

EI-362

PAUL (PETER PAUL) O'DWYER
BIRTH DATE: JUNE 29, 1907
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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
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IRELAND, 1925
AGE 17
PASSAGE ON "THE DORIC"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: QUEENSTOWN
RESIDENCES: IRELAND: BHOLA, COUNTY MAYO
US: NYC, AMSTERDAM AVE. AND 103 ST.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, July 27, 1993. I am in lower Manhattan in the office of Paul O'Dwyer. Mr. O'Dwyer came from Ireland in 1925 when he was seventeen years old. Kevin Daley is running the equipment, and there may be street noise picked up on the recording. Mr. O'Dwyer, thank you for your time.

O'DWYER: All right.

SIGRIST: Can we begin by you giving us your birth date, please?

O'DWYER: Yes. June 29, 1907.

SIGRIST: And is Paul O'Dwyer your full name?

O'DWYER: Well, I was born, I was christened Peter Paul.

SIGRIST: Peter Paul O'Dwyer.

O'DWYER: Because I was born on St. Peter and Paul's Day. But as time went on, it was too awkward, so I just continued to call myself Paul O'Dwyer and sign documents that way. And that's the way it is since.

SIGRIST: Are there any stories that your mother or father ever told you concerning your birth? Did they ever talk about any kind of instances that happened around that time?

O'DWYER: Well, I don't think they did, but I had an older sister who was more up on stuff like that, and she did tell me that. I was number eleven, and it came as no great gift to the family that they were having the eleventh child. But I was the last, of the eleven children.

SIGRIST: You were the youngest.

O'DWYER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What town were you born in?

O'DWYER: I was born in a country village in L-I-S--M-I-R-R-A-N-E, the name of the town land, in the parish of Bohola, B-O-H-O-L-A, county of Mayo.

SIGRIST: And were you born in the house, or were you born in the hospital?

O'DWYER: I'm sure I was born in the house, by local midwife.

SIGRIST: Which would have been the custom at the time?

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the town, and maybe what the town looked like, as you remember, growing up?

O'DWYER: The town was and is beautiful. It's a country place, of course. And my father was a schoolteacher, and he graduated from a schoolteacher's college and, some time about 1895, he came from another part of the country. He came from County Cork, in a town called Tulalease, T-U-L-A-L-E-A-S-E. And his folks got up enough money to send him to a teacher's college, which was the first teacher's college in Ireland that

catered to a Catholic family. Before that any kind of education was mostly in private education where people couldn't, collected money, and it was given out to the, on a government plan, but that was all for this period of time. And that was all devoted to Protestant education. Then things were changing in Europe and Ireland, so, the persecution of Catholics had been dropped, and in its place the government, in order to placate the people, I'm talking about the British government, made sure that there was some money given towards Catholic education. And he became part of the beneficiaries of that program, and he graduated from St. Patrick's College in Runcandra, Dublin. And the character of the country had changed, and particularly the politics, so that it was a period, around the period of time that Charles Stuart Parnell was elected to the House of Commons. And this change was getting, the British government felt that it would be a lot better for them if they were to make friends with the Catholic population and the hierarchy, because they were having their own troubles in the colonies, and in those colonies there was Catholic education. So consequently they would, they would help themselves not only in Ireland but also in

the counties where the missionaries were. And my father answered an advertisement in the place where I was born, he came to answer an ad, and he came as head schoolteacher in a three-teacher school, and married my mother, who was one of the assistants.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

O'DWYER: Patrick.

SIGRIST: And can you give me a little bit about his background and his family?

O'DWYER: Well, he was born in this town, that I had mentioned I visited recently again, a typical small town. It had been a place of great education at one time where people went who were attempting to be kind of missionaries, had stayed and flourished at the monastery in the area. That was long before. And there isn't very much more to tell about it.

SIGRIST: Was his father a schoolteacher?

O'DWYER: No.

SIGRIST: What occupation . . .

O'DWYER: His father was the owner of a business. He was in the

grocery and publican in the area.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of your grandparents on your father's side?

O'DWYER: No. No, I came last of the family, and I didn't have any, I never met any of them.

SIGRIST: What was your father's temperament like?

O'DWYER: Strong-willed. Didn't care much for the clergy, even though they were his immediate employers. And he actually held his job at, when (?). I really didn't know too much about him, because I was thirteen years of age when he died.

SIGRIST: What did he die of?

O'DWYER: Pneumonia, I think, something that perhaps a perfectly healthy person later on a wonder drug would have dispelled it.

SIGRIST: Thinking back to your early childhood, is there a story that comes to mind when you think about your interaction with your father?

O'DWYER: No, except that I knew that he was at odds with the parish priest, and even though he lived by sufferance

of them, it was a manner in which he held his own position, dangerous as that was. And it had constant differences of opinion with the parish priest in the parish.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about when your father died?

O'DWYER: I remember that was a great loss to us because of his salary and he was head of the household and so forth. And it was a great physical loss as well as an emotional one.

SIGRIST: Do you know how he met your mother? You said she was an assistant.

O'DWYER: Yes, she was a, at that time the smart girl in the class became the teacher, and it was done that way. And so that's it, they met in the schoolhouse.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

O'DWYER: Bridget.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

O'DWYER: McNicholas, M-C-N-I-C-H-O-L-A-S.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same question about your

mother, can you describe her temperament for me?

O'DWYER: Her temperament was, I would say, a bit haughty. And she had a very high opinion of herself, as she did of her family, and of her father and her mother and her children.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about her background and her family?

O'DWYER: Well, they were farmers. Her father was a farmer, and his name was Pat McNicholas. And he married a woman by the name of Penelope Caffrey, whom he met as he was traveling the road between the Port of Ballina, B-A-L-L-I-N-A, and our home in Bohola. He would buy merchandise and cart it there. That's my mother's father. And if he was going the road, he would stop off at a tavern where she worked halfway between the point of contact and the point where they were going to. And struck up a conversation, and so they got married. And she, at that time, was, at that time, or sometime before, that she had become the local schoolteacher, not the principal teacher. That was headed for somebody with a college education, and so they both had these eleven children.

