

EI-495/ROBERT WILLIAMS

EI-495

ROBERT MILTON WILLIAMS

BIRTH DATE: FEBRUARY 18, 1898

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 8, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 1:01:12

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: BETHANY HOUSE  
ROME, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.,  
7/1998

WALES, 1907

APPROXIMATELY AGE 10 (AS RECORDED IN THE INTERVIEW)

PASSAGE ON "THE DOMINION"

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Bob Jones, who is also present at this interview, was instrumental in helping to locate interviewees in the greater Utica NY area in 1993-1994, especially in the Welsh community. Mr. Jones' father was a good friend of Mr. Williams. Mr. Williams is hard of hearing, causing the repetition of several questions. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 7/20/1998.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is July 8th, 1994, Friday afternoon, a hot Friday afternoon. I'm in Rome, New York. (addressing Mr. Williams) What is the name of this building? What is the name of the building?

WILLIAMS: Bethany House.

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SIGRIST: I'm at the Bethany House, B-A-T-H-A-N-Y [sic,  
Bethany], with Robert Milton Williams.

WILLIAMS: Williams, yeah.

SIGRIST: Mr. Williams came to the United States in 1907...

WILLIAMS: Yup.

SIGRIST: He was approximately ten years old at that time.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Also present is Bob Jones from Utica, New York, and  
there may be some intercom noises because this is a  
nursing facility. Anyway, Mr. Williams, can you  
give me your birthday, please?

WILLIAMS: My?

SIGRIST: Birthday.

WILLIAMS: The 18th of February.

SIGRIST: What year?

WILLIAMS: '96, uh (correcting himself), '98, '98.

SIGRIST: 1898, February 6th [sic, 18th], 1898.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And where were you born?

WILLIAMS: (he laughs heartily) Pwlheli. (addressing Bob Jones)

Were you ever in Pwlheli?

BOB JONES: Never was there, no.

SIGRIST: Where in Wales is that?

WILLIAMS: Well, are you familiar with a map of Wales?

SIGRIST: Yes, a little bit.

WILLIAMS: You know the point, the point, uh, on the west side  
there, the, the extreme point? It's there. It's



WILLIAMS: Pwlheli.

SIGRIST: Is, uh, can you tell me a little bit about the town?  
What did the town look like when you were a little  
boy?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was a, at that time, of course, things have  
changed over the years, you know. It was the most  
important part of the county at that time. And,  
and it was mostly a farming district, and fisheries,  
of course. And a lot of old sailors around  
there.

SIGRIST: Is it right on the ocean?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: So is fishing an important industry in that town?

WILLIAMS: Huh?

SIGRIST: Is fishing, was fishing an important...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, most--, mostly, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can, what kind of buildings were there in the town?

WILLIAMS: Oh, stone. Stone buildings.

SIGRIST: Where was your house?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was up along side the town a little ways.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what your house looked like?

WILLIAMS: Well, you know, in several places in Wales they have a  
whole row of houses, and that's what ours was, a  
part of a row of houses.

SIGRIST: What, what did the house look like on the inside?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just plaster like this, you know.

SIGRIST: How many rooms?

WILLIAMS: Well, there was a dining room and living room and a  
couple bedrooms.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember how, how, what kind of light you had  
in the house? How did you light the house?

WILLIAMS: How did we find the house?

SIGRIST: How did you light, light...

WILLIAMS: Oh, it was regular, regular home.

SIGRIST: Did you have, did you have lamps to light the house?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was kind of built on a kind of a side of a  
hill and the back part, there was kind of a garden  
there. And there was a wall up here (he  
gestures) and then flat land.

SIGRIST: How, how did you keep warm in the winter?

WILLIAMS: All we had was just coal, you know, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you burn the coal in a stove?

WILLIAMS: No, the fireplace, yeah.

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SIGRIST: Where did, where did, where was the cooking done?

WILLIAMS: Why, everything was done in that one fireplace there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the kinds of food that you ate when  
you were a little boy?

WILLIAMS: Why, mostly in the morning we had oatmeal porridge. I  
remember that. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And what else? What other kinds of foods?

WILLIAMS: Well, we had pancakes and then barley bread. Well, we  
had a nice, light meal.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking?

WILLIAMS: My mother.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

WILLIAMS: Jane Anne.

SIGRIST: And what was her name before she was married?

WILLIAMS: Hughes.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Hughes?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, regular Hughes.

SIGRIST: H-U-G-H-E-S.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me about your mother's background.

WILLIAMS: Well, that's a long story and...

SIGRIST: That's all right. Go ahead.

WILLIAMS: My mother was born over here and brought up here.

SIGRIST: Where in America was she born?

WILLIAMS: Alder Creek

SIGRIST: Alder Creek?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Is that in this area?

WILLIAMS: In Bethel.

BOB JONES: Oh, my God.

SIGRIST: Do you know what year your mother was born?

WILLIAMS: No, not for sure.

