

**EI-553**

**DYAS CARDEN**

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**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.,  
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**GRANDSON OF COLONEL JOHN B. WEBER (1842-1926)**

**FIRST COMMISSIONER OF IMMIGRATION: 1891-1893**

**SON OF GODFREY CARDEN, CAPTAIN OF THE PORT OF NEW YORK  
DURING THE**

**FIRST WORLD WAR: CIRCA 1917**

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, September 22nd, 1994. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Mr. Dyas Carden, and I'll spell that. That's capital D-Y-A-S, capital C-A-R-D-E-N. Mr. Carden is the grandson of Colonel John B. Weber. And Colonel Weber was the first Commissioner of Immigration between 1891 and 1893, and would have been the first commissioner here at Ellis Island when it opened in January of 1892. Anyway Mr. Carden, welcome to Ellis Island and can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please.

CARDEN: March 6th, 1906.

SIGRIST: March 6th, 1906. And where were you born?

CARDEN: Staten Island.

SIGRIST: And can you just tell me a little bit about your family background.

CARDEN: Well, what in particular?

SIGRIST: Tell me a little about your father, because I know he's important to the history of the port of New York, also.

CARDEN: My father was captain in the Coast Guard and he married Colonel Weber's daughter Elizabeth, and he was stationed in New York when I was born, which was why I was born in Staten Island. So, they met on the west coast, my mother and father, met on the west coast and they got married in Buffalo, New York.

SIGRIST: How did they meet? Why were they on the west coast?

CARDEN: I really can't remember, but they came east and they finally got married in Buffalo, New York. And I was third oldest child. My brother was six years older than I am, and he's now dead. He was a veteran of World War Two.

SIGRIST: What was your brother's name?

CARDEN: My brother's name was Blythe, B-L-Y-T-H-E.

SIGRIST: And what was your father's name?

CARDEN: Godfrey.

SIGRIST: Godfrey.

CARDEN: Godfrey (?) Carden.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about your father's family background and...

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...where he came from.

CARDEN: He was, he was born in Bangkok, Siam. He graduated the Naval Academy and he, he was, his family was from Ireland, come from Ireland and they, he was orphaned. He came over here to stay with an uncle in Brooklyn. And he was so mistreated that he and his sister ran away and went upstate New York on foot to Port Jervis, where they were befriended by a Presbyterian minister who took his children when they were about fourteen years old and sent them to college at, he graduated from Williams College. And just, the war began. And while he was there he made quite a friend of one of the men who later founded Hampton [ph] Institute. And they formed a company, a regiment of soldiers to go into the Union Army. So...

SIGRIST: We're talking about the Civil War, I should say here...

CARDEN: Yes, Civil War.

SIGRIST: ..for the sake of the tape.

CARDEN: 1861. And he came out, he was, they, they had the first battle at Harper's Ferry where they were captured. And he was given a parole because the Confederates didn't want to have to feed Union soldiers. And he was paroled to Chicago, Illinois, which was a small town out west at that time. And while he was out there, he went to the Theological Institute and he met, he met Elizabeth Hannah Dyas (unintelligible) Dyas who had come over from Ireland, and they got married. And he decided to become a

missionary. They sent him to Siam and he and his wife spent their honeymoon on a ship sailing to Siam, a sailing ship. And they used to, they didn't have anything like refrigeration in those days. They used to keep the meat cool by hanging it from the yardarms let the breeze flow through it. And then they'd pick out what they wanted to eat for dinner, point at it, "Give me a steak from there," something of that sort. And they got to Siam. They were friends of the king and stayed there for two years. My father was born in Bangkok. But they came back. His wife couldn't stand the climate. They came back to Illinois and he had a ministry in Illinois and then they moved out to Marysville, California. And from there he was suppose to go to the Naval Academy, which he went there. Despite the fact that he was born in Bangkok, he was still an American citizen. He came through the, through the Spanish-American War, fired the first shot of the Spanish-American War for the American side. He was on a ship off the Cuban coast.

SIGRIST: and that would have been 1898?

CARDEN: 1897.

SIGRIST: ' 97.

CARDEN: So, in any event, he got married to Elizabeth Weber was born in 1906.

SIGRIST: What an interesting story your father has, the, the background.