SIGRIST: What personal recollections do you have of your mother's parents growing up?

O'DWYER: None.

SIGRIST: None.

O'DWYER: None. I didn't know them. I honestly, I heard a lot about them from my mother.

SIGRIST: Was she close to her parents?

O'DWYER: Yes, she was. They were in the same village. She was a few houses away, and her parents, her father was a, had his own peculiarities. He was a man who did not believe in the dowry system, that was part of Irish culture at that period of time. And he would not engage in that bartering for a wife, and neither was he going to do that with his own children, his own daughters particularly. So that proved to be a very embarrassing position to him later on because he did have children, and there was no (?) for them to marry them, because they were aware of his reputation and the fact that there was no money coming with them, and that was part and parcel of the system of marriage at the time, that the woman had a dowry. Or sometimes

the man was going to marry into a home where they, where there were, the husband would get whatever there was by way of cattle, they were like that. But he didn't agree with that. He thought it was somewhat barbaric, but it didn't help him very much when his own daughters had to be married off.

SIGRIST: Did he have a lot of daughters?

O'DWYER: Four.

SIGRIST: And all of them eventually married.

O'DWYER: Uh, no. Wait a minute now, yes, they did. They married, some much later on in life, in their sixties. But things began to change, of course. When I was growing up we were talking into a very, very difficult period of, political period, in which the movement of the people of Ireland at that time was to get their freedom from Great Britain, and that brought us into a period known as the Black and Tan War.

SIGRIST: What personal recollections do you have of that time, and maybe how your parents felt about what was going on?

O'DWYER: Well, my father was very strongly in favor of the free

movement. And, for that reason, he had to be very careful about his actions and activities. But he also joined the movement, the trade union movement, which was just about starting at that time, insofar as the teachers were concerned. And if, he joined the Irish National Teacher's association, and the same purpose was to gain some personal freedom for themselves. And to become liberated, as it were, from the tyranny of the clergy.

SIGRIST: And this was the 19-teens?

O'DWYER: That would be, my father died about 1921, I think.

SIGRIST: So it would be just before that.

O'DWYER: Yeah. The rebellion started in 1916 and then continued on for a couple of years after that.

SIGRIST: What personal recollections do you have of the rebellion?

O'DWYER: Oh, very much into it. We're now going into a period of time when I'm thirteen, fourteen years of age, and I am in college. We call it college, it wasn't college really, as we think of it here. It was high school. But I went to this place which was a boarding

house, a boarding college, some twenty miles distant from our home. And there the, it was operated by the local diocese, and it was created mostly for the purpose of developing candidates for the priesthood. I for one had not been particularly interested in that as a child, a boy. And, but went through the years required for graduation, and I did graduate. And then, at that time I was being kept by my sisters, who were teachers teaching in England and Scotland. And their money, and the money that came to my from my father as teacher, kept me going. But I had a brother, Frank, living in this country. He had come out from, he had been subjected to conscription in the First World War, and he got away from that. He came back to Ireland, away from the job he had, in a place called Newcastle on Tyne. And when he came home the British authorities were still after him, and he didn't want to go into the army. He came out to the United States and worked in the fruit and vegetable business where he was a laborer. But he wrote to me, sending me a ticket to come to the United States, and it was a second class ticket. And so I told my folks about it, and I said this was it. And he said, "This way you will not be a burden on anybody, and come to

the United States, and you won't need to rely upon sisters for your education. You'll have privilege here, getting an education yourself, going to school at night, working in the day." Which I did. (he coughs) And that eventually gave me an opportunity to be a lawyer.

SIGRIST: Before we get you to America, I still have a couple of more questions about Ireland.

O'DWYER: Sure.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you grew up in for me?

O'DWYER: The house I grew up in was built by my father and the neighbors. It was very poor construction. It was a thatched roof, and it had sufficient room in it for a shop that he conducted. And it had a kitchen and a couple of bedrooms, cramped, I would say.

SIGRIST: Yeah. There are thirteen of you living there.

O'DWYER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you heat that house?

O'DWYER: It was heated with what's referred to as turf, translated into our language here it would be peat.

And we as kids went out in the spring of the year and cut that out into sods as big as those books and placed it out on the bank to dry. And when they dried it was brought from the bog to the home, and then it was used for cooking and for heating, and everything else.

SIGRIST: Would it be burned in a stove, or in an open fireplace?

O'DWYER: An open fireplace.

SIGRIST: Is that how the cooking was done?

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the sorts of foods that you ate as a child growing up?

O'DWYER: Yeah. We ate bread, which was cooked by my mother. And tea, for the most part. And more substantial would be vegetables, turnips, potatoes, and carrots.

SIGRIST: Were these vegetables, these root vegetables, did you grow them yourself . . .

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Or did you purchase them?

O'DWYER: No, we grew them ourselves.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the garden?

O'DWYER: Well, the garden, we would be, I think about January, February, when the frost left the ground, we would be out there with spades. We would get our instructions about what to do, and we would dig ridges of mold. And after that ridge was built up, we would then plant the potato. Before that, however, we would get one potato, we would make three seeds out of that, or two, or four, and then that would grow to a certain point.

It had to be helped by the kids, again, going out with their shovels and placing some soil around the growing plants. This was true of potatoes, but not true of turnips. They grew without that much nourishment. And cabbage was also, was a substantial food, and that grew from small plants to more substantial ones. As far as other food was concerned, you might get, some farmer had a pig that would be killed sometimes during the winter season.

SIGRIST: This is a pig that you had raised.

O'DWYER: Yes, or buy.

SIGRIST: Or buy. Do you remember how the pig would be killed?

O'DWYER: Oh, indeed I do.

SIGRIST: Can you describe it?

