992**

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 3/1995

**SON OF ELLIS ISLAND PSYCHIATRIST
LIVED ON ELLIS ISLAND FROM 1949-1951**

**ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: William Baker is the son of Dr. James
Louis Baker, Interview EI-280.
Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 3/6/1995.**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It is Thursday, March twenty eighth. We are here with William Baker, whose father was a doctor here at Ellis Island from 1949-1951. Good afternoon.

BAKER: Good afternoon.

SIGRIST: Mr. Baker, could you please give us your full name, middle name included, and your date of birth.

BAKER: Okay, it's William Hale Baker and I was born August 21, 1944.

SIGRIST: I see and tell us a little bit about how you ended up at Ellis Island.

BAKER: Okay, my father was a doctor in the Public Health Service and was stationed at a number of different Public Health Service hospitals. Prior to coming here he was at the hospital in Lexington, Kentucky and took an assignment here, best recollection late '49 after my brother was born and was here from 1949-1951, early '51 as best recall but it was about year and a half to two years.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

BAKER: James Louis Baker.

SIGRIST: And just sort of very quickly tell us a little bit about his training, what his specialty was.

BAKER: Okay, he was a psychiatrist. Don't recall whether he had achieved his, done his residency and been certified as a psychiatrist when he was here or whether if that came after this, but, uh, he was, you know, at the time he was here he was one of the two doctors on the island and was a medical doctor. May not have been a psych..., specialized in psychiatry at that particular point although I think he was.

SIGRIST: Let's start off by talking about where you lived here on this island.

BAKER: Okay. Well, there was one house in the corner of the island closest to the Statue Of Liberty which was shared by two doctors that were resident on the island at that time as I best recall. We were the only families that were resident on the island. It was more or less a duplex house. I don't believe it started that way but it was converted into, split up into two portions so that we shared the house with the other doctor's family.

SIGRIST: Which half did you live in?

BAKER: Okay, we lived on the half towards the open area, as best I can describe it, of the island, the green area. Whereas the other family, as your coming into the house and facing the

stairway, we were on the side of the left. The other family to the right.

SIGRIST: Sort of tell me a little bit about what it looked like. What did the accommodations look like?

BAKER: Well, I remember when we came it had this big hallway, at least to me it seemed really big as a six year old or five year old, and a stairway that we shared. I remember must have been right after we did there they had to redo the floor and I remember it being all shellac, nice and shiny and they had boards across it that we had to of walk across over the freshly done shellac for a while. But it was, you know as a little kid, it seemed like a spacious house. I have a more vivid recollections of the downstairs part of the house than the upstairs, I guess. I remember the living room and the kitchen, the dining room configuration and I remember I was so fascinated at the time by all of the ferry boats and tug boats that most of the time I had our living room kind of converted into my version of what the New York Harbor was like, with cardboard boxes which were ferry boats and ropes across the furniture and things like that.

SIGRIST: Did you have a television or a radio?

BAKER: We had a TV. This was the early days of TV. But we had a TV. Over on the left hand side and I remember watching "Howdy Doody" and there was a program called " the Children's House" that was a big kids program in New York and I believe it was Sunday mornings and, uh, yeah, I recall TV. That was the first place we had TV.

SIGRIST: Now, did the house have an attic or a cellar?

BAKER: It did have an attic and my recollections of the attic was I remember one particular evening where there was a very severe storm. To me it seemed like a hurricane. My parents tell me it really wasn't a hurricane but it sure seemed like one that where the waves were crashing, you know, well, up over the sea wall and I was very scared the island was going under with us on it. And I remember my mom trying to comfort me and

taking me up to the attic and looking out the dormers window and just watching the huge waves crashing over the sea wall as she tried to reassure me that, "Look, everything was okay. It looks bad. It sounds bad but it's okay." So, I have that recollection of the attic. I recall that there was a very, I didn't even, (he laughs) not even worthy of a description as a basement but there was a cellar area that was very shallow that I do remember that we cemented in when we were there so that, as I recall, my dad was trying to store stuff down there and was trying to keep it dry and so that was one of his projects, getting this little basement area with a concrete floor on it so we could store stuff and keep it dry down there.