CARDEN: Yes. And during World War One they had the Halifax disaster in Canada where ships loading munitions blew up, blew up the city. And they said, "We don't want this to happen in New York," which was ripe for the same thing because all the ships were being loaded right at docks with live ammunition. And they created the offices of Captain of the Port of New York, and he had about two thousand men under him.

SIGRIST: So that was his official title, then, your father. The Captain of the Port of New York.

CARDEN: Yeah, and they had eventually about two thousand men patrolling the, the harbor. And fortunately the rules were the ships had to be, with ammunition had to be loaded and stand anchored off shore a considerable distance, which, so they had no explosions here. This was, of course, greatly, not criticized but fought by the shipping industry who didn't want the extra expense off moving ships out to the middle of the harbor and loading them out there. But at least there was no, there was no Halifax disaster in New York.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the port of New York during World War One? Do you have memories of, of what you saw at that time and what was happening?

CARDEN: Well, there was a great deal of pressure on people in charge because they were faced with the problem of having a city-wide explosion and if anything went wrong. But nothing ever did. Ninety four percent of the munitions that were sent to Europe came through New York.

SIGRIST: Do you have any memories of the Black Tom Wharf explosion in 1916?

CARDEN: No, I really don't.

SIGRIST: That actually happened in New Jersey but it affected Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, so I thought maybe...

CARDEN: Yeah, yeah. I remember hearing about it. So...

SIGRIST: What was your father like as a person?

CARDEN: Well, my father, we're talking about now, is a typical military man, like most military men. He's actually a naval man, but, and...

SIGRIST: What was his personality like? You say he was a "typical military man." What, what, what does that mean?

CARDEN: Everything has to be right. And he was accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed.

SIGRIST: He was like that at home as well as on the job?

CARDEN: Yeah. So, I can't characterize him otherwise except he was very strict in his manners. And...

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other stories that he might have told about things that happened while he was on the job at that time.

CARDEN: Yes. He was subject to a lot of attempts of bribery, which he had to put down. And he told about one man who came in, a shipping man, who offered him a turkey. He said, "This is the lowest form of bribery for an (unintelligible)." Probably the most entrancing.

SIGRIST: What would people, what would people need to bribe him for? To bring their ships into the harbor? What, what kinds of situations?

CARDEN: Let them anchor at the docks and safety rules could be forbidden.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what some of those safety rules might have been?

CARDEN: Unfortunately, no. I should have, but I was too young then.

SIGRIST: Well, you were just a kid at that time.

CARDEN: Yeah. So, he later became in charge of the Shipping Board, United States Shipping Board in South America, and had an office in Buenos Aires where I spent one, one part of a year. I went down for summer vacation and it lasted longer than expected. I went to school in Buenos Aires.

SIGRIST: Really.

CARDEN: English school.

SIGRIST: How old were you at that time? What, what year was that?

CARDEN: That was about 1920, about 1920, yes.

SIGRIST: Right after the war.

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Soon after the war. So he was actually the Captain of the Port of New York pretty much just during World War One.

CARDEN: Yes, and being in the Coast Guard he was sort of being assigned to any places that needed, needed men. He had a lot of experience with machine tools. He works for the, he was on leave from the Coast Guard to the Department of Commerce. He once went through Europe, then (unintelligible) machine tool flats, then made a report on them so that the American machine toolers, they could be more competitive.

SIGRIST: While your father was the Captain of the Port of New York, did he ever talk about the immigration side of, of that position and the in-coming ocean liners?

CARDEN: Not distinctly because there wasn't much immigration going on at that time. In fact, I can't think of any. Maybe they are some, but I can't think of any.

SIGRIST: So you were living on Staten Island at the time that he was...

CARDEN: No, I was born there. We were living in Manhattan.

SIGRIST: You were living in Manhattan at that time.

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Well, let's, let's talk about your grandfather now for awhile. Your grandfather, Colonel Weber, is the father of your mother...

CARDEN: Elizabeth's, right.

SIGRIST: ..and tell me what your first memory of your grandfather is.

CARDEN: Well, of course, he always seemed an old man to me because he was pretty old by the time I came along. And he had a very nice estate near Buffalo, New York, Lackawanna, which we used to go to for summers. And Thanksgiving, we went there for then. My first recollection was he was very friendly but decisive. And he always wanted to have sons to go to West Point. Instead, he had five daughters. And...