O'DWYER: Very well. The pig was taken down by, either by some of my family and some of my neighbors, and held down when it was butchered. It cried to the wide world for help that never came. The pig would then be cut up into long strips that were hung up in the kitchen where it would be smoked. That would be available for bacon and cabbage or, more infrequently, bacon and eggs, because that was a whole other situation where we raised chickens, and the chickens laid eggs, and we collected the eggs, and we used them for our own food.

SIGRIST: Did you raise chickens mostly for your own consumption, or did you sell the eggs?

O'DWYER: Well, for our own consumption, except that sometimes you had more eggs than you needed, so you sold the eggs at the market. And I would take them, after they were collected, put them in a basket and go over to the place where there would be a man there to buy them

and ship them to England or Scotland or to Dublin.

SIGRIST: It sounds like in this family of so many children that the children were expected to do a good many of the household chores.

O'DWYER: Absolutely.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little more about some of the domestic chores the children were expected to do?

O'DWYER: Well, in the first place I, as a boy, would be required, we had a cow that gave us milk.

SIGRIST: Did the cow have a name?

O'DWYER: No. "Cow." And I would take her to the pasture, and get back again after milking, and we had a horse. I remember our Connamara pony that came from the rather isolated districts on the west coast. It's a breed of horses that were very special in the sense that they were easy to train. Excuse me. And they were docile, and they were trained to the plow and harnessed, to a trap, or other vehicle like that. And we were supposed to clean out the stable. And then in the spring of the year we would take the manure, borrow a donkey, load up the donkey with manure, drive out to

the pasture to the place where the potatoes were growing, and fertilize them with the horse manure, cow manure. That was what the kids were supposed to do.

SIGRIST: It's manual labor. What about interior chores? Anything in the house that you might have been expected to do?

O'DWYER: Not really.

SIGRIST: Your brothers and sisters, anything?

O'DWYER: Not really there. That was done by the, by my mother and by my sisters. In other words, if there was baking to be done, that would be done by the females.

SIGRIST: How many sisters did you have?

O'DWYER: Four.

SIGRIST: Can you name your brothers and sisters for me?

O'DWYER: Yes. My oldest brother was William. Later on he became Mayor of the City of New York. And later on he'd become a general in the United States Army in the Second World War.

SIGRIST: How many years were there between you and your

brother?

O'DWYER: Oh, about eighteen. I never met him until he came to the United States. I came there much later than he did, and that's when I first met him, actually. And I had a brother, Jimmy. Jimmy turned out to be a fireman in the City of New York. And his daughter is a Supreme Court judge in Queens, and her son is a lawyer, and her daughter is a lawyer. Her son was a, the brother Jim became a member of the United States Army in the First World War, and he came out to this country and became a fireman.

SIGRIST: So there's William, and there's Jim.

O'DWYER: Jim, he became a fireman. And he died when he was in a false alarm in the fire department. His daughter that I talked to you about was born three months afterwards, and she's the one now whose children are lawyers. My sister Cathleen was next in line, and she became a schoolteacher and taught in Ireland. Most of the money that was kept like that was turned over to educating the girls rather than the men, the idea of being that some of the men would forage for themselves, and the girls were more delicate.

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BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

O'DWYER: My sister Josephine became a teacher in England, and my sister Linda, who was the nearest in age to me, she became a teacher in Scotland. Why Scotland and England? Well, they, Irish Teacher's College for Girls in Ireland was occupied pretty much. There was no room for them. So they had to go to England or Scotland for their education, to become a schoolteacher. It had a certain advantage because they were short of teachers in Scotland and England, and they could live there and get a job in Glasgow somewhere, or Hull or any place like that.

SIGRIST: And was this one of the few professional opportunities that women had at this time was . . .

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Becoming a schoolteacher.

O'DWYER: Yes. There was, I do remember somebody becoming a doctor, but few and far between. Generally speaking, children's schoolteachers would be more likely to become schoolteachers. My brother Frank was next in

line. He was the one who came here, with whom I had a closer association, because he sent me the ticket, bought the ticket here and sent it over to Ireland for me. But he urged me not to tell anybody about it. He says, "Go." And I couldn't do that, because we were a very close family. Our relationship to each other was very close. And I didn't feel that I could pack up and leave and say goodbye to my mother and my sisters. My brothers had gone by this time.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America when you were growing up in Ireland? What did America mean to you?

O'DWYER: The place where people left that couldn't get a job in Ireland.

SIGRIST: Did you perceive your brothers this way also?

O'DWYER: Yes. Yes, I did. In America if you really wanted to work, you could get a job. If you educated yourself, you could do it in Ireland, but there's nothing for you to do like that. There was no such opportunity available. And that was, we didn't know very much about it, about its history, very little.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about your brothers?

Because They're obviously here before you are, how did they feel about leaving Ireland and, or was that a common thing for young men in Ireland to go to England or America?

O'DWYER: It was a very common thing except, in this instance anyway. My mother was a bit more religious than my father, and so that's the idea of my oldest brother become a priest. It was acceptable to her and, to a certain extent, to him.

SIGRIST: This would be William?

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: That's your oldest brother.

O'DWYER: But, again, it took money to become a priest in Ireland, but there was a system in vogue since what I refer to as penal days, penal days being the days when it was better to become a priest. And so the church, at that time, recognizing the problem, created scholarships in Rome, and Salamanca, and in France, where a young man who didn't have the means could become a priest, if he was recommended by the local parish priest. And so they were able to pay through

this scholarship. My brother went to Salamanca, Spain, where he studied under a great philosopher called Unamuno. And, however, after about two years in the University of Salamanca, he decided to chuck it and gave up and went to Cherbourg and got onto a ship that brought him to New York.

SIGRIST: And I can only imagine your mother was probably not pleased by that decision.

O'DWYER: That's probably the understatement of this century. And my father wasn't pleased with it either, because he saw this as wasted money. And from that point he was more practical.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year this is, that William came to America?