SIGRIST: And when did she go back to Wales?

WILLIAMS: Oh, that's a long story, too. (Mr. Sigrist laughs)  
You see, in the beginning my father was a, a seaman.  
He spent about ten years in the ocean on that  
type of ship, the old, old sailing ships. And  
that's a big story, again. He never had a home  
from five, from five years old until he was twenty  
one. Now just think of kids today without a home.  
He didn't have any home. He was the youngest of six  
children and his mother died when he was five

years old. And his oldest sister harbored the rest of the kids, you know. She took care of the kids. And then he didn't know of anybody else as a mother except her until she got married. Then she got married and came over here and settled up in Tug Hill [ph] above Turin [NY] there. She was about the first settlers up there.

SIGRIST: When your mother, how old was your mother when they went back to Wales?

WILLIAMS: Well, she was in her twenties, I guess.

SIGRIST: So she was a young lady when she went back.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, sure.

SIGRIST: How did she meet your father?

WILLIAMS: Well, that's another story. (he laughs) My father had an old friend that had been on the ocean with him, you know. He was a ship's carpenter. And he settled up in Alder Creek. Then my father used to go and see him, you know, and during that time he met

my mother.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

WILLIAMS: John T.

SIGRIST: And what did the "T" stand for?

WILLIAMS: Thomas.

SIGRIST: John Thomas Williams.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What was your father like as a person?

WILLIAMS: Huh?

SIGRIST: What was your father's personality like?

WILLIAMS: Oh, if you can imagine a, a sailor. He'd been all over the world. He went to sea when he was twelve years old as a cabin boy and he was in the sea 'til he was twenty two.

SIGRIST: Did he ever tell stories about being on the ships?

WILLIAMS: Oh, he used to tell us sometimes about his experiences.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of those stories?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell us one of those stories on tape?

WILLIAMS: Uh, one time he was going to Odessa with a load of slate and they stopped in Constantinople. And he and this fellow I was telling you about that lived in Alder Creek, they went for a walk in Constantinople. And they'd been around the town walking and they were going back to the ship. And a dog rushed out and he threatened to bite them, you know. And this other guy, his name was Owen Jones, and he said to my father, "Do you know how to handle those guys?" And, of course, he did it so quick when that dog come there. He took his hat off and held it like that (he gestures) and the dog

grabbed it, see? And while he grabbed it, he give him  
a kick right in here, see? (he gestures and laughs) I  
remember that distinctly. But if they, he hadn't any  
more than done that, here comes a whole goll-darn [ph]  
village after him, you know. Then they realized  
that they were after them, you know. So they  
rushed back to the ship, and they just barely made it  
before that mob caught them. And then, when the  
captain saw them, he said, "What have you guys been  
up to?" And he told him. He said, "You're lucky  
that you ever got out of there." He said, "It  
would take the whole British fleet to get, to  
get a hold of you because those dogs are sacred and  
you are just lucky that you got out of there."

SIGRIST: After your father got married, when he married your  
mother, did he give up his life on the ships?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did he do after he got married?

WILLIAMS: Well, that's another story. First of all, he drove a,  
drove a buggy for a doctor in Rome [NY]. And then

he used to go back and forth to Utica [NY] to meet some of the Welsh people, you know. And do you know who he come in contact with, who he made a friend of? Was John F. Hughes. You've heard, there's a school. And John F. Hughes was a plasterer. And then my father learned the trade with John F. Hughes. While my father was working with John F. Hughes, John F. Hughes had got aligned with some friend of his in California after that big earthquake. So he said to my father, he used to call him Jack, "Let's go to California. There's a lot of work there." So off they went, the two of them, to California after that big earthquake. And they were there pretty near two years. And while they were there, although by this time they were both plasterers, see, but John F. Hughes was all the time experimenting. You see, prior to that, they just had lime and sand for mortar. And John F. Hughes had it in his head that you could find something that would work quicker. And he called it the "Patent Plaster." And that is American Hard Wall. And then he experimented with the, with the plaster there. He decided he's coming back to Utica and sell it. But when they were coming through

Chicago, it was after that big fire there. They stayed there another year, too. (he laughs) Then he, then finally John F. Hughes still didn't want to come back to Utica and he started manufacturing American Hard Wall Plaster. (addressing Bob Jones) That was before your time probably, but your dad knew about it.

BOB JONES: Yes, indeed, I know he did.

WILLIAMS: And I think my brother worked with your dad one time. I used to hear him mention your father's name.

SIGRIST: What do you remember yourself about growing up in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Well, we used to have a lot of fun, you know.

SIGRIST: How did you have fun in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Well, we used to like to fish right along, we were right on the coast, you know. And, we used to like to catch fish of all kinds.

SIGRIST: What kinds of fish did they have at that time?