SIGRIST: Did you eat in the cafeteria or did you eat in the home?

BAKER: No, we ate at home. It may have been in the cafeteria once or twice briefly for something but in general, you know, we had a kitchen in the house and that's where we ate our meals. And I was restricted to a large degree. I mean with it being a hospital and still some degree of restriction in terms of where you could go and what patients you could be around. Generally, we didn't, there was really no reason for us to eat in the cafeteria.

SIGRIST: I see. Describe a little bit for me what it was like being a five or six year old on a place like Ellis Island?

BAKER: Okay. It was fascinating in terms of living where we did and being able to view the skyline of New York City looking right out our backyard at the Statue of Liberty. I remember watching the great ocean liners come by periodically, the Queen Mary, the Queen Elizabeth. You could recognize them by, you know, how many smoke stacks they had and I recall the fireboats that used to come out to escort them in with the big, long shooting streams of water. To me that was just a very fascinating experience, to watch that kind of thing and to ride the ferryboat in to school. I went to school at Governor's Island, which was an army base at the time and so I was five or six years old, I guess. I went there for kindergarten and first grade. I had to make the trek into

Manhattan on the Ellis Island ferry, which was incredibly slow. I remember that. It was ugly and slow, an awful green colored boat and it seemed to take forever, and then took the ferry out to Governor's Island and then I had to walk across the other side of the island to get to the school. And I was escorted by one of my father's mental patients, a relatively harmless one but one that he could rely on for insuring that I get there and home safely, so, uh...

SIGRIST: Was he sort of your playmate?

BAKER: In some of the patients there, he became (he laughs) my only real playmate. Every once in a while I was able to entice one of my schoolmates to make the trek over to the island from Governor's Island to play but most of the time my playmates were the patients who also shared duty frequently as workers on the island, maintenance work. This mental patient, name was Tom Tremble, who was a merchant seamen who was there at the Marine Hospital and I can think of a couple others. I know one, one other one, only recall his name being Charlie and I remember Tom always telling me to stay away from Charlie, " Watch out for Charlie. He was crazy." Of course, Tom was a mental patient himself, so it was interesting. These were unusual playmates for a five or six year old.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed free run of the island or were there parts you weren't allowed to go?

BAKER: There were some parts but on the portion on the island where I lived I had a large degree of freedom to roam around. There where the side of the island where the Great Hall is I don't recall exactly what all the reasons were but I was very seldom allowed to go over to that side. I don't recall in great detail whether it just plain wasn't being used then or whether they, at that time, had it restricted for more contagious diseases at this stage in its life of Ellis Island, may have been over in that direction but, for whatever reason, I probably didn't go over to that side of the island but maybe a couple of times. But I roamed freely on the side where our house was.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people at Ellis Island at that time?

BAKER: Well, it was in its closing years and certainly, I'm sure, compared to its heyday there were not a lot of people on the island. It was small number of patients and nurses and the people that ran the hospital but I, you know, certainly wouldn't say it was a lot of people. It was a, but you know, it was operating. I mean it was a hospital. It wasn't, I would say, probably half the island was active because it doesn't appear that there was a whole lot of activity on the immigration side, the other side of the island back then.

SIGRIST: Did you ever accompany your father on his rounds?

BAKER: He took me on tours of the hospital, various wards. I'm not sure I would call "on his rounds," although, yeah, I guess they were because on Sundays and so forth, when he would have to being the only doctor, he would have to, as I recall, make some rounds and he would occasionally take me along on those and where it was okay for me to go, certainly, wards or whatever, where there was some sort of contagious disease or something. I certainly never, you know, had any exposure to that, but, uh...

SIGRIST: What do you remember of the hospital?

BAKER: Oh golly, I, you know, I remember some wards, some desks and some offices and some nurses. There was one nurse with the name of Miss Brave, who was almost like a second mother to me, but I remember the people as much as the hospitals, some of the individuals, you know. I remember the long hallways that we had to go down that sometimes would get flooded in a rain every now and then, you know. There would be a real mess in these long, enclosed hallways.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about Miss Brave.