O'DWYER: Ah, about the year I was born, 1907.

SIGRIST: So he was well established here before you . . .

O'DWYER: Oh, yeah. Well, he was not too well, he was, he had been a cop, then became a lawyer, and he was a New York lawyer at the time.

SIGRIST: When your brother Frank sent you the ticket, did you

know he was going to do this, or did this just sort of come out of the blue?

O'DWYER: No, I didn't know he was going to do it, but it didn't, it didn't, it was no surprise, because he was a member of the family, the kids and the family and so forth and so on. It's not surprising.

SIGRIST: Did you want to come to America?

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Why?

O'DWYER: Come to a point, I was getting nowhere. I was in the University, National University of Ireland in Dublin. I wasn't doing too well with my studies. I didn't know whether or not I was going to pass my exams or not, so in a certain sense it gave me a double reason to escape. And this other reason that Frank gave me, that I would no longer be a burden upon my sisters, it was helpful in the sense that I now had a noble reason for going.

SIGRIST: And they were really responsible for the welfare of your sisters at this point.

O'DWYER: Yes, they were.

SIGRIST: How did your parents react to your decision to go?

O'DWYER: My father was dead.

SIGRIST: That's right.

O'DWYER: My mother reacted badly. Although she thought it over and she said, like most Irish mothers, at that point, that if the immigrant ship was the way to go, that was the way. She wasn't going to interfere with it. She could not, she would not permit herself to be in the position in later life when she was dead and gone of having prevented me from going the road that I had determined to go, which was for my own welfare.

SIGRIST: What do you suppose she objected to the most about going? Was it simply that you would be not near her, or . . .

O'DWYER: Well, I think what she objected to was that I was going, period. There must be some other way of staying in Ireland. I knew there wasn't.

SIGRIST: How long was it from the time that Frank sent you the ticket until you actually left?

O'DWYER: A few months.

SIGRIST: Do you recall any of the details about getting papers and that sort of thing?

O'DWYER: Oh, yes, indeed. I made an application to the American authorities in Dublin, and filled out an application to migrate. And then you got, some people whom you designated who would recommend you, that you didn't have any criminal record or whatever else was necessary. And then you were to travel up to Dublin, to the American consul, and somebody would go over your papers there with you and check them out and talk to you about them and so forth. And they were mostly interested in whether or not you'd become a public charge in America. And that wasn't a big problem at the time, because immigrants were coming all the time. They were making out one way or another. So it wasn't really a big serious problem for the immigration authorities.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo any kind of physical exams in Ireland during this process?

O'DWYER: No. Later on, because of the fact that I got a second class ticket rather than a third class ticket, which

was the cheaper one, that gave me certain privileges in crossing. And my brother Frank, who knew all of that, was able to recommend that I have the second class ticket, which would mean that I was relieved of the process of being deloused, number one. And that second class ticket gave you a little bit more privileges at the table, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

SIGRIST: Did you understand that when you got the second class ticket? Did that mean anything to you?

O'DWYER: Ah, I think it did. Certainly, you know, immigrants talk to one another. Those that are on their way, those that are going, and they meet in the local church or something like that to discuss when they're going and where they're going and to whom they're going, it becomes a sort of sub-culture. And, yes, I knew that these things were helpful.

SIGRIST: May I assume that Frank actually had come over third class and had lived through the bad experience himself.

O'DWYER: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: Before you left, did you spend time with your mother

at the house?

O'DWYER: No more than usual.

SIGRIST: Was there some kind of a sendoff dinner or a gathering of some sort to commemorate your leaving?

O'DWYER: Yes, there was. It was called known as the American Wage, where somebody like myself, seventeen years of age, would be going, probably never coming back. And the people from the neighborhood would come in to say goodbye. And they'd come in with money, and they were not really in a position to give any money, they all did. That would be two shillings, a shilling, three shillings. All amounted to thirty shillings, I remember. And I took it, and was grateful for it. And then the following day, the following morning, a horse was hitched up to the trap and I was left at the railroad station to pick up the train to go to Cork.

SIGRIST: Did your mother go with you, or any family members go with you?

O'DWYER: As far as the local railroad station, yes, but not, nothing further than that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you were carrying, what kind of

luggage, or what you were bringing with you to America?

O'DWYER: I had a razor. I had just begun to shave. And it was my special introduction to manhood.

SIGRIST: Do you remember saying goodbye to your mother?

O'DWYER: Oh, yeah, that was a tearful goodbye.

SIGRIST: So you went to Cork on the train.

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then what happened once you got to Cork?

O'DWYER: Well, we went, again into, the night before the ship was to sail.

SIGRIST: You're traveling by yourself.

O'DWYER: Yeah. You know, as you go along on the train, other immigrants come on. I saw a couple of them. You look at them, and you figure they're in the same position you are yourself, except that I was a second class passenger. On the ship there was no fun in second class.

SIGRIST: What ship were you traveling on?

O'DWYER: The S.S. Doric, D-O-R-I-C.

SIGRIST: And where did you pick up the ship? Where did you actually board?

O'DWYER: At Cobh, that time called, Queenstown. And first class, you weren't permitted to go anywhere near the first class, but you could go to third class. And that's where the music was. It was a lonely existence up till that time, but the band began to play in third class, and I'd go down there. And if you were told by some of the other immigrants how you'd get down from third class, from second class to third class. We'd follow the route, and there would be music and dance there. And then it wasn't so bad.

SIGRIST: Were there mostly Irish people on the boat, or was it a mix of nationalities?

O'DWYER: Uh, they were mostly Irish. On that ship. The White Star Line catered to Irish, as did the Cunard.

SIGRIST: The Doric was White Star?

O'DWYER: The Doric was White Star. And there were, they had, when the immigrants meet like that, if there's

somebody that has a capacity to play a musical instrument, it usually happens. You're going from country places. One plays the flute, and the other one was the accordion. And they were from the villages, where they met and danced to pick up all that. And made life pleasant for the seven days' passage.