SIGRIST: How did your mother fall into those five daughters?

CARDEN: She was the third oldest. And she was the only one that married anybody in the service.

SIGRIST: Would that have been the next best thing for your grandfather, if all his daughters had married military men?

CARDEN: Well, probably so. He, he wouldn't say so in so many words. He was, he came from the Civil War without any wounds or illnesses. But he was always drinking coffee, boiling, boiling the water to make coffee. And he went through the whole Virginia campaign against Richmond without being wounded.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk or tell stories about his, his experiences in the Civil War that you can remember?

CARDEN: Not that I can remember.

SIGRIST: Was that an important part of his life, do you think, or...

CARDEN: Oh, yes. And he went in at the age of nineteen and was one of the youngest colonels in the army. He became a colonel before he graduated. Which, before he was twenty three when the war was over. And he then went into local politics. He was in the wholesale food business in Buffalo and, where he met the Farthings [ph]. That's where he met his wife. He had a farm of his own about two hundred and twenty acres, which was farmed by a, a turf farmer. And he knows every Congressmen from Erie county and went into politics after, after settling in Buffalo. His parents were Alsations. His mother came over from Alsace as a young girl and went to Buffalo rather than to Quebec or Canada where there were more French. For some reason or other, she, she settled in Buffalo and she persuaded her boyhood sweetheart to come over. And that got married and lived in Buffalo and had

a farm. And he [i.e. Colonel Weber] was born in 19--, uh, 1842. He was nineteen when the Civil War started.

SIGRIST: So Colonel Weber was born somewhere in the Buffalo area, then, near Buffalo on the farm.

CARDEN: Yeah, and I was very fond of his five daughters and did a lot for them in many ways. Some of them had not too happy lives with their marriages, others had very happy lives. But we used to come up there in the summertime and the whole family would gather around it. We'd come up there to his estate in Lackawanna. And he was strict but firm, had a good a good sense of humor. And, uh...

SIGRIST: When you say "he had a good sense of humor," what kinds of things did he do to express that to people?

CARDEN: Well, the only thing that I can remember that might illustrate was we were having lunch one day up at his farm and we went up there for the summer vacation. And his second wife, (?), was very haughty, stood at the phonograph playing "Raindrops" and he said, "What's playing?" She said, "'Raindrops.' You should remember it." So the next thing is he walked out. Came back into the room wearing a raincoat. And he didn't say a word. Just ate his lunch in a raincoat. Not that it (unintelligible) but it's one thing I can remember off hand.

SIGRIST: What did your grandfather look like?

CARDEN: Well, he was medium height. And a great friend of Grover Cleveland. And they succeeded each other in jobs, one after the other. He ran for Congress and was Congressman from Erie County. And visited the White House with Cleveland and gave some thought putting him up for governor in

New York, which never, never eventuated.

SIGRIST: what was, what was he like with his grandchildren? What was, what was your relationship with him? Did you see him frequently or just in the summers?

CARDEN: Just in the summer times. He'd come down and visit the grandchildren, the children in the New York area. Two, two of his daughters were married and lived in, in New York. And we all were sort of in awe, in awe of him because he had been the Commissioner of Immigration, he had been the youngest colonel in the Civil War and he knew a president, and all this. And, but he was not, not, never haughty. He was quite (unintelligible) with children and I think would have welcomed their confidence more than he got. We were all a little bit in awe of him. And times when I think back now seventy years, it's a little hard to remember.

SIGRIST: Did, did he ever talk about his position here as the Commissioner of Immigration or anything connected with that, that you can remember?

CARDEN: Well, he may not have talked to me about it because I was too young, a kid but, when he came into here immigration was being handled by Tammany Hall and was very corrupt. Tammany, Tammany Hall was the most corrupted, with Boss Tweed and those people. And they would get the money out of the immigrants in various ways. And then just let them drift. So, that's why the Federal Government decided to make it a federal job. And, so he was always very much impressing and interested in whether there was any corruption in government, which is strictly an interest fighting it all his life. So I think he, he was very concerned. Think he felt that the Republican party was the only party that was any good. His connection with the Democratic party had been nothing but corruption. So, he had very strong views on, on government matters. But, because I say we were too,

too young then to talk about. He invested in new things. The Pierce-Arrow Motorcar Company was in Niagara Falls. It started there and he knew the manager who was the head of it. And he went out to see, to see what this new-fangled cart was. And Mr. Pierce took it for a ride, gave him a demonstration. And when he got through with his ride, he said, "How did you think, what do you think of this new form of transportation?" "Well, it's very interesting." He said, "Well, would you buy one of these cars?" "What would you do if you ever wanted to back up? Is there some way to make the car go backwards?" Pierce said, "No, we haven't, we haven't figured that out yet, but it's coming along. We'll have a reverse, reverse gear in the next ones." So he decided not to buy one. He bought one some years later. And he was one of the first people to drive around in an automobile in that part of Buffalo.