BAKER: Okay. Well, Miss Brave was, may have been the head nurse, one of the primary nurses who was just kind of, I guess became, she was attached to me and I became attached

to her and she, you know, was one of these people, like the mental patients, who was a real good buddy of mine and who just took me places, special events and so forth and just, it was almost like an aunt or a grandmother or something of that sort, so I recall her taking me to stay with her. I believe she must have lived on Long Island somewhere. It was across, definitely not on this island but, and that being a great event for me. I just can't tell you a whole lot of specifics other than there was a real strong attraction, attachment to this lady, who just seemed like a real special person to me.

SIGRIST: Here on the island, were there any offers of entertainment, movies, anything that?

BAKER: You mentioned to me the theater, which I had forgotten and I frankly don't recall that I saw much in the way of movies there. I'm sure it was more for the patients and folks like that and probably was past my bedtime most of the time. Don't recall ever really seeing any movies there but I guess there was something on the island but boy, I'll tell you, there wasn't much. Again, as a kid it was, you had to be fascinated with the boats and the scenery and so forth because there weren't any playmates to play with so you just appreciated other things about the island.

SIGRIST: Talk about the fire in New Jersey.

BAKER: Well, I do remember one night a huge fire which, as a little kid, fires fascinate little kids. On the shoreline, I guess over in Jersey City, it must of been old warehouses, as I recall, went up in flames and it just seemed like the entire Jersey shoreline was just engulfed in flames for hours. I don't know what it was other than probably abandoned warehouses but I remember it just seemed huge. It was almost, it just seemed like an entire city to me was burning but really it was, I'm sure, just a bunch of old warehouses on the shoreline, but it certainly was an awesome sight for a six year old in the middle of the night, just watching that stuff and, as I recall, there were even some fire boats in the water trying to control the blaze. We couldn't see it that well from where we were other than the flames. We couldn't see the detail of the fire fighting.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any holiday celebrations at Ellis Island at all? Did you celebrate Christmas here? Channukah or something?

BAKER: Well, I do remember Christmas. I remember that was in the days of Hop Along Cassidy and I remember when I was here at Ellis Island getting my Hop Along Cassidy suit for Christmas. I think I even have a picture, if I dredged out the old pictures of me, with my two six guns standing out in front of our house with them aimed at the camera and my black Hop Along Cassidy hat and Hop Along Cassidy black shirt and pants and so forth. I do remember we definitely had a Christmas here and that's the one that sticks in my mind. I don't recall whether we had one or two Christmas's here.

SIGRIST: Did your mother like being at Ellis Island?

BAKER: Well, I think she viewed it as an experience. It certainly had its frustrations. Shopping was a little awkward when you lived out here.

SIGRIST: Explain how she did it?

BAKER: Uh, you know, I'll be darned, oh, I do know. They did all their shopping over the army base at Governor's Island and that's where we went for most things like that. Being in the Public Health Service we were able to use facilities of the base and we used it for lots of things like that. We certainly, we had a car that was put in storage, an old 1950 Buick I guess we got after we were here and that he stored there on the, where the ferry, on the most part where the ferry landed in Manhattan there was an area right off to the side where they kept his car. I do remember, also, the electricity here was different than it was in other places. None of the normal appliances would work. It seemed like at that time everything was 220 bolts as opposed to the normal, the 110 electricity, so we had to have all ..appliances had to be specially rigged to work on the electrical accommodations here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any sort of this maintenance aspect? Do you remember, for instance,

the garbage disposal or the incinerator?

BAKER: Well, I remember because my buddies were these patients, mental patients and so forth who also did work around the island. They used to take me on when they were doing their work. They would take me where they went, let me follow along and so I remember seeing the big incinerator room on the side of the island that we lived on and that was, things like that were again among the recollections I had because these were my interests then was (he laughs) following these guys on their rounds and watching them dump trash into the incinerator. And I remember just being fascinated with little things, like these sticks that they used to have with a nail on the end that they used to pick up the trash on the ground and stick them in their sacks. I used to think, "Gosh, that would be eat." I had to have one of those so that I could go around like these mental patient maintenance workers and stab (he laughs) stab trash. I mean, at that point in my life I probably aspired to be a trash picker-upper.

SIGRIST: Describe for us learning how to ride a bicycle?

