

**EI-537**

**DR. LOUIS ELLIS PARRISH**

**BIRTH DATE: APRIL 5, 1927**

**INTERVIEW DATE: AUGUST 24, 1994**

**RUNNING TIME: 22:10**

**INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**

**ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL**

**MEDICAL INTERN**

**PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE AT ELLIS ISLAND, 1950-1951**

LEVINE: Today is August 24<sup>th</sup> 1994 and I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History studio with Dr. Louis Parrish who worked here for the United States Public Health Service from June 1950 into 1951. And I just want to start out, This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I want to start out by saying I'm very happy to see you here.

PARRISH: I can't tell you have flattered I am to think I'm part of history.

LEVINE: Well, you are, you are. You are now. And I want to see we'll, we'll start out, whatever you remember, of course, is most welcome. And I'll start out by asking some questions and whatever is relevant within that you can mention. And, of course, any anecdotes are always most welcome. Why don't you start by saying your birth date and where you were born?

PARRISH: Okay. I was born in Louisiana, north Louisiana in April 1927. I came to New York in June as you said as an intern after graduating from medical school and was stationed at the public health hospital on Staten Island. It was, we were responsible—or they were responsible—for about once a month or once every three weeks sending a doctor over here to consult with the detainees, the few

retaining detainees. And when I saw few, I mean few. I mean I can't remember more than about twelve or thirteen being here. And the Coast Guard would take us from the dock down at the, where the Staten Island ferry was, bring us over here. And they had a dispensary. And anybody who had any medical complaint was free to come in and talk with the doctor. Now—

LEVINE: Now, was, the Coast Guard was stationed here at that time.

PARRISH: No, no.

LEVINE: No?

PARRISH: I don't know who was running the place at that time. But the Public Health Service was responsible for the health and care of the people who were still here. I mean some of them would go into litigation. I remember two that were here because they had tuberculosis. And in those days, in 1950, we didn't have a treatment for tuberculosis. And one thing I never figured out is what they were staying here for. I guess it was litigation or family pressure or something. I remember when I would return in the mornings to go back to the hospital you would see one or two men who were lawyers or something coming over here to discuss the cases with their clients. But I remember tuberculosis was definitely a part of it. And the Public Health Service had a hospital on Manhattan Beach. And sometimes the patient would be sent over there—if he was going through, through an acute period—and then brought back here. It was all sort of confusing for me. I must say I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the history, the feeling of the place. But I mean it was like a—I don't know what to say—a big tabernacle or something. Nothing going on or anything that you could hear. I remember that after the evening meal there was some lady here who considered herself an opera singer. And she would, and there was a piano. And sometimes they'd play and sometimes she'd sing for a little while.

LEVINE: Would she sing in English?

PARRISH: What? Oh no, no, no, no. Her husband was the one. He couldn't believe that here I was twenty-two years old from Louisiana and was interested in learning Italian. And we used to play dominos together. And it was always a struggle because he wanted to speak English and I wanted to speak Italian.

LEVINE: So when you would come over on a given day you would come over and you would spend the night?

PARRISH: After, I'd spend the night.

LEVINE: And leave the next morning?

PARRISH: I would, we would, I was trying to, I mean I haven't seen around enough to see. I don't, yes, I do. After about the third trip I insisted on eating with, they had a dining room or something. And I insisted on eating down there. Otherwise they would put me off in a little room and I'd have to eat alone. And then lights were out around about nine-thirty or ten o'clock. And I had a private room up on the upper level here. And I'd go in and spend the night and then catch an early boat the next morning to go back the hospital because I still had to tend to my duties over there.

LEVINE: So in other words, you spent the night here just in case there should, something should happen during the night that you would be on call if need be.

PARRISH: That might be it. I think it was more for the convenience of the Coast Guard. They didn't want me to hold (laughs),

LEVINE: I see, the boat schedule.

PARRISH: hold the dispensary and then come back and pick me up. But I didn't mind it. I mean like this time of year, or the last time I guess I was here was probably in June of '51. And there is no better view of New York. And it was all to myself. I mean I could roam around the grounds and look over at the city. And, and it was romantic in a way.

LEVINE: Well, tell me, like, with the tuberculosis cases—and there was no cure for tuberculosis—what did you do for them?