WILLIAMS: Oh, most anything. Mackerel, herring and lobsters and crabs. But the, the Coast Guard was very attentive around our place. But they never stayed 'til only about five o'clock but us kids, we timed them. We knew when they left at five o'clock. Then, when the lobster fishermen would come in, you know, when the Coast Guard was there, they'd check them. They had to be five inches on the back of the lobsters. And those that were under five inches, they'd throw them into the ocean. Well, those crabs, you know, they wouldn't travel very far. But if it happened at high tide, when low tide come there, boy, we would have a picnic. We'd go after those short lobsters. And then there, I got pictures of the pool where those lobsters would settle down in there, you know. There was seaweed in there. And us kids would go in there and catch those little, little lobsters.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being in school.

WILLIAMS: Well, I'll tell you, when we left there, all, all the schools were Welsh, you know. But they were beginning to introduce English in the school, you know. And I was in the third grade. I was in the third grade and I remember some of the lessons the teacher used to give us. Of course, we knew the Welsh words, you know. We had both a Welsh dictionary and English dictionary. Then, when they started to introduce English, they'd give us a list of Welsh words because we knew those, the meaning, see? Maybe fifty or seventy five or a hundred words in Welsh. We knew the meaning of those.

Then they gave us the equivalent, we had to tell it in English.

SIGRIST: Was that hard for you, to learn English?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was regular school work and we just, the teacher assigned it and we'd do it, see?

SIGRIST: Do you still remember your Welsh?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you say something for us in Welsh on tape? Can  
you say a prayer in Welsh?

WILLIAMS: Where?

SIGRIST: Can you recite a prayer in Welsh for us?

WILLIAMS: (Welsh) (he laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: What does that mean?

WILLIAMS: Well, it's just the name of the school, you know,  
yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you go to church in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

WILLIAMS: Well, my folks, there wasn't a link with any, any

certain church, you know. But in the village,  
there was a high English Episcopal church and we  
used to go. And I made that painting in it. (he  
gestures to a painting) I made that painting.  
That's where we used to live. That's where.

SIGRIST: And what do you remember about the church?

WILLIAMS: Oh, of course, in Welsh, it was Welsh. But there was  
an old, they called him the vicar, the vicar in the  
Episcopal church. And he was quite a friendly  
old guy. We used, we used to like him, you know. And  
we used to play marbles a lot in the village. And  
once in a while he'd come along and he says,  
"(Welsh), my children," was always saying (Welsh).  
Then he found out that we wasn't doing anything  
special and then he'd have us go over to the church  
with him. And we got to like the old fellow. And  
that's where I learned Welsh, with that old  
vicar. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What did he teach you? What kinds of things did he  
teach you?

WILLIAMS: Well, just ordinary stuff, you know, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you celebrated Christmas in Wales.

WILLIAMS: Well, it wasn't much different. The only thing I remember about the Christmas in Wales, my mother made it a point to deal in the same store for, for a year. At Christmas time, the store keeper would give you a package. (addressing Bob Jones) I don't know if it did where you, were you born over there?

BOB JONES: No.

WILLIAMS: But, anyway, if you dealt in the store for a year, the store keeper would give you a package, the complete ingredients for a pudding. I remember that.

SIGRIST: How did your mother make the pudding.

WILLIAMS: Oh, that's quite a job, (he laughs) making a (Welsh). They put all these ingredients together, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the ingredients were?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. There were raisins and all kinds of fruits, you know. It was good.

SIGRIST: And then what did she do with the ingredients?

WILLIAMS: She mixed it up, you know, and then boiled it. The pudding had to be boiled. And they made, she'd make a big, a big, uh, I don't know, it wasn't a cake, a regular pudding. And then in the ingredients there was a towel in there. And then they, she boiled it and cooled it, this towel was on the outside, all white. And that pudding was enough for about a week. And boy, when she cut that, cut that pudding you had, that was something.

SIGRIST: Did you get presents at Christmas time?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. They, they used to exchange, exchange presents, you know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a gift that you received?

WILLIAMS: Well, at that time, you know, these were all poor

people and they couldn't spend much money. They  
may give you a nice pencil or maybe a slate. It  
wasn't nothing but we thought it was quite a  
thing, you know. (a lawn mower can be heard in the  
background)

SIGRIST: For the sake of the tape, I want to say that they seem  
to have begun to mow the lawn outside. Tell me  
about, when you were growing up in Wales, what, did  
you have grandparents in town?

WILLIAMS: No, my grandparents were gone before we come there.

SIGRIST: On both sides?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have any other relatives in this town?

WILLIAMS: (addressing Bob Jones) But do you know Bob, you've  
been around Remsen there a lot...

BOB JONES: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever hear about Reverend Pierce?

BOB JONES: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Reverend Pierce.

BOB JONES: Yes, one his daughters...

WILLIAMS: In (Welsh).

BOB JONES: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Well, my dad used to go to the (Welsh) church and I  
remember going with my father to the old church,  
the original (Welsh). Then Reverend Pierce came  
here and went to Remsen. And then he, he build  
that (Welsh) church. Was you there at that big  
celebration they had?