SIGRIST: Did you play an instrument yourself?

O'DWYER: No.

SIGRIST: But you enjoyed yourself.

O'DWYER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And can you describe your accommodations, the second class accommodation on the ship?

O'DWYER: Not bad. They were in a bunk. In a bunk there would be probably three people in that, in that accommodation. One of the ones that I met, I met an Irishman by the name of David Scott. He came from Belfast, and he was a Presbyterian. And that was the first Presbyterian I ever met.

SIGRIST: Your town was all Catholic?

O'DWYER: The whole, one hundred percent. There was a local
Episcopalian church. By that time, they'd all fled.

SIGRIST: Was there a special second class meeting area, like a
second class parlor of some sort?

O'DWYER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: A second class dining room?

O'DWYER: They didn't forget the bar, and nobody ever did,
shipping Irishmen.

SIGRIST: But your heart really belonged in the third class.

O'DWYER: Uh, yeah, it did. For food it did belong in the
second class.

SIGRIST: It was better food.

O'DWYER: Better food, but other than that, the enjoyment of
people with the same sort of habits as myself, there
was an attraction they were the third class. And
there was, also I was coming out of a Revolution,
which meant a lot to me. And, so, I ran into some
difficulty at these ship functions when they would,
the band would strike out God Save The King. I didn't
want God Save The King at all, so I would not stand

up. It was the one thing that I was taking with me. Freedom was gone by that time, the Rebellion was lost, and it was a terrible feeling. The feeling that everything that you thought was worthwhile in life was gone down the drain. Now all you had left was the memories of good people who were killed.

SIGRIST: Did you know personally people who were killed and who were dying?

O'DWYER: Yes. I was at the wake and the funeral. I would be, then, I was maybe about fourteen years of age, fifteen, something like that.

SIGRIST: Would you say that young men in Ireland at that time all had a strong political consciousness because of what was going on? Or do you think this was just peculiar to you?

O'DWYER: It was peculiar to me, and to people who were raised like me. I wouldn't say that everybody had the same feelings. There were people who for economic reasons had been laborers that went to England or Scotland and worked on the farms and came back. They didn't have the same urge that others of us had. If they got freedom, they wouldn't know what to do with it anyway

at that point. But they didn't want to go to England, and didn't want to go to Scotland. And, of course, for permanency, they wanted to go to America.

SIGRIST: Would you say that the Irish rebellion was fought mostly by young men?

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: Was it really a sort of, a conflict of younger people as opposed to the older generations in Ireland?

O'DWYER: No, not that way. It was younger people through, led by people who were educated and had strong feelings about freedom, who were masters in the history of their country, and felt very strongly about the necessity to be free. But they were mostly young people. They wouldn't, leadership came from the educated class, top leadership, particularly.

SIGRIST: Would you say that a lot of the Irish coming to America at that time, while maybe poor financially, economically, were educated people?

O'DWYER: No.

SIGRIST: No.

O'DWYER: They were a cross section, pretty much. People who were partially educated, like myself, would continue to acquire an education. But for somebody who had been a laborer in England and traveled back and forth would continue to be a laborer in America. And some of them gained importance in that concept, and the others would not.

SIGRIST: You said the ship took seven days.

O'DWYER: Yes.

SIGRIST: What time of the year is this?

O'DWYER: April.

SIGRIST: In April. Did you get seasick, or anything like that?

O'DWYER: No.

SIGRIST: The sea is still a little rough in April, probably.

O'DWYER: It is. But, no, I didn't.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty coming into New York Harbor?

O'DWYER: No. Somebody asked me about that, during that period the Statue of Liberty meant nothing to me. Getting a

job meant something to me. They were all they'd talk about, at that time, I think it something about, I forget what the occasion was, maybe it was something to do with the Statue of Liberty, and I was interviewed, like you're doing it now. And I said, I don't remember anybody standing on the deck and saying, "Hooray." The Statue of Liberty is a symbol of my liberation. Really, I find it difficult to get enthusiastic about that situation, because it didn't happen. Maybe it happened with somebody coming from someplace else. The picture of the immigrant at that time is somebody with a shawl over her head, something like that. And a headdress, of a peasant nature, and some children knocking around. That wasn't it at all.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me what did happen when the boat came into the harbor. What happened at that point?

O'DWYER: They had it down to a fine point. There were immigrant officers that boarded the ship, maybe at Sandy Hook, came on board, and then went into one of the lodge rooms. And then you came up with your passport and immigrant papers, and they were examined and stamped. And then you went, you went either to Ellis Island, which I didn't go because that was

another benefit, coming from the second class ticket, or you got off the boat at North River piers. You went from there to wherever you were going. If somebody was going to pick you up.

SIGRIST: So your second class ticket saved you the rigors of Ellis Island.

O'DWYER: Absolutely. I told somebody that. I got a medal from my group in Washington, DC, looking around for somebody to give a medal to. You came through the immigrant ship. You know, I really didn't come from Ellis Island, I've got to tell you. I was of the class that could have come from. I got the medal anyway.

SIGRIST: Was Frank waiting for you at the docks?

O'DWYER: He was.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the reunion with Frank?

O'DWYER: Oh, it was pleasant.

SIGRIST: Were you close?

O'DWYER: I was, yeah. He was closest with me in age to the

others. I had an older brother, there was no such relationship between myself, Frank and myself.

SIGRIST: Was William in, the older brother, was he in New York or was he somewhere else?

O'DWYER: No, he was in New York. In New York, as a matter of fact, I think he had passed the bar that year. Sometimes that year, but he wasn't a lawyer yet. He was in that later stage, but he passed the bar, but he was not admitted yet.

SIGRIST: What was the first thing that Frank did with you when you got off the boat?