BAKER: Well, I can't say I completely learned but that's one of the other recollections is that my mom had an old twenty six inch lady's English bike and they decided it was time to at least give me a try, to see if I could learn to ride a bicycle and, of course, it was much too big for me to truly ride single handedly but they had me practice balancing and riding this bicycle back and forth across the sidewalk in the open area in front of our house. And I got to the point where I could do some partial pedaling of it without and maybe maintain balance for a few yards and so forth but there were always too, my folks were always there to catch me but I just remember that sidewalk as being the spot where I made my first attempts on learning to ride a bicycle.

SIGRIST: Earlier in the interview you mentioned some feelings about the ferry. Describe what the ferry looked like through the eyes of a six year old.

BAKER: Well, I remember we were always embarrassed by the Ellis Island ferry. It was the

worst of any of the ferries in New York Harbor in terms of being slow and ugly but it was still fascinating to me. It was an old, gosh, as I recall, almost an army green, an ugly army deep green color, very slow but I was fascinated by it. The people, the guys that ran the ferry would let me, at least I thought I would be helping them close off the gates and tie it up. I would certainly be there watching every move as they docked it at the island, at Ellis Island or in Manhattan. And I, you know, I used to go up and the, whatever they call the area where the guy that steers it, you know, steers it from, the name of it escapes me at the moment, but he would let me put my hands on the steering wheel to get, as if I was actually at the wheel of this thing, so I was able to. I knew the folks that ran the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the captain's name?

BAKER: Oh, I don't remember their names. I may have at the time but that, no, I don't have any specific recollections of the name but I remember that those folks were all sort of my buddies to me and, you know, it was unusual for them to have a kid there and they knew how fascinated I was by all the goings on of just, how you, how you ran the boat. And, as I say, I had my living room of our house was draped about in ropes and so forth and made up to look, you know, or at least to me it was my playroom, my version of riding ferry boats and docking and so forth. I treat my living room as if that was the harbor and get in a cardboard box and kind of rock it across from one side to the other and tie up against the couch or table or something of that sort.

SIGRIST: Earlier in the interview I asked how your mother felt about being on Ellis Island. Did your father like this experience? What were his feelings about it all?

BAKER: I think, you know, they viewed it as an adventure. I mean it certainly was just a very unusual situation and I think for the short period of time here that they really really enjoyed it. Certainly, they were stationed in a number of places like this that were unusual and you kind of had to treat them as adventures and not dwell on the awkward, you know, aspects but appreciate the interesting parts and this was, I think, for them

was a fascinating couple of years assignment.

SIGRIST: Tell us a little bit about how you left Ellis Island?

BAKER: Well, as best I recall, we were the last family that was resident on the island. I could be wrong because when we left, as far as I know, they had made the decision to close the Public Health Service or I guess it was called the Marine Hospital at the time and we left to take another assignment, my dad to take another assignment in Texas when the hospital was closed. Don't know really what happened after that other than that was what lead us to leave was, as far as we know, they had made the decision to close things in 1951 and I guess there must have been some presence left on here that but, to my knowledge, I don't believe anybody actually was resident on the island permanently after that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember leaving the island? Do you remember packing up or how you moved off the island?

BAKER: You know, I remember coming the first night to the island more vividly than I remember leaving because I guess it was new to me then and I had no idea where this was and I actually remember the ferry boat ride fairly late at night when we arrived in New York. Must have been nine or ten o'clock and just the, you know, the newness just being in the dark on this ferry, on this island that I could hardly see in the dark out there. That's what sticks in my mind really more than when we left. I guess the recollections (he laughs) of moving, of leaving just didn't make an impact on me.

SIGRIST: I see. Well, I think that brings us pretty much full circle. Is there anything else you would like to just tell us before we wind up the interview?

BAKER: Oh, I really can't think of anything. I think I hit on most things that are high points. For me it was just a fascinating time in my life at a very young age. You know, I greatly value the opportunity of having been able to experience some of these situations and

I appreciate the opportunity to share them. Hope somebody else (he laughs) gets some enjoyment out of them.

SIGRIST: Well, you know, I'm very happy you claimed who you were when you came to the tour. (They laugh) Well, anyway, I want to thank you very much for taking your time coming up here and giving us the interview and this is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.