BOB JONES: No, that was in 1924, I think.

WILLIAMS: And then he's buried in what is the old (Welsh). I  
went with my mother to that old church.

BOB JONES: Oh, my God.

SIGRIST: What other kinds of foods did you eat in Wales before  
you came to America?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was mostly fish, you know, because fish was  
so plentiful or lobsters or crabs or something like  
that.

SIGRIST: You said that you had a garden with the house.

WILLIAMS: Well, a very small one.

SIGRIST: Was it a vegetable garden or a flower garden?

WILLIAMS: Well, just maybe a few potatoes and maybe peas or  
beans and that's about all.

SIGRIST: So you had to buy food.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, bought everything.

SIGRIST: What about milk? Did you buy milk?

WILLIAMS: We had to buy that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you have any animals?

WILLIAMS: No, we didn't. Well, toward the end my father had a horse because he traveled around a lot, you know, so he had a horse.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, when you were growing up in Wales, what you knew about the United States?

WILLIAMS: Well, as far as I'm concerned, I didn't (he laughs) know anything about it. But then I had a brother. He was, he was quite a bit older than I was. Then he took it in his head to come over here. He was born over here.

SIGRIST: He was born here when your parents were here.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, in Remsen.

SIGRIST: What year did he come over?

WILLIAMS: 1907.

SIGRIST: That's the year you came over.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Right? He came over the same year...?

WILLIAMS: Oh, why? Well, my mother, since she was born and brought up in the United States, thought that the best for us kids, my sister and I, to come to the United States for our educational purposes and all around, you see, people over there were very poor. So they did most anything to get away from it. And then my brother came here before we did and he had prospects of a lot of work, so my father, he decided he'd come over here.

SIGRIST: What was the name of your brother?

WILLIAMS: Hugh Larson [ph] Williams. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: And did he come to the Utica area when he came?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he came to Rome.

SIGRIST: He came up to Rome. How long, how long had he been in America before you came?

WILLIAMS: Oh, about six months.

SIGRIST: Oh, so not a very long time then.

WILLIAMS: (addressing Bob Jones) Have you, you've been in the Utica Depot, haven't you?

BOB JONES: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Did you ever look at the ceilings in there? The ornamental plastering? My brother was a foreman on that job.

SIGRIST: So your brother learned how to do plastering when he came to this country.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he was a, he learned his trade over there. He put, he put four years for nothing over there.

SIGRIST: What, what trade was that?

WILLIAMS: Ornamental plastering.

SIGRIST: He learned that in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then he did it once he got here.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Was he apprenticed to a plasterer in Wales?

WILLIAMS: He was what?

SIGRIST: Was he apprenticed to a plasterer in, how did he learn  
plastering in Wales?

WILLIAMS: Oh, with my dad to begin with.

SIGRIST: Did your father learn to be a plasterer in the United  
States or in Wales?

WILLIAMS: In the United States.

SIGRIST: And is, did he do that when he went back to Wales also?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about getting ready to leave to come to the United States.

WILLIAMS: Well, that was, that was quite an exciting time, you know. But I'll never forget my mother. There used to be a lot of gold coins over there, the guinea, you know. And Mother would never spend one of those and she collected them. I remember she had several spindles of gold coins. You put them in wrappers, you know. Until we had enough to come over here.

SIGRIST: Do you know, do you know how long it took for you to get your papers?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I remember that. That was an exciting time. Did you ever hear of Marconi, the inventor of wireless telegraph? He was experimenting on our ship.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

WILLIAMS: Dominion, yeah.

SIGRIST: And where did you have to go to get on the ship?

WILLIAMS: Huh?

SIGRIST: Where did you have to go to get on the ship?

WILLIAMS: Oh, to Quebec. No, we went up further to Montreal.

SIGRIST: But where did you get the ship in Europe?

WILLIAMS: Liverpool.

SIGRIST: You went up to Liverpool. How did you get from your  
town to Liverpool?

WILLIAMS: Oh, there was a bus service there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed to take with you?

WILLIAMS: Well, my parents had that, you know.

SIGRIST: But do you remember what they took?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just a change of clothing. That's about all. (he laughs) But I remember, I remember Marconi's experiment. That was quite a thing. I followed that so close, every day. Marconi started in Italy, in Italia, you know. He started in Italy. Then he had difficulty in sending transmissions across the ocean. So he took all his equipment to the western side of Ireland and he set up his apparatus there. Then, when we was going across, when we was about a half way across, they put a big bulletin board on the bridge of the ship and everybody was watching the bulletin board, you know. But it was on news, daily news from Europe.

It was on that bulletin board and we was all watching it, you know. Then all at once. (he makes a noise) That's the end of it, when we was about half way across. And that was the furthest range that he could send it was half way across. Then just a few hours, about an hour or so, the news from the United States was coming in. I remember that experiment. And you know what the radio means

today.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about being on the ship?  
Where did you sleep on the ship?