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a child his automobiles or you...

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...know, when he, what struck you, as a child, about that?

CARDEN: Well, of course, there, there weren't (unintelligible) in those days. We used to drive some of the old cars around and he still invested in the wholesale food business and the farm, which invested his property.

SIGRIST: Did you celebrate holidays with your grandfather?

CARDEN: Not necessarily, although I suppose we did. He used to come down. He had two daughters in Bronxville, New York. He used to come down to visit them and my mother. And we must have spent Christmas together. His wife was killed, you know.

SIGRIST: His first wife?

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that?

CARDEN: No.

SIGRIST: That was before you were born?

CARDEN: Yes. And he met his second wife, Alice Roberts, when my father was in Europe, we were all living in Europe. He met her over there through us. Not that we had any interest, now, but we were very surprised when he finally decided he was going to marry her.

SIGRIST: And her name was Eleanor, you said.

CARDEN: Alice, Alice Roberts.

SIGRIST: Oh, Alice Roberts. How did, how did his first wife die? How was she killed?

CARDEN: In a, horse, horse ran away, right in front of the house. They were in a carriage, what do they call those things, not buggies...

SIGRIST: Like a phaeton or...?

CARDEN: Yeah, something like that. And she was killed. The horse ran away and threw her out of, out of the car.

SIGRIST: When you went to spend summers with your grandfather, what kinds of activities did he like to do during the summer?

CARDEN: Well, of course, when we were up there he was getting along in years and he was interested in following politics and collecting a library, which he later donated to the city of Lackawanna. And they're building a monument to him this summer. I think he was mainly interested in making sure, oh, he had one of his daughters living with him. She had an unfortunate time. She was (running out?).

SIGRIST: This was one of his daughters?

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was her name?

CARDEN: Jean.

SIGRIST: Jean.

CARDEN: She lived out there when her husband left her and, of course, being a kid (unintelligible) interested in what his business pursuits were.

SIGRIST: Do you remember your grandfather's funeral in 1926?

CARDEN: No, I was in college then. I didn't attend it.

SIGRIST: Do you know what he died of?

CARDEN: I really, really don't. He had pneumonia and a heart attack.

SIGRIST: Was your mother close to your father, (correcting himself) to your grandfather?

CARDEN: Yes, I think, I think so. She was very fond of him, because he was glad to have his grandson that went to West Point. My brother went to West Point.

SIGRIST: So your grandfather was very proud of that.

CARDEN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did your grandfather ever give you any advice that stuck with you for the rest of your life? Did he ever say something to you that, that you've held onto all these years?

CARDEN: A lot of things, but I can't remember just what they were individually. He was very honorable in all his dealings, (unintelligible). Everybody should be. And there was enough going on of a dishonorable nature around the world to avoid. (pause)

SIGRIST: Well, good. Well, Mr. Carden, I want to thank you very much for filling us in on your grandfather and what he was like as a person and some of the highlights of his life. It's important information and I'm very happy that we got a chance to, to record it.

CARDEN: He was a very active man. He was self taught. He never went to college.

SIGRIST: And he was, was he proud of that? Was he proud of the fact that he was self taught?

CARDEN: No, I don't think so but I think he gave the impression that he really wanted to do it. And he was very, very conservative with money. And he had one of the first telephones put in, in his house. But he kept a very close watch to see if anybody was making long distance calls. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You said he was a progressive man. He was interested in automobiles and telephones and all the technology of that time. Well, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Dyas Carden on March 6th, I'm sorry, on September 22nd, 1994 here at the Ellis Island Studio. And we've been talking about Mr. Carden's father Godfrey Carden and his grandfather, Colonel John Weber. Thank you very much.