PARRISH: I don't know what they, just listen to them cough, I guess. I mean it was mostly supportive therapy. The United States wanted to look after these people. I never even really knew, and I mean, my knowledge is not very great of it whether they were screened before they came here. There was a man with syphilis. And we had just discovered penicillin to cure it. And there was someone with dysentery, not cholera. Perhaps it's why I turned out to be, faithfully, forty-four years old. And I'm not ashamed to say I'm the world's leading expert on amoebic dysentery. But most of them were political, I think. I remember after seeing, or talking, to someone, whenever I could talk, because, you know, if you stayed here for three or four years, I mean, (laughs) you couldn't get off, you had to learn some English, like being in prison, I guess. And some of them I got to know. But it was the beginning of the McCarthy era. I think some of them were political detainees at that time.

LEVINE: It sounds as though, was it pretty much the same group every time you came back here?

PARRISH: Oh yes, there was pretty much the, there was nobody coming through here anymore. This, it just stopped. Ellis Island had just stopped. And this was, as I said, about a dozen people who were still hanging on here looking at freedom across the way, but not being able to get to it because of illness or political problems of some sort. Or, I remember one woman, and she was a mother,

grandmother. And the family just couldn't guarantee support. So why didn't they send her back? But I don't know maybe—

LEVINE: Maybe she had nothing to go back to.

PARRISH: Yeah. That's probably it. Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Yeah. She probably didn't. I mean had nothing to go back to. But the family couldn't guarantee support or, and she was not able to work. She was too old and if I remember correctly a little senile or something. They just kept them here. I mean I really don't understand the whole situation. But I'd say half were medical detainees and half were political detainees.

LEVINE: Were you the sole medical person connected with this place?

PARRISH: No, no, ma'am. They had a nurse here in the little dispensary during the day. And she would take care of aspirin, whatever they needed. Then she would say, well you ought to see the doctor if they needed a shot or something like that when he comes over in the evening. So she would have a little schedule for me to see two or three patients or whatever it was. I think a lot of them just wanted to talk. Come in and have some sort of contact.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well I'm not sure if you mentioned this. Did you come once a week?

PARRISH: No, no.

LEVINE: How often did you come?

PARRISH: Well it varied but I would say it was about once every three to four weeks.

LEVINE: I see.

PARRISH: We were a lot of interns and we rotated the duty.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. So you might not come for several months.

PARRISH: No, no I would be here at least once a month.

LEVINE: Oh you, I see. But someone would, would someone come—

PARRISH: Someone came every night—

LEVINE: Oh, every night.

PARRISH: Every night.

LEVINE: I see

PARRISH: We drew duty, I mean, you know. Just like in the army we drew duty. And someone, they had, they had the best medical care. And I know that they would have, for example, I would go back to the hospital, yeah. I remember that. I would go back to the hospital and there was this one woman who was in cardiac failure. And they sent out a, a, a cardiologist on a special trip to take care of them. They were given excellent care. Food was good, simple but good. I can't remember what nationality it was because we had a, I would say out of the twelve people there were eight different nationalities. But the, it was plain old American food. And the thing that struck me, you know, that it, there's a little, there's a little library. And, as I said, the madam sang sometimes in the evening or somebody played the piano all the time. And but it must have been terribly lonely for them all day out here.

LEVINE: Do you by any chance remember a man named Peterson who was purported to be the last person to have been detained here—

PARRISH: No, ma'am, I don't remember. He was—

LEVINE: From Norway, I think.

PARRISH: From Norway, no. I don't remember him. Well the Norwegians are pretty healthy people (he laughs).

LEVINE: Yeah, that's true. You might never have crossed paths. Well, let's see. And the Coast Guard, you, you really, your memory of them is simply being the ones that, that, that ran the ships that, or the ferries, that brought you out here.

PARRISH: Well the Coast Guard boat brought us from right next to where the Staten Island ferry was. There was a Coast Guard dock there. It went to Governor's Island, too.

LEVINE: I see.

PARRISH: And also come to Ellis Island. And they'd bring us over about five or six o'clock in the afternoon. And then we would go back around about seven o'clock, seven thirty the next morning. I mean when they, basically, I guess, even though in my imagination, or megalomania, whatever it was, I thought that it was a private boat. But I don't think so. It was, the few employees who were still here, like guards, they did have guards, armed guards. And, of course, they had to have some sort of administrative work here. So there were other people. It was not my private boat as I like to think.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything else about the people who were working here at that time?

PARRISH: No. I didn't have much contact with the people who were working here. I mean, you know, it was back a long time ago in the history of medicine where doctors

were respected and not talked to. And so I didn't make any friends. I just talked with two or three of the people here that I could communicate with of the detainees because, you know, in June the nights were—I mean the days were long. And I remember this man in particular, what was his name? Domico, Delmonico, something. And we would take a table, is there a porch around here somewhere? I can't remember. And play dominos and watch the sun go down over Jersey. That's the man, he wanted to learn English and I wanted to learn Italian. And between the two I don't know whether either one of us learned anything. But if you want to ask me my basic impression, it was depressing to walk into the main hall, maybe one person on duty and then to be taken to wherever I was working, the dispensary. And the huge, huge, I don't know what I'm seeing now. But to me it was just big. I mean high, and big and empty.