WILLIAMS: Oh, that is an interesting thing. I got in there and I was wondering how they could tell the speed they were on and how far, how far they were. Now, that was quite a thing. They threw a thing like, it was like a bucket, overboard on a cable and towed it. And by, by towing it there was an apparatus in there that revolved, you know (he laughs and pauses to catch his breath), I'm trying to get my...

SIGRIST: Here, we'll just, there you go.

WILLIAMS: And this cable revolves, you know. It was like a

speedometer but it was attached to this bucket.  
They could tell the speed and the distance they  
went. They used to do that daily to check on it.  
Then, when we got to Quebec, we were put in  
quarantine for three days.

SIGRIST: So the ship went from Liverpool to..

WILLIAMS: To Quebec.

SIGRIST: ...Quebec.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did they, where did they feed you on the boat?

WILLIAMS: Well, they were just ordinary meals, you know.

SIGRIST: But was there a room for you to eat in?

WILLIAMS: Well, maybe a hamburg.

SIGRIST: Where, where was, where did you eat on the ship?

WILLIAMS: Oh, they had a regular dining area, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was the Dominion a nice boat, a nice ship? Or was it  
a slow..

WILLIAMS: Well, it was one of the older ones, see? But it was  
very efficient, you know. But there's one thing  
that I remember, down, way down in about the third  
floor, there was a group of people in there and  
they wouldn't let them come up on board. They were  
Lativanians [sic, probably Lithuanians, see  
next page]. They wouldn't come on, let them  
come on board. They were filthy. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So there were different kinds of people on the ship,  
too.

WILLIAMS: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anybody else who was traveling on the  
ship?

WILLIAMS: Well, you take the French and the English, they mixed  
all together. But those Lith--, Lithuanians, they

were down in the hole. (he laughs) I remember those.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember being up on deck on the ship?

WILLIAMS: What?

SIGRIST: Do you remember being up on deck? Up, up on the deck of the ship?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. We had more privileges than the average on our ship. You see, my father, he had been in the ocean for ten years before he was married. And that's another story. That's the reason why we came to Canada. My father was acquainted with the travel agent in Liverpool. His name was Hugh R. Jones. And my father used to go see Hugh quite often, you know. (he laughs) And Hugh told my dad, "If you ever want, make up your mind to go back to the States," he said, "I can arrange for you to go on a ship where there are several of the same crew members as was on your ship when you was on." Well, that was quite an attraction, you know. So, all at once he sent a notice to my dad that there

was a ship that there was four, four fellows on there  
that used to be on the ships with my dad.

SIGRIST: So the ship docked in Quebec? The ship went to Quebec  
and docked?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you said you were in quarantine in Quebec.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, on account there was a ship went through before  
we did and stopped in, in Quebec and had typhoid  
fever. So they wouldn't, we were all under quarantine  
for about three or four days.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about being in quarantine? What  
did they do?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was just the ship was at anchor and the  
regular ship routine in there. That's all it was.

SIGRIST: And then, when the quarantine was over, where did you  
go?

WILLIAMS: Montreal.

SIGRIST: How did you get to Montreal?

WILLIAMS: Well, the ship went.

SIGRIST: And then when you got off in Montreal, what happened?

WILLIAMS: Then we took a train for Rome [NY].

SIGRIST: When you got off the ship in Montreal, did you have to undergo any kind of examinations?

WILLIAMS: No, we had that in Quebec.

SIGRIST: What, what kinds of examinations did they do?

WILLIAMS: Well, of course, I was a kid but my father had to go through it. And they used to make quite a (?), first thing, "Do you believe in anarchy, anarchists?" If you did, (he laughs) you didn't go through. I remember that question. And then they asked them, all of them, if they had any idea of employment when they come here. That was very

important. And my dad had. he had been promised a job when he come to Rome.

SIGRIST: Do you remember in Quebec, was there a building that you, that they asked you the questions in?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, there was a regular, well, just the same as Ellis Island. They asked about the same questions they did in Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: And it was the same, it was a separate building that you had to go into?

WILLIAMS: Why, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything else that happened at that time when you were being processed in Quebec?

WILLIAMS: Well, I didn't. Of course, my father had to go through there.

SIGRIST: How many people are with you? It's you and your mother and your father...

WILLIAMS: And sister.

SIGRIST: And sister. What was your sister's name?

WILLIAMS: Margaret.

SIGRIST: Did any of you get seasick on the ship?

WILLIAMS: My mother did, very sick.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about her being seasick on the  
ship?

WILLIAMS: What?

SIGRIST: What do your remember about her being seasick during  
the voyage?

WILLIAMS: Well, she had, until we got to Rome she didn't  
complain too much but when she got to Rome, boy, she  
had quite a session. She was about, bedridden for  
about a month.

SIGRIST: It took her a while to build up the sickness...

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that's...

SIGRIST: So you went, how did you get from Montreal to Rome?

WILLIAMS: The train.

SIGRIST: And what happened when you crossed the border into the  
United States?

WILLIAMS: Well, nothing there because they've taken care of that  
in the immigration office.

SIGRIST: Did anybody meet you in Montreal to bring you down to  
Rome?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

SIGRIST: Where did you go when you got to Rome?

WILLIAMS: Well, we had to go to a place, uh, Richland. That's  
where we stopped.

SIGRIST: Richland?

WILLIAMS: Richland, yeah.

SIGRIST: And is that a town?

WILLIAMS: That was, that was in the United States.

SIGRIST: Why did you stop there?

WILLIAMS: Well, it was like, just change trains. Nothing very  
important.

SIGRIST: And did you have, was your brother waiting for you in  
Rome?

WILLIAMS: My brother was, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did he meet you when you got to Rome?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, in, in Rome, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you first got to Rome [NY]?  
What did you, what were your impressions of Rome  
when you first got here?

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WILLIAMS: Well, I'll tell, I remember my sister and I, we were  
                  awful tired. We didn't, we just wanted to go to  
bed,                    yeah. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Where did your brother...

WILLIAMS: But I want to tell you something.

SIGRIST: Go ahead.

WILLIAMS: When we landed in Quebec, my father went to a  
                  restaurant there and they served ice cream there.  
And                    that's the first ice cream I ever had. (he  
laughs) I                    didn't know what the heck it was, you  
know, yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did your brother live in Rome?

WILLIAMS: Where?

SIGRIST: Where did he live in Rome?

WILLIAMS: Oh, he had a room with a cousin of ours.

SIGRIST: So where did you stay when you got to Rome?

WILLIAMS: We stayed there for about a couple weeks.

SIGRIST: In his one room?

WILLIAMS: Oh, no. There were several rooms.

SIGRIST: And tell me about going to school. Did they put you  
in school when you got to Rome?

WILLIAMS: Why?

SIGRIST: Did they put you into school when you got to Rome?

WILLIAMS: Yes, I remember that, too. I was in the third grade  
in Wales. But they put me, because I couldn't speak  
English, you know, they put me back in grade  
two.

SIGRIST: And what else do you remember about attending school?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I tell you, it, I remember it distinctly. Now

here I learned a lot of English words, see, but I  
couldn't carry on a conversation. But there was  
one teacher, I'll never forget her, Miss Doyle.  
She was the principal of the school. He  
didn't have a class but she walked through four  
rooms like this, you know. (he gestures) And there  
was a regular teacher there but she didn't teach.  
And I'll never forget Miss Doyle. She come passed  
my, through the alley way. And she says, "Young  
man, are you having problems?" She knew, she knew I  
was. "Young man," she says, "are you having  
problems?" Then she set by, by my, on my seat, you  
know. I will never forget her. And then she explained  
it to me. Why in no time at all I was able to speak  
English, you know. But she was (?). Then the Italians  
was mostly coming to Rome [NY] at that time and why,  
Italians all over. And every recess there was  
usually an awful fight, you know. And we didn't  
know what it was. It was a different nationality  
of immigrants. And finally one day somebody  
hollered, "Get that Welshman!" Well, somehow I  
recognized his tone, his tone of voice. I didn't  
know him, see? But there him and I got together and  
we, we had a fight, I tell you. And at first I

didn't realize what I was doing. And he was about sixteen and I was about ten years old. But, anyway, I got awful mad, you know, because he said, "Get that Welshman." Then I realized, I could tell by his voice what he was. He was an Englishman. And then, anyway, we got together. And, of course, he was sixteen and I was only about ten years old. But we had a fight. And I remember when we got into contact, I really got mad. And I happened to see a stick on the ground, you know. And I got a chance to pick up that stick. And, boy, I everlasting hit him. And I remember hitting him on the side of the head, you know. I thought sure I took his ear off. And then the blood, the blood came down his face and, wow, I was scared, you know. Just then, there was always a teacher on the second floor watching the playground. And there was always a fight there. And when that guy had to show blood, there goes the whistle. There goes the whistle. And that meant that we should all go inside, you know, it's the end of the recess. Well, at first we didn't pay much attention to it. But do you know every time we lost five minutes of recess, this teacher recorded it. And sometimes there'd be so much time that the

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next day we didn't have no recess. We lost our recess  
on account of the fight. I remember that.

SIGRIST: Did you and this boy ever become friends?

WILLIAMS: I didn't know who he was.

SIGRIST: Did you ever see him after that?

WILLIAMS: No, I never saw him.

SIGRIST: Tell me about...

WILLIAMS: But I tell, I want to tell you one thing. There was a  
awful lot of different nationalities. The  
immigrants were just coming in. And there was one  
Italian fellow, him and I got pretty chummy. (he  
laughs) And at that time there was the old canal  
was going down Black River Boulevard there. And  
rather than being mixed in with those fighters, we  
used to go and watch the boats go through the lock  
on the canal, you know. And we got pretty chummy.  
And do you know, after I came here (referring  
to Bethany House), there was about sixty years

difference in the time. One day I went over to the Senior Citizen's [Center] and he says, "Is your name Bob Williams?" "Sure." I didn't know him. And he was that guy that I, that Italian fellow. He remembered me after sixty years.

SIGRIST: Tell me about the first job you ever had.

WILLIAMS: Well, my father had been a sailor for ten years and he was a great disciplinarian. Boy, when he'd tell you to move, you moved. (he laughs) And I remember the difficulty my mother and him used to have. My mother, you know, would just give you a slap across the face. He always said, "Don't do that!" He'd never let anybody do that. "Don't you realize that you're dealing with a human being. And if you can't tell him in words what you want him to do, it's your fault." But give him capital punishment, no.

SIGRIST: What was the first job you ever had?

WILLIAMS: Well, I'm grateful for the way I was brought up. My father always, see, my brother and I were boys. My

father always said, "When you go out on your own, see, out away from home, you're going to find out one thing that you can't get around. You've got to eat. You'll find you've got to eat. And in order to get something to eat, you've got to work. So don't be too particular of what you get. Take whatever you can get." That's the way I was brought up. And if you earn a dollar today, don't spend it all. Maybe tomorrow you ain't working. That's the way I was brought.

SIGRIST: How old were you when you went to work?

WILLIAMS: Why, I'd been helping the neighbors quite a bit, you know, but when I got my first job I was about eighteen or nineteen.

SIGRIST: What was that job?

WILLIAMS: Well, there was a Swiss farmer up next to our place and I used to help him quite a bit. And his son went in the army. It was in the First World War. Then he was short of help. Then he wanted me to go and help him on the farm, you know. And the prevailing

wages then was only twenty five dollars a month, but he gave me thirty five dollars because he knew what I could do. And he gave me thirty five. And here's something that I've always been proud of. Don't spend it all when you get it. So when he used to give me a check for thirty five dollars, I put twenty five dollars in the bank. I put twenty five dollars in the bank. And, of course, I was getting my room and board with the farmer. But that's my real first job.

SIGRIST: What kinds of duties did you have on the farm?

WILLIAMS: Well, a regular farmer. Milking the cows and feeding the cattle and all that, driving the horses.

SIGRIST: Did your mother go to work?

WILLIAMS: No, my dad never let Mother work. (he laughs) My dad never let Mother work.

SIGRIST: Did she want to work?

WILLIAMS: Well, she has, she used to do so many, she was a great

milliner. She had a lot of work to do.

SIGRIST: Did she do, did she do this millinery work for other people?

WILLIAMS: Oh, once in a while, yes.

SIGRIST: She trimmed hats.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what you remember about World War One and that time period.

WILLIAMS: Oh, I almost got caught in that. I almost got caught in World War One. You see, they didn't take the eighteen year olds at first. Well, then they used to reclassify them. So I was classified as an eighteen year old. Well then, as the war proceeded, they decided they had to take the eighteen year olds. So they decided that I was in that draft stage, eighteen year olds. So this is in, oh, middle of November, I guess it is. then I was called up for a physical the first week of

December. And here I was preparing for it. And then Arm--, then Armistice came and they cancelled the prior orders. That's, that's just as close as I come. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: What about your brother, your older brother, did he have to serve?

WILLIAMS: No, he was married and had a family, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me about going to church in America. Was there a church that you went to in America?

WILLIAMS: Yes. (addressing Bob Jones) Did you ever hear of (Welsh) in Wales? That was an evangelistic period. Boy, that was, that was quite a time, yeah. And do you know I was only eight years old. There was one of those hymns they used to sing that stuck by me. (he recites the hymn text in Welsh) I remember that. I remember that. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did you go to church in Rome [NY]?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, the old Presbyterian church there.

SIGRIST: Was there a big Welsh population there?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, mostly all.

SIGRIST: Were your parents religious people?

WILLIAMS: Well, I tell you, that's one mistake they made in those days. They insisted on having Welsh in the home but they had to go to school. And then in, in the church it was Welsh services they had. Then, when the kids went to school, they were looked upon, "Oh, he's a foreigner. He can't talk English." So what do the kids do. They made an effort to learn English. And that's, and the old timers, they tried to keep the Welsh in, everything Welsh. They made a mistake there.

SIGRIST: Did your parents only speak Welsh?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they spoke Welsh.

SIGRIST: Did they speak any English?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes, but in the home we always had Welsh.

SIGRIST: Did you ever, did your parents ever want to go back to  
Wales to live?