O'DWYER: Well, he took a look at my clothes. They were all these heavy tweeds. And he said that I got to get rid of them, going out to the summer here in New York, it would be very overpowering in the summer time. I got rid of those. I found a place downtown, my brother took me to the Lower East Side where immigrants were going to get suits of clothes that had very cheap prices, mostly on Hester Street, around that section. And somebody took me down there. I know the cost of the suit was seventeen dollars. And I don't know what the cost of the suit in Ireland was in pounds, I

couldn't tell you. Anyway, it was cheap in comparison.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a minute so that Kevin can pop another tape in the machine, and then we'll continue with Paul O'Dwyer.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: We're now continuing with Paul O'Dwyer. Mr. O'Dwyer, let me ask you, you'd been in big cities before, obviously, Dublin. But what struck you about New York on that first day?

O'DWYER: It was a very strange place. It wasn't that the buildings were big. I'd seen big buildings before, nothing the size of that, but somehow or other, there was a different style about them. And I had feelings it was a very strange place to be.

SIGRIST: Especially going to the Lower East Side on your first day which is, you know, a unique place in its own right.

O'DWYER: Oh, absolutely. I was in the middle of the heartland of the immigrants. Eimmigrants was a different

culture and different outlook and so forth and so on.

SIGRIST: What was your reaction to that initially? Was it something you were intrigued by, or was it something that you wanted to separate yourself from?

O'DWYER: Oh, I was intrigued by it, and I loved it, I loved it. The thing that began to get to me more than anything, different customs and language and things like that, and that appealed to me.

SIGRIST: Did your brother Frank live down on the Lower East Side, or did he just bring you to get an inexpensive suit down there?

O'DWYER: No. Frank was a very hard customer. He lived in the hard work of the fruit and vegetable market. That's what he did for a living. He was a, he unloaded trucks, vegetables, and he discharged them. Later on he became a buyer and left New York and went to California and became a vegetable farmer. He did very, very well during the first World War.

SIGRIST: How many years had there been since you had seen him last?

O'DWYER: I had seen him about six or seven years previous. I

hadn't seen Bill since, I never remember seeing him before.

SIGRIST: How long was it after you arrived that you saw your brother William?

O'DWYER: The same day.

SIGRIST: Oh. Did he go to the boat to meet you also?

O'DWYER: No.

SIGRIST: Talk about meeting William.

O'DWYER: It was quite a sensation. I met a man who had become completely Americanized. He hadn't a trace of an Irish accent. He had been through, all this experience that immigrants don't go through, that Salamanca, somehow or other, I forget, somebody told me he had a bicycle and went to Cherbourg, got onto a boat at Cherbourg. She works across the ocean.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, this is a man that you don't know at all.

O'DWYER: I don't know. That's right. I don't know, and he's a stranger to me. And his conversation with me may as well be with somebody I never saw or never heard of

before.

SIGRIST: Were you taken to where William lived, or to where Frank lived?

O'DWYER: I was taken to the boarding house where we all lived.

SIGRIST: So William and Frank lived in the same . . .

O'DWYER: No, William was married this time. But the boarding house was up on 103rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. And there is the place where Jimmy had come through. In the meantime, he got married, and Frank lived in the boarding house. My brother Jack lived in the boarding house. And there I was, too, when I came in. I had a room in the boarding house assigned to me.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about Irish immigrants in New York at that time, and maybe what professions they tended to get involved with, maybe what neighborhoods they lived in?

O'DWYER: Well, there were several neighborhoods, if you were staying in Manhattan you would stay on the Upper West Side and you would live in a boarding house for the most part. And there would be an Irish woman who would cook your meals and take care of your sleeping

quarters, and look after you in a fashion, and make certain that you didn't have a woman in the room. And that was, that qualified her to take care of my mother's son. And that was the situation. Now, the Irish people, young people like myself, got accustomed to the strange environment. New York was really a great place. Summertime it was hot as hell, and there was no air conditioning.

SIGRIST: And this is not a situation that you're accustomed to. It's much more temporary.

O'DWYER: Right. Well, we would go out after coming home from work, go out to the park and sit in the park and fall asleep in the park, a couple of hours stay there. I remember going out to, the nearest park would be Riverside Park. There was a sign across the way, "Linit." I don't know what they were selling. But I was fascinated by the change, the electric change that came. A few more minutes, then Linit would come on there again. And finally get tired and go back and sleep, back to the boarding house.

SIGRIST: What sorts of professions, were there specific professions that the Irish tended to get involved with

in the city?

O'DWYER: Grocery clerks. They made up practically all of the grocery clerks. They were taken in, they had enough education to be able to add up and subtract and whatnot, so they put in for that. And they worked for Irish grocers, Butter Brothers, Reeves Brothers. They would have twenty, thirty, forty stores, and hire these greenhorns. And they would pay a fair price by comparison to what was the going rate at that time. And later on when we got to join the unions, part of the upwards mobility of the American working class.

SIGRIST: What was the first job that you got here in New York?

O'DWYER: My brother got me a job in Williamsburg. And he did that through, the police department. He was a local police captain, and there was a place where you would, it was kind of a converted garage where working men who were working in the various phases of transportation would come fix up the trucks, and they would have to get parts, gaskets and likes, from a storeroom upstairs. And I got the job of taking care of the storeroom and so on. The mechanics would come and ask me for a certain part, and I would go and get

it. But I got so completely confused with the parts, I had known how to work, I worked in the old country as a kid, and the work didn't bother me, but I'm now into a mechanical age, and it confused the hell out of me. And I didn't know what kind of a gasket they were looking for. I would go down, and some of them would be patient, and some of them would not be patient. And I lasted for about a month and the boss came along and said, "You're a nice kid, but you're not fit for this job, so I got to let you go." I said, "Well, I could, you gave a job to somebody the other day who was sweeping up. I could sweep up." "Forget about it." And that was the end of my tour of duty with the first job in America.

SIGRIST: How long had it been from when you first arrived till when you got the job?

O'DWYER: I would say about ten days to a week.

SIGRIST: And do you remember how much you were paid for that first job?

O'DWYER: Yes. Seventeen dollars a week, which would be about the going rate for that kind of work at the time.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did in the two weeks before you even got the job? What were you doing in New York?

O'DWYER: Hanging out. As the kids would say today, hanging out.

SIGRIST: Well, what kinds of things were you discovering here in the city that maybe . . .

O'DWYER: I was discovering that the loveliest thing that America had to offer me was a strawberry ice cream soda. My brother Jack brought me into a drugstore. That's what they sold at the time. And I did think that was probably the nicest thing ever, and it entered my life. I still do it.

SIGRIST: Was there any other thing in New York that maybe you had not seen before?

O'DWYER: Oh, I had, everything in New York I hadn't seen before, like Walt Vincent books. But, you know, they were, at that time there were still trolley cars. This thing ran through the street. You jumped down and jumped off and paid your fare. It had its own fascination.

SIGRIST: Was there a particular part of New York that you kept going back to, you know, a neighborhood that you found particularly interesting?

O'DWYER: As time went on. First there was the Irish area. But I wanted more than that. And I went down to somewhere around Ninth Street and found there were people there from other parts of Europe, and who spoke with, of course, a different tongue. And I would get on, I'd walk in the streets, and hear them. Mainly they told me, but I knew they were different. And I wanted to know more about them, really. And then, I grew less interested in the Irish community. I would go on a Sunday to a park where they played football. We were right in the middle of prohibition, and I would see people in their bag, taking out bottles of whiskey and selling it. It gave me a great sense of disgust. We had, at that time, I didn't stay with it too long, we had something called The Pledge. The Pledge was what you took when you were confirmed, that you wouldn't drink any alcohol. Part of a great movement by a great, I would say call him patriot, by the name of Father Matthew Talbot, Talbot, T-A-L-B-O-T. And he had done this recognizing the fact that this very

destructive part of Irish life, and I joined into it at Confirmation time. And I stayed with it for, until I became a lawyer. And then I, the demon whiskey, alcohol, this part to erupt and encroach on that part of my life. And it was a place of enjoyment, and in the tavern, somebody was singing at the end of the bar, somebody was telling a story, and the bartender was an affable, friendly fellow all the time. I enjoyed it up to a certain point, and I realized I was going to become a lawyer. I was going to become a lawyer, and this thing was ruining me, so I cut it out. I gave up, and I didn't drink anything after that for another thirty years.

SIGRIST: Would you say that this was a serious problem among the Irish population in the city?

O'DWYER: Absolutely. I became aware of it, and I recognized it as such. And it ruined many people that I knew.

SIGRIST: Was this a problem that developed once they had come to America, or was this something that was already a problem in Ireland at that time?

O'DWYER: Partly. But in Ireland it was a problem, but people didn't have any money, so they weren't able to afford

the luxury of getting drunk. In America, that wasn't so.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your own political awareness and when you start becoming interested in the city and city affairs, that sort of thing.

O'DWYER: I'll tell you like I told the man down in Mississippi.

When I was battling for the rights of Negroes to vote, and the guy said to me, "How did you get interested in this stuff?" And I said, "When the Black and Tans were shooting at my town, and I came to realize it was the same fight." And I spent a lot of my years, my adult years, in that battle, whether it be for blacks or Hispanics or whatever it might be, that if I were getting a dirty deed, and after a while I enjoyed, for a while I enjoyed the fact that I was being received much better than they were, that I was getting the enjoyment of a special person, because I was white, even though I had not been born in the country, and I had no special rights to claim, to claim it. But then I saw, well, I'd been educated in the meantime, and recognizing that fact that people in our own country were being harshly dealt with. That brought me over to the field of human rights. I've

been there ever since.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that career and that fight just a bit.

O'DWYER: Well, it also brought me back to Ireland because that fight for human rights hadn't finished there. And I have helped as much as I could to see that they got some semblance of liberty. And then there was many other battles going on right, not too enjoyed. I was greatly disturbed when the Jews who were being not given their rights in Israel, and I joined that movement. And that brought me into association with our Hebrew brethren. I recognized, also, the wondrous world that they had sort of created (?). The world of art, music, literature. That gave me an entree into another world altogether.

SIGRIST: (?) one that maybe you first discovered getting your first suit on the Lower East Side.

O'DWYER: (he laughs) I recognized the accent, anyway.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about maybe some of the positions that you've held?

O'DWYER: There weren't that many. I did belong to, I belonged

to a democratic club when I first came to the country.

I was going to St. John's College, St. John's Law School in Brooklyn, and I was living out the way of it. And I would take the train, and then one of the students who would take me to school on the train once said, "You want to join a club?" And I was new in the country, I said, "What is it? What's a club?" So many things which seemed so easy for people who understand, growing up in the city, are strange to the ones who are just coming as an immigrant. Yes, I joined the club. It was out near Coney Island, and we studied at different times during the weekend, different places. We usually studied in somebody's home, and I would be in the home of the Jewish family, and after there I would be held over for dinner. And while Russian fare didn't appeal to me that much, at the same time I was in a home where the warmth of the household was a rewarding experience. And got to know people, what their troubles were. After a while, I found their troubles were like mine, except in some cases they were worse. I learned what a pogrom was. I learned what a rape was, and how a child would be raped by the Cossacks. That opened up my world to another way of thinking. I was part of a group called

the Irgun Zvai Laumi, S-, uh, Z-V-A-I-L-A-U-M-I. They were a group that were exactly the same as the ones who were fighting the Black and Tans. They were using exactly the same kind of reaction, and I traveled around New York raising money for them with two Jewish organizations, mostly (?), and the group I was with would realize the fact that I was a real find, an Irishman with a brogue telling about the people in Israel who were fighting for their existence and for their liberty and their freedom, and they were hunted all over the world, every place they went, that it wasn't fair. And the least they ought to do is to give them a few bucks. That was another phase of my life that I enjoyed.

SIGRIST: You served the city in several capacities.

O'DWYER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you just mention each of those capacities for us on tape, please?

O'DWYER: I was living up on the West Side, and a lady, she came to me and said, "We've met. You ought to run for the City Council." I said, by this time I'm very well-acquainted, and I'm a lawyer, and I'm involved in more

things. And I said, "Oh, I don't know. I never thought of it before." I had been involved in politics here, and, but I did. I went with her idea, and I ran for City Council, and I got elected. It wasn't, it wasn't easy. I joined the reform movement.

Because up till that time the politics that I was introduced to, it wasn't very appealing. It was politics that if you were well-known and you knew the leader, you're likely to get elected. If you didn't, no. As part and parcel of that movement that elected a number of people into office, I was one. That would be about 1963. And, at the same time, I was bidding my time partly in Mississippi, where I would utilize the functioning of a political party in getting people to get their rights. And I think I was two years as a City Councilman. I realized there wasn't that much to it. I had a job, but it was nothing. I gave it up. And some time later on they changed the charter of the City of New York to provide for President of the City Council. I thought that's more like my style, so I ran for it. My friends helped me. I had been part of the labor movement in the meantime. I got help there, and I got help from people, not too much Irish, but I had help from a lot of other people that had become

involved in the same thing as I had myself.

SIGRIST: How long were you the President of the City Council?

O'DWYER: Four years. Then I got defeated. I was part of the women's movement, and so a woman defeated me, and I couldn't complain, because I was responsible in a great measure for part of that.

SIGRIST: What year was it that you were defeated?

O'DWYER: Probably '64, thereabouts, I'd say. That book will tell you. Then the next thing I ran for was United States senator, and I ran in the primaries. And I was opposed to the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war also reminded me, to a certain extent, to the Black and Tans, bombing people in their huts with the thatched roofs and so forth. It didn't seem right to me. I learned more about it, trying to go wholeheartedly in support of Gene McCarthy, who was our leader, who was opposed to it. And I see him from time to time yet. And that took me all over the states, Jamestown, New York, the Great Lakes, Montauk Point. No place I didn't go to. And mirabile dictu I got elected and was the candidate of the party, and that brought me in contact with all the old democratic leaders, some of

whom couldn't stand the sight of me, and all because I was going against things that they were brought up in, political party, Tammany Hall. But then, of course, that was a disastrous period of time. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and Bobbie Kennedy was assassinated. John F. had been assassinated before that. A murderous period of time. Again, every hopes that you had were dashed. Then I, the next time I served in the city government was when David Dinkins, I had supported him for mayor, and I thought I'd like to be the city's representative to the United Nations. And I went to him, and I was appointed by him to the United Nations. And I served there for a couple of years, then finally I gave that up.

SIGRIST: That must have been much more recently.

O'DWYER: Yeah. That was, I served up to last year.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: And you also mentioned earlier that you had been a historian of the City of New York.

O'DWYER: Oh, that's something, you know, that's a non-paying

job.

SIGRIST: But important nonetheless.

O'DWYER: Because I liked it, I loved it. I liked the history of New York. And, like everything else, I began to love New York. It wasn't just merely that it gave me an advantage, but there was also a lot of other things about it that seemed (?).

SIGRIST: What was your proudest moment of your life?

O'DWYER: (he pauses) I would say probably when I was elected into the democratic primaries to be the candidate of the democratic party for United States senator.

SIGRIST: Do you, just very briefly, have any thoughts to share with us about your brother's own political career?

O'DWYER: Oh, yeah. That was very much typical New York politics.

SIGRIST: The old school politics that . . .

O'DWYER: To a certain extent, though he sure wasn't an old school politician. Yeah. He fought the established politicians of the day and won, to become mayor. And there's a certain amount of pride in knowing that he

was not going to be part and parcel of their machines.

He could do that with the help of the American Labor Party that had come into being about the time of the second World War, and was a left-wing party. And he stayed with that for a period of time in the war. The period of time in the Army was, of course, a very special period of time, and it was a great contribution to have an immigrant lined up in the, in the World War Two period in the army of his adopted country, raised by a president in the position of general.

SIGRIST: Did you ever see your mother again?

O'DWYER: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah?

O'DWYER: I went back. (he clears his throat) I was working on the waterfront, and I had been making seventeen dollars a week before that. On the waterfront I was making thirty-five dollars a week. I saved up for a couple of years, and bought my ticket and went back. She was still alive.

SIGRIST: Did she live long enough to see the rather illustrious

careers of her children?

O'DWYER: I think so. Being a lawyer was illustrious enough. We wouldn't think of it as such right now, but from an immigrant ship to that it was a big jump.

SIGRIST: She must have been very proud of her sons.

O'DWYER: She was.

SIGRIST: And her daughters, for that matter.

O'DWYER: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever regret coming to this country?

O'DWYER: Never.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Ireland?

O'DWYER: I think it would be quite different. I had thought of going back, but something that grips you as an immigrant, perhaps to a certain degree American-born kids, but to me is the sense of freedom, the fact that you can, that you know that you're part of a country that started out with Tom Payne writing the thesis for it, and that it felt that it was, the country was

worth fighting for, and that you are part of that system, that you are privileged enough to be part of it. Whereas if you were in Ireland, you'd have a hard time in the first place. Under British authority it would be unthinkable, and even under the Irish authority, it would be a certain period of time under slavery, as such. Enough to dampen the spirit. I don't think I could have ever enjoyed it.

SIGRIST: Well, I think that's probably a good place for us to end. Mr.O'Dwyer, I want to thank you very much for letting us come out, and we've been talking for the past few hours, probably, and you've been wonderful, and I really thank you for your time.

O'DWYER: Okay.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Paul O'Dwyer on Wednesday, July 27, 1993, for the National Park Service in Manhattan, in Mr. O'Dwyer's office. Thank you.