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MILLVINA DEAN (ELIZABETH GLADYS)

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ENGLAND, 1912

AGE NINE WEEKS

PASSAGE ON "THE TITANIC"

LEVINE: Today is May 18, 1995, and I am here at the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Millvina Dean, who would have arrived at Ellis Island in 1912, in April.

However, she and her mother and brother and father were traveling on the Titanic. And so this is really a first visit for you, Millvina, at Ellis Island.

DEAN: Yes, uh-huh.

LEVINE: And I want to say I'm absolutely delighted to have the chance to talk with you and to hear, it won't be firsthand, since you were nine weeks old, but I'm sure

you've lived with this story all your life, so you can recount, uh, your experience, or your family's experience, on The Titanic.

DEAN: Well, as I was only nine weeks old, obviously I don't remember anything. All I know is that, um, oh, by the way, we were immigrating to Kansas. And, um, all I remember is my father saying, when the Titanic struck the iceberg, he heard the crash, and he said, "I'm going up on deck to see what has happened." He came back down and said apparently the ship had struck an iceberg, get the children out of bed, and up on deck." So that is what happened. And my mother got into lifeboat number thirteen, and I followed. I was put over in a sack because I was too small for anybody to hold, and then after my mother was on the lifeboat she discovered that my brother wasn't there. But, of course, she couldn't do anything about it, because there were too many people in the lifeboat, and she had to look after me, and it was so cold. And as well as losing my father, of course, she was in a dreadful state about losing him, wondering where my brother was. Anyhow, when we arrived on the Carpathia there he was, somebody else had looked after him, so that

was quite a relief to her.

LEVINE: Well, let's start at the beginning. Do you know, did your mother ever tell you about why it was decided that the family would immigrate and go to Kansas?

DEAN: Well, apparently my father thought there was much more opportunity in America, and we had people there already, so he thought he would go, we left a small private hotel in London, and he thought he would go to Kansas and open a tobacconist shop. But, I don't know why a tobacconist shop. It seems rather odd, after a small hotel. Anyhow, that was the idea.

LEVINE: Do you mean to say that your father was the proprietor of a small hotel in London?

DEAN: Yes, but it was only a, only an extremely small, only an extremely small one.

LEVINE: And what was your father's name?

DEAN: Bertram, the same as my brother's name. My brother's name was Bertram Veer, and my father's name was just the, um, Bertram.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And your mother's name?

DEAN: Georgetta.

LEVINE: Georgetta. And what was your mother's maiden name?

DEAN: Light.

LEVINE: L-I-G-H-T?

DEAN: L-I-G-H-T.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And did you, um, let's see. Uh, do you remember, uh, why it was Kansas? Did . . .

DEAN: Oh, yes, because we had relations there.

LEVINE: I see.

DEAN: Oh, yes. We were going where they were. And apparently there was a house there for us awaiting us.

LEVINE: And, um, did your mother ever talk about, uh, other passengers on the Titanic?

DEAN: She hardly ever spoke about anything at all. I mean, it was all so absolutely awful for her. I mean, she lost a young, handsome husband, and so she hardly ever mentioned it at all. In fact, I wasn't brought up by the Titanic at all.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEAN: I had no, I never heard anything about it. People would say to me, "So you were on the Titanic." And I say, "Um, yes." And that was it. I never said anything else. And then it was only about seven or eight years ago I became involved.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you have any idea, then, maybe not, but did you know why, did your family, mother and father, want to go on the Titanic, particularly, since it was its maiden voyage?

DEAN: Well, it was purely a coincidence, really, because we were going on another ship, and then they, last minute, my father heard from the shipping line to say there's a vacancy, there's been a cancellation on the Titanic, would you like to go? And he thought, "Absolutely wonderful." And so he said to my mother, "Isn't it marvelous, we've been offered to go on the Titanic." So that was how we were on it. Otherwise we weren't supposed to go on there at all. So, fate.

LEVINE: And, um, let's see. Have you had contact with other passengers since, now?

DEAN: Survivors. Well, every time I went to a convention, usually I would meet some there. When I first went to America, to Boston, I met about nine others, or ten others, other survivors. The last time I went, '90, '92, there were four. This time I went to Los Angeles, and I was the only one. The others were either sick or, or unable to go, for some reason or other, but I was the only one there.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, do you recall what happened after the Carpathia picked up the survivors and coming to . . .

DEAN: New York.

LEVINE: Yes.

DEAN: Yes. Well, all I know is that we came on here to New York, stayed here for, I think, a week or two, after my mother partly recovered, I imagine, from the shock, and then we went back to England, but we went back to her parents' farm, my grandfather's farm, and stayed, lived there until I was eight years old. And then a vet came to look upon my grandfather's cows, saw my mother, and fell in love with her, and they got married. I mean, we left the farm and went back to his place in Southampton to live.

LEVINE: Oh. Uh-huh.

DEAN: So, I mean, it changed completely then from the country to a town.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Because Southampton was the town where the, uh, a lot of the crew members . . .

DEAN: Oh, yes, almost all of them came from there. Um, Southampton, yes.

LEVINE: Did you ever have any contact with them?

DEAN: No. I never heard, no. I never heard anything about any of them. But, well, in fact, then, at that time we didn't have any contact with anybody on the Titanic at all, because, as I said, my mother, well, she just didn't want to talk about it. So we didn't know any of them.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, do you have any sense of how, I mean, obviously the experience affected your whole life because your father did not survive. Is there anything else about that experience that you think has really colored your life?

DEAN: No, quite honestly, it hasn't affected me at all,

because I wasn't, I wasn't brought up with it at all.

I wasn't brought up with the Titanic. We lived in Southampton, and as well as my stepfather attending cows and horses, we would take in dogs and cats and any other kind of animals, when people were on holiday or anything, and so, uh, my interest, mostly, was on the animals and everything, and it was quite a big house, and we had stables and everything. It was a nice house. And my stepfather, first of all, we had a horse, a horse and trap. So we used to go in and out with the horse and trap. I mean, then I had so many other interests that I didn't ever think about the Titanic at all. Not until, as I said, eight years ago. Otherwise I hadn't, I'd never been brought up with it, and I had no interest.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

DEAN: Yes. I was old, I know.

LEVINE: Yeah, it does. Um, what was your grandfather's name?

DEAN: Light, like my mother's, you see.

LEVINE: And his first name?

DEAN: George.

LEVINE: George. And was your grandmother alive?

DEAN: Oh, yes, my grandmother was alive. She lived till '93.

LEVINE: Oh, and what was her name?

DEAN: Alice.

LEVINE: Alice. Do you happen to know her maiden name?

DEAN: No, I don't. That's funny. Norbrey[ph].

LEVINE: Norbrey[ph].

DEAN: Norbrey[ph]. Of course it was. Because that's the name of the people in, in Kansas, their relations in Kansas.

LEVINE: I see.

DEAN: Norbrey[ph].

LEVINE: And when you think back of that period of eight years, when you were on your grandparents' farm.

DEAN: Yes?

LEVINE: What are other things that you remember about that

time?

DEAN: Well, being quite happy there, because I liked farms, and having the pigs and the cows and everything. And, uh, it was a very nice old farmhouse. And mostly about dairy, milking the, milking the cows, and making the butter, and everything like that, all connected with the farm. Yes. It was really nice.

LEVINE: And, um, did you go to school then?

DEAN: Oh, yes. I went to school, only the little country school, the village school, because I remember, you see, I was five, my brother, then, was almost seven. So when we first went to the school, I went off with him, but I wouldn't leave him. I wouldn't go in the class for five years. I would scream my head off. So in the end I had to go with him as well to, to the older class, because I wouldn't, I wouldn't go. (she laughs) Dreadful creature.

LEVINE: So you must have been quite close with your brother?

DEAN: Yes, yes, then, I was. When we were, when we got older, it wasn't quite the same. We didn't, we were entirely opposites.

LEVINE: Hmm. What was he like as a child, and what were you like as a child?

DEAN: Uh, how do you mean? In appearance, or what?

LEVINE: In personality, and, uh . . .

DEAN: He was, he was reserved. He was very reserved, and as you probably can find, I was the opposite. Say, he was the introvert and I was the extrovert. Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh. And, uh, did he, did, do you think he was affected with the Titanic as sort of living the legend of the Titanic, or he didn't really . . .

DEAN: I don't think he, I don't think he was affected by it, but when the war was on, he worked with somebody in a shipyard, and he worked for one of the crew who happened to be on the Titanic, so then he became interested. So he was interested in it all the time. He got very interested. And he went to various places, and became an expert on Titanic. He went . . .

LEVINE: Oh.

DEAN: Yes, he was the one who was interested. I wasn't.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEAN: And, um, so he went more or less on his own. He hardly ever spoke about because, of course, as I said, my mother didn't want to hear about it, so he didn't ever, you know, say anything about it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How about, um, uh, let's see, are there any other anecdotes that, that you can recall related to this event, anything else that . . .

DEAN: That my mother might have said, you mean? Well, the only thing I remember my mother saying was that one person who was in the lifeboat was ever so upset, not because she had lost her husband, but she had lost her featherbed, and she was crying her eyes out because she had lost her . . . I think probably shock, yes. And that's the only thing I remember my mother saying, except that it was bitterly cold, and they were in the lifeboat for some hours, and how cold it was, and that's all I remember, I remember her saying, how hard it was to keep warm, to keep me warm. And then also on the way back, uh, I was, this was in the paper, I, the first and second class passengers were allowed to hold me for ten minutes each. They all wanted to hold

me, apparently, because I was the youngest, and there were pictures in the paper, I will have the paper with the picture in, of them holding me, and it said, "Baby Dean, this bundle of humanity, who was held by first and second class passengers." They were allowed ten minutes each to hold me.

LEVINE: This was on the Titanic.

DEAN: That was on the Adriatic on the way home.

LEVINE: Oh, on the way home.

DEAN: On the way back to England.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

DEAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So it was the Adriatic that took . . .

DEAN: Yes, took us home.

LEVINE: All of the Titanic survivors went back on the . . .

DEAN: No, I don't think they all went on the same ship. I don't think so. We were on that ship, but I don't think they all went on that one. I have a feeling they went on, there was one other one as well, but I

can't tell you what it was.

LEVINE: Well, do you think it was pretty, uh, prevalent that most of the people who survived the Titanic did not immigrate to the United States, that they actually went back?

DEAN: Came back again. I imagine so, because they didn't have anything, they had no money, they didn't have anything. Everything had gone down. All the money my mother, my father had saved up to buy the shop, of course, it all, everything went. So there was no point in people, well, especially us, going on to America, if we didn't have anything. The clothes, every single thing we had went down. So the only thing my mother thought for us to do was to go home again. And besides, she was so upset anyhow she didn't want to go on.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Well, is there anything else that you can think of, um, relevant to, well, maybe we could talk a little bit about after you left the farm. Then you went . . .

DEAN: Into Southampton to live with my stepfather.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And what was your stepfather's name?

DEAN: Leonard Burden.

LEVINE: B . . .

DEAN: U-R-D-E-N. And, um . . . (she clears her throat)
He was, he wasn't quite so old as my mother. He was a
bit younger than my mother. But, uh, as I say, it was
a very large house, and when I look back it was a very
happy time. Yes. Because I was more or less, I was
brought up with animals, you see, all the time, and at
holiday times, Christmas time, and that kind of thing,
people would come in with their dogs, and the very,
Christmas Eve, the very last, uh, about nine,
ten o'clock, they would come in with dogs, they hadn't
booked them in, and my stepfather would say, "I cannot
take any more. I'm full up now." And they said, "Oh,
you must, you've always taken my pussy or my doggie,"
or something or other. "You've always taken them.
You must take them." So what happened, on Christmas
day, we'd wake up, we'd go into the bathroom. "Grrr,
grrr," there's a dog. We'd go downstairs in the
kitchen, there's a dog. "Grrr, grrr, grrr." We'd go
in scullery, there's another dog. There were dogs and

cats all over the place, because these people would just not go away, or they'd push them in, they'd come to the front door, push them into the hall and said, "Oh, here's my dog." We'd say, "We can't take it. We hadn't room." "You must." And they'd just push the dog in, slam the door, or say, "We have a train to catch," and slam the door, and there we were left with the dog, cat or what have you. And the people would bring their dogs, cats, fish, goldfish, parrot, monkey. Oh, we had all kinds, we had all kinds of animals. And then, for a child, of course, it was lovely.

LEVINE: Can you remember what Christmas was like? I mean, how, how you celebrated it, and . . .

DEAN: Well, it was, we were mostly with animals, because we were all the time either feeding or exercising the animals. You see, it was only a day or two after that we seemed to have time for ourselves. But I remember going to my grandfather's in a horse and trap with my brother, and we sat in the back, and, um, a frosty night, and we were all wrapped around with rugs, moonshining. It was absolutely beautiful. I loved it.

LEVINE: Is a trap an open carriage?

DEAN: Oh, it's open. Oh, yes, it was all open. But we were, we were all wrapped around with rugs, and quite excited, going out to my grandmother's for a party with the other relations there, you see. And the piano was played, and we all went around and sang. And then we drove home again in the moonlight. It was quite lovely, yep.

LEVINE: You mentioned before that you, that you love music.

DEAN: I do love music.

LEVINE: Can you remember any, uh, anything about music and the part it played in your life growing up?

DEAN: Well, there was always, there was always music. At my grandmother's, there was a piano. My grandmother also played an organ, and then when we went in to Southampton to live, there was a piano again, so I was taught to play.

LEVINE: Oh, and do you play . . .

DEAN: Not now. I wasn't, I wasn't very good at playing, I'm afraid. And all my music teacher did was rap me on

the knuckles with a ruler if I made a mistake, and I made all sorts of mistakes. But I was, I was always brought up, I always loved music, and my friends, and we used to go to all the concerts, everything that was on, we would go to all the concerts and things because, as I say, I am passionately fond of music.

LEVINE: And how about dancing?

DEAN: No, I never, I wasn't any good as a dancer, because, I think, I was too, what was it? What is the word I mean? I imagined I couldn't dance. I had, I know, I wasn't confident at all. I, quite honestly, I had an inferiority complex. You might not believe it now, but I did. I had the most awful, and I was incredibly shy.

LEVINE: And what changed that?

DEAN: Well, it's only changed really in fairly recent years.
(she laughs) Yes.

LEVINE: Well, good.

DEAN: It's only really changed since I've been going around more, because I always had the most awful inferiority complex. I suppose it was odd, but, I mean, I was

always incredibly shy, because I was invited to parties, and I would pray not to be able to go to parties. I would pray to have anything rather than go to parties. You would hardly believe it, especially now, but, uh, that's how I was for absolutely years.

LEVINE: Hmm. How about religion? Was your family religious?

DEAN: Well, yes. Well, yes. We always went to, um, church.

LEVINE: What church was that?

DEAN: Well, it was one in Southampton, Church of England. Yes. Premettle[ph] Church, it was called. Yes. And they were, they were all, the whole family were brought up to be quite religious. But, mind you, I don't go to church much now. Um, but I still, I am still quite religious. Yes.

LEVINE: And so your mother, did you see a big change in your mother when she did remarry and start a new life?

DEAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, of course. She was happier. But I still remember having those headaches.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEAN: Yes. She still went on for a very long time having

awful headaches. She had to go to bed in the afternoons with these headaches. That went on for not an awfully long time after she married. Gradually they went, but at first she still had them.

LEVINE: Was that a migraine headache?

DEAN: Well, I suppose, thinking about it, I suppose it had to be, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Was this brought on after the . . .

DEAN: The Titanic.

LEVINE: Yes. Uh-huh.

DEAN: Oh, yes. And it went on for a very long time after the Titanic.

LEVINE: Were there any other ways in which you think your mother suffered as a result of the Titanic?

DEAN: I don't really think so. I think it was only having these headaches. I don't think so. Well, she never said anything, but then she probably wouldn't.

LEVINE: Okay. What kind of a person was your mother? How would you describe her?

DEAN: Very much, very much like me. She had, she had a good sense of humor, and, oh, yes, she was quite, she was quite fantastic. And she wouldn't ever complain about anything. And she'd take everything, she was quite, uh, broad-minded, especially, you know, for those days, when some of the people weren't so broad-minded, she was very broad-minded, and she got on with everybody. Yes. She was a very nice and attractive person.

LEVINE: Did she have other children after she remarried?

DEAN: No, no. She didn't, no, she didn't have anybody any more. She was, when she got married, she was thirty, thirty-nine, possibly? But she didn't have any more children. My stepfather would probably have liked it, because he was very fond of children, but, uh, but he hadn't been married before either, and he must have been thirty-five or something? He hadn't been married before.

LEVINE: So how were you in relation to your stepfather?

DEAN: Oh, I got on very well with him. Well, then, I'm easy, but my brother didn't get on quite so well with him. If ever he wanted anything, if we wanted

anything, if we wanted fireworks for a fireworks display, I had to be the one to ask my stepfather. Will I ask him this, will I ask him that. Because my brother, he wasn't, he wasn't scared of him, but he just wouldn't ask for anything. I had to do the asking all the time. But, uh, when I look back, my stepfather was really awfully good to us. Yes. Yes, quite honestly, he was. He made a very good stepfather. And he loved playing games with us.

LEVINE: What kind of games? Do you recall?

DEAN: Absolutely anything at all he'd play. We had quite a big lawn, so we had a croquet set, and we would play that. And then indoor games, any kind of card games, any kind of children's games, Snakes and Ladders, absolutely anything. If it was a game, he'd play it. Football, up and down the drive, we used to play, and break the kitchen window. (they laugh)

LEVINE: What's Snakes and Ladders?

DEAN: Uh, on a board. It's a board game, and a dice, you know? I expect you had that kind of thing, but you probably called it something different.

LEVINE: Maybe.

DEAN: Yes. Mmm.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, and how old was your brother, then, when the Titanic sailed?

DEAN: Oh, he was under two.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEAN: He was a year and nine months older than me.

LEVINE: I see. So he, did he, he couldn't have remembered anything either.

DEAN: No, no, he didn't remember anything either. No, he was too small.

LEVINE: Yeah. And do you know if he had associations, once he became interested in the Titanic, with other people who were connected with it. Do you know?

DEAN: No, I'm sure he didn't. The only ones he became connected with were the . . .

LEVINE: Crew.

DEAN: No, not the crew, just this one man was on the crew.

LEVINE: Oh.

DEAN: He worked with. Oh, no, nobody else. And, and he didn't get around until he belonged to these, what society did he belong to first? It must have been an all English one I think, or an American one. I don't know. But that was, those were the only people he became connected with, not anybody from the ship.

LEVINE: I see.

DEAN: No.

LEVINE: Okay. Um, let's see if there's anything else that we haven't covered. Uh, well, it's been said about the Titanic that it shattered, the sinking shattered faith of an age. Have you read that, that somehow that episode changed . . .

DEAN: Well, no. No, I haven't, I haven't, I haven't read that. But I believe that you can't go, I still believe that, that you can't go against the forces of nature. I think now that they say could anything like that ever happen again, or anything, yes, I'm sure it could, because it's sort of going against, well, religion, God, isn't it? It's making out that you are

more, uh, smarter than anything at all. And I think that's wrong. They all ask me if I think anything could happen, planes, anything. And I said, "Yes, any of it could happen again." I don't believe anything is impregnable.

LEVINE: Do you think you have any other attitudes that stem out of this episode, that sort of have influenced the way you think about life, or . . .

DEAN: No, no. I don't think so for one moment. No. It hasn't had, I hasn't had the slightest effect on me. It would have done, probably if I'd known my father, then I think it would have changed me, but as I didn't know him, of course, it really didn't have any effect.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you can think of that we maybe haven't covered that you'd like to mention?

DEAN: I don't really think so, because, as I say, all my life I wasn't, I wasn't interested. It's only in the recent years I've become involved with all these things that are happening, conventions and things. And I belong to so many societies now, about six or seven societies I belong to. Two Irish ones, a Swiss

one, a Canadian one, two American ones, one English one. And I hear from people, of course, all over the world. So many people are so interested. They write to me from all over the world.

LEVINE: And what kinds of things do they, do they write about to you?

DEAN: They write, first of all, they write and ask me, you know, how old I was, and all of that, the Titanic. And then they ask me what my interests are, and all that kind of thing, and it's all depending because, people say, "Well, what can you write about?" But it's amazing, you can write about all kinds of things once you start. And they get very interested, and they tell you all about what they're doing, their lives. And then you tell them what you're doing, where you're going, and all about it, and you can go on for ages. Right, well, I've been writing to a young South African for ages now.

LEVINE: Wow.

DEAN: He's the longest one, I think. I mean, oh, and Americans. As I say, I write to people all over the world, and they want, um, photographs, mostly. Yes.

Well, I send them my photograph. And they send me things to autograph. Will I autograph this. And so there's always an interest.

LEVINE: Well, it seems as though the Titanic disaster, at this point, is enriching your life.

DEAN: Oh, it is. Oh, it is, because I meet people. And I've always been interested in people, anybody, every nationality. I've always been interested in them. So, of course, and I'm interested in them, and they're interested in me. So it really is awfully nice. And I get, uh, television people coming to my home. The last time the Japanese came, five Japanese came, could they interview me. And they, they came to my home, five of them. And I've only got a very small bungalow, so they rather filled it up with all their . . . (she laughs) All their television things on them. But, yes, I find it all interesting. And speaking to all these people from all over the world. I really enjoy it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. So, um, then your, your old age is being, uh . . .

DEAN: Enriched.

LEVINE: Enriched. Wonderful.

DEAN: Yes, quite definitely.

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Well, I want to thank you so much.
It's been a real pleasure. I'm so happy to have met
you, and been able to talk with you.

DEAN: Well, it's really nice speaking to you, too.

LEVINE: Well, thank you. So I think we'll sign off here.

DEAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And this is May 18, 1995.

DEAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: I'm here with Millvina Dean in the Oral History Studio
at Ellis Island, and this is Janet Levine for the
National Park Service signing off.

DEAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Thank you.