WILLIAMS: My, my father wanted to. That's one thing my mother  
and my father used to have arguments over. You  
see, my mother, she was born here. She was an  
American citizen. But us kids was born over  
in Wales. Then, in, for us to vote, we had to  
naturalize, become an American citizen. And my  
mother used to try, and then my father, he was a  
Britisher. And then my mother wanted us, wanted  
my father to naturalize. If he naturalized,  
then we would be citizens but he never did. And  
I remember them arguing about it. "Look here,"  
he says. "If you can show to me that Uncle Sam is  
better than John Bull, I'll, I'll consider it." He  
didn't say he'd do it but "I'll consider it" but he  
never did. Then one time he thought if he went to  
Canada he'd be a British subject, see, and he wanted to  
go to Canada. And Mother said, "Absolutely no,  
absolutely no!" (he laughs)

SIGRIST: When was the first time you went back to Wales?

WILLIAMS: I never went back.

SIGRIST: Never went back.

WILLIAMS: No.

SIGRIST: Ever wanted to go back?

WILLIAMS: Well, there was a time I kind of wanted to go but things have changed. I had three girls that were going to school. And I wanted those girls to have better education than I had, so those three girls had four years of college education which I never had. And then, when those girls was going through normal school, it cost money and I couldn't, I couldn't afford to go to Wales. That's my history.

SIGRIST: What do you think is truly Welsh about you?

WILLIAMS: About school?

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SIGRIST: About you. What, what is Welsh about you?

WILLIAMS: What did I think of Welsh?

SIGRIST: What do you think is Welsh inside of you? Is there  
some way that, that you're very Welsh?

WILLIAMS: Well, I tell you, I've always been interested in Welsh  
history. And in doing so, I've become interested in  
all kinds of history.

SIGRIST: Did you enjoy singing?

WILLIAMS: Huh?

SIGRIST: Do you enjoy singing? Singing?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. I (he laughs)...

SIGRIST: Can you sing a Welsh hymn for us on tape?

WILLIAMS: Well, my voice isn't what it used to be.

SIGRIST: That's all right. Go ahead, try. Try one.

WILLIAMS: But I, I remember that, that old hymn (Welsh).

(Welsh), I remember that one. I was only ten years  
old but I still remember it.

SIGRIST: That's the hymn that you, you spoke for us a little  
while ago.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Does it have a, does it have a tune that goes with it?

WILLIAMS: Did I what?

SIGRIST: Does that hymn have a tune? Can you sing that hymn?

WILLIAMS: Oh.

SIGRIST: You recited the words but can the sing the tune for  
us?

WILLIAMS: If I was alone, I'd sing it. (he laughs heartily)

SIGRIST: All right.

WILLIAMS: (addressing Bob Jones) You know, Bob, I used to go to  
Old Mariah [ph] Church and they tell me that's  
going down.

BOB JONES: That's the way many of them are going.

WILLIAMS: I used to love Margaret Griffith playing the piano,  
remember? Do you remember the (Welsh)?

BOB JONES: We had a...

WILLIAMS: I, I used to attend those.

BOB JONES: There was a hundred years in Utica.

SIGRIST: Was your family musical?

WILLIAMS: Well, they liked, they liked it, you know. But I  
married a girl that was a great musician.

SIGRIST: What was the name of your wife?

WILLIAMS: Gertrude.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

WILLIAMS: Uh, Gertrude Scothon.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

WILLIAMS: S-C-O-T-H-O-N.

SIGRIST: And you said she was great musician.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What year did you marry her?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I forgot. (he laughs) But she's been dead about  
five years.

SIGRIST: And how long had you been married?

WILLIAMS: Fifty two years.

SIGRIST: And you had four children? How many children did you  
have?

WILLIAMS: Three.

SIGRIST: What were their names?

WILLIAMS: Bobby, Bobby and, uh, sometimes I'm kind of foggy,  
yeah.

SIGRIST: Okay. Did you ever encourage your children to learn  
Welsh, the Welsh language?

WILLIAMS: Bobby was a, tried to but the, after a while, she give  
it up.

SIGRIST: I see. Mr. Williams, I want to thank you very for  
letting us come out and...

WILLIAMS: Well, now, I'm proud of my grandchildren. They've all  
turned out good. I got nine sons, uh, nine sons of  
grandchildren. And, uh, they've all (turned out  
good?) There's one of my grandchild, uh, grandsons,  
two years ago, he got the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy. And he earned it, too. And I give him  
credit. He still remembers me. He sends me a

letter. And he sent me a letter once after his graduation, "You know Gramp," and he was pretty near thirty five years old, "You know Gramp, I never had a new suit of clothes." He always wore jeans, you know, or sport coats. "But now I have got to go for an interview and I've got to buy a brand new suit."

SIGRIST: Mr. Williams, thank you very much. This has been...

WILLIAMS: Then I, then Bobby, she became a school teacher. She's retired.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Robert Milton Williams on July 8th 1994 in Rome, New York. Thank you very much.

WILLIAMS: Then at this stage I, I feel grateful that my creator, this is clear. (he gestures to his head)

BOB JONES: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: You're pointing to your head.

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WILLIAMS: Yes. I can remember way back to when I was four years  
old almost.

SIGRIST: Great. Thank you.