LEVINE: How did your fellow interns or other people in Staten Island who did the duty here too, how did? What was the general feeling about having—

PARRISH: I've got to do it. I've drawn duty. So I've got to go over. I don't remember discussing any particular patient with another intern. Well I do talk. And I would like to learn more about these people but didn't. It just was lonely, particularly in winter. And lights out at nine-thirty or ten o'clock or something like that. And cold, because there was no central heating or anything. But the food was edible. So I was happy. No. It was a great experience in my life and I'm glad that I was there at that time. And now I'm looking forward to trying to recall some more memories.

LEVINE: Yeah. Good. Well I was just going to ask you that. In retrospect, when you look back at this period in your life of, of being here, is there anything about it that, that—I don't know—has affected anything since then?

PARRISH: Yeah. I felt very sorry for these people. And I felt very important. That's actually, I'm not getting that impression today because we've, I've only been here [unclear]. but just the space and benches and little cubbyholes, I guess where the people

had in the past been taken to be questioned or whatever it is. And it was emptiness. I guess that's the best thing. So it's so wonderful to see now that it's been restored. But I, when the, it's very interesting I mean that I came over with my office manager today who's twenty-three. And she taught me something I didn't know, and that was that when the first Puerto Ricans came here, they stopped and were detained here for a while. So that a lot of people with history of having gone through here. How many did they use to process a day?

LEVINE: Well, I, I'm not sure how many a day. But it was, there's a twelve million figure of people who passed through here.

PARRISH: That came through from what period of time did they--?

LEVINE: Eighteen ninety-two. And then there was a fire so a few years out. And then until 1954 when it was officially closed but, of course, the big time—

PARRISH: I was, nobody was coming in through here in '50 that I remember.

LEVINE: Yeah. But there were still some detainees. In '54 they closed it up. But most of it happened from the 1890s till 19, mid 1920s. That was the time when the largest numbers were coming here.

PARRISH: Okay.

LEVINE: So let me ask you, after this was there anything in your experience that you connect with this experience at all?

PARRISH: I just, Yes. I've told you that there was. Of course, you know dysentery was one of the biggest problems in health at the turn of the century. And I said I remembered this one patient who was here and he had dysentery. And never at that time did I think I would become a dysentery specialist. I came here to be a

writer. And now I'm writing a book on amoebic dysentery. So I mean it's just funny how things evolved after that period of time. Nineteen-fifty, and I finished the book last week. (He laughs.)

LEVINE: Oh, well, congratulations.

PARRISH: Thank you.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, let's see. When you said you came here to be a writer was it to be a—

PARRISH: I came to New York City to be a writer.

LEVINE: A medical writer or—

PARRISH: A medical writer, yeah, medical [unclear] writer or reporter or whatever it was.

LEVINE: I see.

PARRISH: Yeah. And my focus was not on medicine as medicine. I didn't want to become a great surgeon or anything. I couldn't have at any rate because my hands are useless. I mean I can't even sew a button on. And I remember it was something about that. I remembered that sometimes you would see visitors coming over here with clothes for the people, you know. If they had relatives they'd come to visit with clothes. Those that didn't have relatives, I don't know where their clothes came from. I mean there are many questions on my mind. I'm trying right now to think about what sort of food we had. I think it was probably macaroni or spaghetti or something like that. But it was standard American food. But the people were well treated, I promise you. It was just the loneliness of this place. And then sitting here, particularly in winter, when it was cold and nights were early. And they're sitting here. And all of Manhattan—because we're at the end of Broadway,

right. All the Manhattan life going on over there and they're out here. So close, but yet so far.

LEVINE: I think maybe that's a good place to end this segment. And then we're going to walk around with you with the video. So if you discover some places that you recognize or any further memories we can—

PARRISH: Come back.

LEVINE: Record them.

PARRISH: Fine. Thank you.

LEVINE: Okay. I want to thank you, Dr. Parrish.

PARRISH: Well, thank you, for asking me. As I said to be a very small part of history, but I like it.

LEVINE: Significant, nonetheless. And this is August 24<sup>th</sup> 1994. We're here in the Ellis Island Oral History studio. And this is Janet Levine signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW