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CHARLES LEMONICK
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LEVINE: Today is August 29th, 1995 and I am here in the Ellis Island Oral History studio with Charles Bennett [PH] Lemonick, who has been a volunteer here and has worked with us in the—in the—on the oral history project but has also volunteered in other phases or aspects of—of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm very happy that we agreed to do this interview, because this is the first interview we've done with a volunteer that I'm aware of. And it might be good to just get a history of your volunteering. So maybe—

LEMONICK: Okay.

LEVINE: —if we could start with when you started to volunteer and what you were doing in the beginning.

LEMONICK: I started to volunteer in March, actually March 30th. I know that because that's my anniversary. March 30th, 1992. And I started here working in the library. I was doing all of the grunt work in the library.

There are also at least a hundred-some odd scrapbooks, which I made a database on. It is now here for posterity. I've also created a database of the census. I upgraded the 1980 census, which you have downstairs on the People in—of America exhibit. It has now been updated to 1990. I don't think it has been computerized yet but all the figures are here. I also have done work down at the desk at the information desk, which I happen to love dearly.

LEVINE: What do you like about it?

LEMONICK: I love meeting the people. I've heard so many stories that I can relate to from people that either have been here, or people that have had relatives coming through here or friends coming through here. And I absolutely love it. I love talking to the children. My only regret is that there is no exhibit that is primarily geared to the children. And as you know, we have so many children coming through here, not only with parents but also as groups from schools or in the summertime from the day camps.

LEVINE: Have you brought that to anyone who might be in a position to—

LEMONICK: Yes, I have and they say it's a good idea. But so far—I guess the wheels of government move very slowly.

LEVINE: Well, how was it that you came to volunteer here, in particular?

LEMONICK: Well, in 1990, when I left my place of employment, I sort of started taking it easy. My wife and I have always loved the national parks. We have made it our life goal to try to visit all of them. So far, we've been to at least 250 of the 368, and they keep adding everyday. And I said to my wife that, "As long as I'm going to take early retirement, if I get to the point where I'm bored, what I will do is seek volunteer work and it will have to be in the national park system. This is primarily because of my love of the national parks. And I feel it's like payback for all the many, many days of pleasure that I've gotten. And living in New Jersey, there are really only two national park facilities that are available. One is Ellis Island, or the Statue of Liberty, and the other is the Edison Memorial, or the Ed—Edison National Monument, which is, believe it or not, closer to me. But I felt that Ellis Island or the Statue of Liberty would give me a more—an interesting variety of things to do. And I'm not sorry I've done it.

LEVINE: When did your interest in the National Park Service start? Or what were the circumstances?

LEMONICK: I would have to say it has to be at least 15 or 20 years ago. My wife and I, we—you know, we used to go away on vacations. And in the beginning, my wife's concept was to go away for two weeks to one place. My concept was to move around. I love to travel. I have not seen the entire United States. My concept of going overseas is probably no further than Canada. I have no desire to visit Europe. I've been to Asia during the Korean War.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: So therefore, to me it was a natural extension when you travel, invariably, you're going to see a natural—a national park facility. And this is what happened. And I began collecting all of the brochures from the various national park facilities that we've been to. And this is—this is our love. We don't take a vacation, or we very rarely take a vacation that does not include at least one facility.

LEVINE: What were you doing before you retired? What kind of work?

LEMONICK: Well, I was in the field of marketing research. I was a—I was the number three man in the company. And more and more with the latest business regulations and everything, I became more involved in finance to the administration and got further away from my field of marketing research. I was conducting primary research through questionnaires, focus groups, one-on-one interviews. And this is something that I loved. Our company was sold and it was resold. And the second time we were told that the new company's policy was to rid themselves of management as quickly as possible. And being I was part of management, I was let go in 1990 in January. And I remember the date very specifically, January 11th, because my wife and I, every January 11th, we want to be in Las Vegas as a anniversary memento. I was fired right before we were to go on vacation and this is the reason we perpetuated it over the years.

LEVINE: Hmm. So [clears throat] do you have any sort of favorite projects or things that you've done here at Ellis Island?

LEMONICK: Well, yes. [clears throat] I have two favorite projects. One is completed. I don't think it will ever go any further than what I've done, simply because of budgetary constraints. And that was I put together almost 60 or 70, 000 newspaper clippings in a database, which could be put onto microfilm, which could be used for any researcher wanting to look up at the time of the restoration of the statue and also of the restoration of Ellis Island. This goes from about 19—I guess 1984 through 1986. And then of course, as you know, I am deeply involved in the oral histories. I absolutely find them so fascinating. And it

starts triggering my memory of my childhood and my growing up. I would consider myself really first generation American born. My mother came from Russia. My father, although he was born in the United States, his parents, from what I understand, came from—they're Flemish so I guess it was be Flanders or Alsace-Lorraine, someplace around the Belgian, German border.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So did your mother actually come through Ellis Island?

LEMONICK: My mother did come through Ellis Island. She came from Russia. As a matter of fact, my grandfather, her father, came into the United States from Russia with two of my uncles, one of whom I knew. The other had died before I was born. As a matter of fact, I'm named—my middle name, Bennett is—I'm named after him. His name is Benjamin. The—when my grandfather came with the two boys, they came primarily to avoid conscription in the Russian Army. My grandmother followed and she came—it had to be with at least three or four of the seven children. My mother at that time, I believe, was about six years old. And I do know that my uncle, my last remaining uncle right now, came through when he was about one or two. And I would place this about 1907 when they came through.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: Of course, I never had the opportunity of speaking to my mother about her experiences. And this was a shame and, obviously, hindsight is better than foresight. And I would have loved to now have the opportunity after my involvement here with the oral history to go back and interview her. Unfortunately, it—it never happened. As a child, though, it's interesting in that I have been to Ellis Island at least two or three times prior to my volunteering here. The last time is prior to it closing in 1954. As a child, we grew up in Brooklyn and there were, like, seven of us. We called us the "magnificent seven" or the "lucky seven," and even had red and black sweaters. Those were—that was the thing in those days. And we had one of the fathers who was almost like a scoutmaster. And he used to take the seven of us throughout the New York area. And Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island was one of our—one of our stops, as well as Lower Manhattan. I still remember our trip to Francis [PH] Tavern, which was, in those days, unheard of. The—the interest that this man had in the seven of us, I think, really laid the groundwork for the future of all seven, although I'm not in contact with them anymore. I think as you start getting married, each one tends to go their own way with their wives. And this is what happened to us. But I remember with us there was—all seven of us were college graduates. Yeah.

LEVINE: When did you begin with going on these trips and this man taking an interest in you?

LEMONICK: Probably around the age of seven or eight.

LEVINE: Wow.

LEMONICK: I remember it because he was also involved in our Cub Scout pack. I went through the normal—I guess the normal childhood of being a Cub Scout as well as a Boy Scout. So therefore, this was part of our involvement in the community. The—I think it's—I think it was—he, basically, was the one who got us interested in seeing the sights and learning about the history. And his—from—from that point on, history was always one of my keen subjects.

LEVINE: How long did this continue, that you would go around together?

LEMONICK: Probably up until the age 14. I remember we went from Cub Scouts into the Boy Scouts and I was in the Boy Scouts. At that point, I believe you had to be 12 years old. And I remember being in there at least two more years past my 12th birthday. I remember starting high school and still being a Boy Scout.

LEVINE: Oh, yeah. So did you go to any National Parks with—with your—

LEMONICK: No.

LEVINE: —with this man?

LEMONICK: No, it was all—it was all geared to the local New York area. We never had the opportunity of traveling outside of New York. As a matter of fact, the first time I left the New York area was when I went into the Army and I was stationed down in Columbus, Georgia.

LEVINE: Hmm. So [clears throat] when you came here in 1954, you were already older than 14.

LEMONICK: Oh, yeah.

LEVINE: You ha—who did you—how—what—what about that trip?

LEMONICK: The—what brought about that trip was the—I had just gotten out of the Army. I was in Korea and I came out of the Army in 1953. And one of—one of my friends, or one of my acquaintances in the Army was a Japanese American [unclear]. And we had come back from Korea together and he was talking about his relatives. And he had

mentioned San Francisco as a port of entry for his relatives. And I had mentioned Ellis Island as a port of entry for my mother. And I thought at that point—I said, "Gee, I would love to—I would love to see what actually happened." And I remember coming back to Ellis Island prior to 1954. I mean, and it was virtually decimated. It was—it was like a shambles. And to see—

LEVINE: How did you get here?

LEMONICK: We came here—we came here by boat. It was a private boat at that time. A friend of mine from the—as I said, this friend of mine from the Army lived in New Jersey. And we had—we had been in touch with one another. And he says he has a boat. Why didn't we go out on—take a boat ride on New York harbor. And we did and he said, "Oh, let's stop off at Ellis Island." And at that point, we were able to. I don't know whether it was legal at that point.

LEVINE: Did you come into the slip? Is that how you came in?

LEMONICK: We came—no, we came through what is now the back where the parking lot is right now. And—

LEVINE: By the bridge?

LEMONICK: No, no. Well, it's—yeah, it was around the bridge. In other words, this is the [unclear]—the closest point to New Jersey. And at that point, basically, we scrambled up the side and then we were walking around. At that point, I didn't know whether—you know, I didn't know that there were three islands, as I do now. And I—we did see—we did see the—the Great Hall. And we never got over to the other islands because it was—the undergrowth in the bushes was just not conducive to walking around.

LEVINE: What struck you about—about the place when you—when you saw it that time?

LEMONICK: Really nothing, other than—other than a desolated area. I don't think I really appreciated the meaning of Ellis Island until I began doing volunteer work here. And when you start realizing the stories and what people had to go through, and you try to relate that to your own experience it's very difficult. I mean, basically, we led a very sheltered life compared to the original immigrants that came through here in the early 1900s. I mean, we would never think of, you know—we grew up in an area, for example, where virtually all my aunts and uncles and cousins, with the exception of—of one aunt and one uncle, lived within a three-block radius of one another. So therefore, to just pick up and

move, we would never think of doing it. As a matter of fact, when we got married, my wife and I, we sort of still lived in New York but we moved from—we moved to Queens. And I remember the day when we moved from Queens to—for me to get a job opportunity in Philadelphia, which, Philadelphia is, like, 90 miles away. Well, I remember her parents and my mother thought we were moving to the other end of the world. And so being here at Ellis Island and listening, reading the stories of these people, the way they just picked up and left and came over here, I think you—I think you now get the full meaning. I wouldn't consider these people immigrants. I consider them pioneers. I mean, our pi—what we learn in history, our pioneers going across country, this was nothing compared to what these people came from Europe. At least, the majority of our people, our pioneers had a basic—a basic ability to communicate. They had a language that they could communicate in, other than perhaps with the Indians. But, I mean, here people—people were coming over and not being able to talk. Not being a—not being able to communicate with one another, I think, made it even harder. I think some of the m—foray—mores and folkways had to be mind-boggling to these people. We would—we would never think of that right now, you know. Our children, in many cases, when they get married they move away. We've been very fortunate. Now, our children live very close by us. My oldest daughter lives about a mile and a half from us. My youngest daughter lives 20 minutes and my son lives about—just about an hour. So therefore, the family is really very, very close, which is unusual. In the old days, when the immigrants came here, this is what happened, especially, I would—I would say some of the Jewish people that had lived in Central Europe, Russia, Poland—these people that probably lived and experienced the pogroms, came to the United States and they all tended to live together. In other words, they devel—they really transported, I feel, the ghetto from Europe to a ghetto here in the United States. And many of the interviews that I've been able to go through sort of confirm that.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: So this was—this was, to me, a—what I thought of Ellis Island in those days, you know, was a place to visit that was a "historical place." But I never fully realized the meaning of it until I began volunteering here.

LEVINE: Yeah. Are there any other kinds of things or particulars about the oral history transcripts that you've been working with that reverberate for you, personally?

LEMONICK: Oh, yes. There are many stories. I think one—one of the stories was I had read about a person that left Germany and came to the United

States through San Francisco but through China. And they had mentioned the name of the ship that they left Hawaii from to come into the United States. And this was 1948 when they left and they were on a ship called the General Meigs—M-E-I-G-S. And that same ship was the ship that took me back home from Korea in 1953. That was one of the incidents. The other incident is that (I guess it must have been several months ago) we had the opportunity of interviewing a person by the name of Arthur Tracy [PH], who was the original street singer. And Arthur Tracy—I began listening to his tape and it brought back so many memories to me. He talked about a cantor that was—that had taught him in terms of singing. And I grew up hearing about this cantor. He taught the—he recorded a song dedicated to his mother on his—on a—I guess it was his mother's birthday. I forget the title of the song. But my mother, who was an aspiring singer in her youth, used to sing that song to my grandmother. And I—I will remember that song for many, many years. So these were some of the stories. And then there are other little nuances that—of places in Brooklyn where I grew up that I remember.

LEVINE: That are mentioned in the interviews.

LEMONICK: Oh, yeah, that are mentioned in these—in these oral history interviews. And the—the things that they—that they speak about were not foreign to me. I mean, I grew up with them. So therefore, in many cases, I start remembering. Based on these oral history interviews that we have, I start remembering my growing up and my experiences and they weren't far different.

LEVINE: Do you think—do you have any sense that, having read all this material, has redefined in some way your early experiences with your mother, with your family—

LEMONICK: Oh, yes. Yes, definitely. My early experiences—to begin with, I didn't appreciate my mother until I got out of the Army. And this was in 1953. So therefore, I got out—this was 22 years. My father had died three months before I was born. So basically, my mother was the one that was mother and father to me. And she provided literally everything I ever wanted. So therefore, I grew up to be a spoiled brat. I—we lived—my mother and I lived with my grandparents. My grandparents at that point—my grandfather had been retired and we lived in a single home, which again, is somewhat unheard of. My mother's brothers and sisters all got together. And it was their intention that they would pay for the house and the upkeep and everything like that, in exchange for my mother being there for my grandparents. So therefore, I grew up sort of as the favorite of my grandparents. And I was like the black—it seems like the black sheep

of the family because I was the favorite grandson, or I was the favorite grandchild. And—

LEVINE: You mean by the rest of the family?

LEMONICK: By the rest of the family. And yet, I turned out to be the first one in the family that went to college. Although I did have at least three cousins that were older than I was, I was the first one that went through college.

LEVINE: Well, you said earlier that you—you didn't really appreciate your mother. Now—until you got out of the Army. So how did your idea of your mother change then? And then has it changed since you've been working with all this material that sort of—

LEMONICK: Well—

LEVINE: —makes you reconsider her?

LEMONICK: [chuckles] The—my mother was a Mero [PH] machine operator. And I don't know how to spell the word Mero. It's like a sewing machine operator in the lady's garment industry. And she used to do things—I think my mother was probably light years—although, you know, she was an immigrant herself, I think she was light years—she became Americanized so fast that she was light years ahead of her generation. For example, she was the one who taught me how to ride a bicycle. She was the one who taught me how to roller-skate. And I remember in my grandparents' house I learned how to roller-skate in the basement. I remember many—many is the time my mother used to fall down. My mother made sure I literally had as much as she could provide. I really took advantage of her because I didn't know any better. My mother, for—afterward, I found out my mother many times used to go to work and she used to have cardboard in her—in her shoes where she had holes so that I could have the best. I remember, as a child, I went away to sleep-away camp. And as I got older I also went to day camp. So therefore, I was literally spoiled rotten. And I didn't appreciate my mother, as I said, until I got out of the Army. At that point, my grandparents had died, so that we were living alone. My mother—as I said, I think now [clears throat] that I'm a grandparent, I appreciate—I—I can look back and say, "I wish my mother was here yet." My mother had a favorite expression. She used to crook her finger, or point a finger and she used to say a Yiddish word, Gdenk [PH], which is—which means "remember" or the literal translation means to remember. But what it really meant is, "Just wait until you become a parent and you become a grandparent." And to this day, I'm now a grandparent of three grandchildren. And I

re—I know with my oldest, who has two, I constantly crook my finger, my index finger and I say to my children, "Gdenk."

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: So—and this—I think some of the ways that my mother became Americanized so fast—we grew up. My grandparents were ultra orthodox. And they did not speak of a word of English. It was Yiddish. And consequently, my mother, who was an aspiring singer, grew up in a neighborhood with the Ritz [PH] Brothers, who were a famous troop of act—of comedians, actually. Needless to say, my grandfather, being so religious, my mother's aspiration of a singer went down the tube. No way does he see a—his child becoming a singer. So my mother, on the outside, for example, learned how to eat bacon, which was a no-no as far as my grandparents were concerned. And consequently, I began picking it up from my mother. My mother went to, literally, all the shows. And she did that virtually all her life. She went to all the Broadway shows. This was one of her fetishes, to go to all the Broadway shows. And to give you an idea of how Americanized and how many light years she is ahead of her time, when I was in Korea she began hearing about the soldiers going out with the Orientals, with the Japanese or the Korean women and getting VD. And so, consequently, my mother sent me a little package of condoms.

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEMONICK: And she said, "Be sure to wear your raincoat at all times."

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

LEMONICK: This—this was unheard of in those days.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, how—do you think you have reworked your experiences with your mother as a result of reading all this material that's so very closely—

LEMONICK: Yes.

LEVINE: —connected?

LEMONICK: Yes. It's not only with my mother but also with my grandparents. My grandfather was what they call a gabbi [PH] in the local synagogue. And a gabbi, I guess, is the equivalent of a deacon. But he was, like,

one of the unofficial officials. And I remember my grandparents and my grandfather, in particular, was a man of, I guess, around six foot, two. And my grandmother was, like, four foot, ten. But yet, my grandmother was able to control my grandfather. I mean, all she had to do was raise her finger and my grandfather said, "Yes, dear." And my grandfather used to take me as a child to the Yiddish theaters on the Lower East Side on Second Avenue. And I saw many of the old actors and actress—actresses. I always remember Molly Pecan [PH] and I remember—I remembered Arthur Tracy. So therefore, when I found out, number one, that he was alive and I've sort of now become a—a reincarnated Arthur Tracy fan again. So, yeah, the—all of these—h—all of these oral histories relate or make me relate to my childhood and my growing up, so that all of these things—and, unfortunately, I watch the children today. And they didn't have what we had. We didn't have all of the material things that they have today. But we were able to do things that they cannot do today. For example, in Brooklyn we grew up playing what they called stickball or stoopball. Well, now, there are no stoops so therefore, out—out in suburbia they can't play stoopball. They certainly won't play in the street. I mean, that's taboo. And we used to make do—I think we appreciated the material things more. And this is really—listening to these, or working on these oral history interview, has, you know—I can literally place myself at the scene of where these people are. I mean, these people that came over in the early 1900s, that—oh, that may be a little too far. But the people that came over in the 1920s, this is only one decade away from where I was and where I grew up. Believe it or not, I still remember the Triangle Shirt fire. And the reason I remember that is my mother was in that type of industry. I remember my mother with the sweatshops and that which you constantly hear through these interviews. My mother—I remember my mother used to be a pieceworker. And she used to come home and she used to have these little tags of all the bundles of clothes that she used to do. And it was my job; I used to add them up for her. So she learned how to speak English very, very well. As a matter of fact, she was one of seven children. And they—all the children never had the opportunity of getting past elementary school because they went out to work. My youngest uncle, they decided that he was going to go as far as he wanted through school at—in other words, at their expense. Well, my uncle today is a retired high school principal from New York City. He has a CPA and he also has a law degree. He got into teaching in 1931 during the height of the Depression where he couldn't get a job as a CPA or as a lawyer. So he became a teacher. And the—watching my uncle today, I was a—I'm able to relive a lot through him. I've learned more—believe it or not, working here at Ellis Island has made me more interested in my family roots than ever before. And it's just been the last several years I found out that my

mother's maiden name was legally changed from Malovitsky—M-A-L-O-V-I-T-Z-K—or S-K-Y to Mallow—M-A-L-L-O-W. I had never known that.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEMONICK: This is—I also have, for example, my uncle. I've asked him to take a tape recorder and just randomly record whatever he wants. One thing, let me just go back a little bit. When I was a child, as I said, my father died three months before I was born and my mother never remarried until after I was married. And I used to think that my uncle, my Uncle Irving, was my father.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: As a matter of fact, I couldn't—I remember the time he got married in my grandparents' house. And I remember I was upstairs and I was on the banister and I was watching this. And I began carrying on because I couldn't understand why he was getting married to another woman and there was my mother. It—and that—that was the time when I first found out that my father had died before I was born.

LEVINE: You mean, you literally thought he was your father?

LEMONICK: Yes.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEMONICK: Yes. I grew up—I grew up that way. Because he was al—he, at that point, was not married so, therefore, he was living at home. So he was always around.

LEVINE: Is he the one that became the high school principal?

LEMONICK: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEMONICK: Yes. The—and I learned—believe it or not, my interest in reading I learned from a—an aunt of mine, my mother's sister-in-law, who lived across the street from us, and she was a very voracious reader. And I learned how to read from her. She was the one who used to take me to the library. And to this day, I have now—I probably have, I'd say, close to 600 books in the house. I just love to read. And I now—at least am now seeing the pleasure of watching my eldest grandchild, my granddaughter, who you met—

LEVINE: Right.

LEMONICK: —the same way.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: We love to read and she constantly tells me, "Grandpa, I've done this." And, "Grandpa, I've done this." But growing up in Brooklyn, these are places that I remember. I remember all of the places that these immigrants talk about. And it—it really—the experiences that these people went through, I experienced. For example, we grew up in Brooklyn in a mixed Jewish, Italian neighborhood. My grandparents, who couldn't speak a word of English, and a friend of mine and his parents, who was Italian, couldn't speak a word of English. Neither one could speak the other's language. But that—yet, they were able to communicate, which now is mind-boggling how they were able to do it. My grandfather probably went to his grave thinking that my friend, Frank's sister was Jewish, because she was able to talk to him in Yiddish and also played pinochle with him. So I pro—

LEVINE: But she was Italian.

LEMONICK: She was Italian. I probably, up until the time I was in the Army, I never failed to make a midnight mass every Christmas, simply because this was the thing. You went—you respected each other's backgrounds, plus, of course, my friend Frank's grandparents used to make—his grandfather used to make homemade anisette—

LEVINE: [chuckles]

LEMONICK: —which was like white lightening. And the grandmother used to make these butter—these Italian butter cookies. And we used to look forward to that.

LEVINE: Well, did Frank's sister speak Yiddish because she learned it from being around—

LEMONICK: She learned it from being around all of us. Again, keep in mind that all of us, the children—the grandparents were virtually all around at the time. In other words, there were very few that didn't have grandparents.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

LEMONICK: Grandparents, needless to say, never spoke a word of English. They're all—they were able to communicate with one another in either Yiddish, in Italian. And yet, I don't ever recall my grandfather speaking an Italian word or Frank's grandfather speaking a Yiddish word. I mean, they would conver—la, la, lum and they were able to understand one another.

LEVINE: Do you remember any of your relatives, or even your friend's relatives—any attitudes that they expressed about being American?

LEMONICK: Yes, I remember—I remember my mother. My mother—my mother cried every time she heard the "Star Spangled Banner." And that simply—I think she became Americanized so fast that she—she thought that the United States was *the* place. She never considered herself anything but an American. She never considered herself—even though she—even though we're Jewish, she never considered herself—she considered herself an American and then a Jew or an American Jew, never a Jewish American. And even to this day, it's rubbed off on me. Although I'm Jewish, I have no desire to ever see Israel. I—yeah, I can empathize with them but, I mean, what happens over there happens over here. And yet, I'm still an American. So, yeah, they—they became Americanized. They thought of the United States as—as the place. And ironically, one of my friends, his father used to think that the world was c—everything should—should be coming to him. I remember when I went into the service and I went to Korea and I was wounded in Korea. And I came back. His son went into the service but never went overseas to a combat zone. And he couldn't understand why I went to school under the Disabled Veterans Law where the government paid for everything and his son didn't. And I remember he used to call me a comminis because he couldn't say communist. The—the—these are people that became highly American conscious. They told—I never heard my—I never—I, you know—knowing that we were going to do this interview, obviously, I was thinking and thinking and thinking. And I can never recall my grandparents—I can never recall my aunts and uncles ever saying, "Gee, I wish I was back in the Old Country." Never once heard that said. As an interesting sideline, there was a person who grew up in our neighborhood. The grandfather was a World War I flyer ace, except he was in the German Army. He was a German ace who had shot down, I think something like 30—20 or 30 American and allied planes. And he was over here. And when he came here he used to be able to talk about his World War I experiences. But he always regretted—now that he was here, he always regretted that he was not an American. And the pride that these people had, I think—I think the—today, the people do not have the pride in our country that the immigrants had.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, thinking back now from—from your perspective now, I mean, you were, like, a Cub Scout and a Boy Scout—

LEMONICK: Right.

LEVINE: And then you were in the Army and now you're volunteering at a national park. Like, could you say how those—how those experiences, which are traditionally American male experiences, c—could you say how they—how you think of them now?

LEMONICK: Well, I—

LEVINE: How do you think about being a Boy—having been a Boy Scout? Did that—

LEMONICK: Well, I think it's the greatest—

LEVINE: Did that affect you in some way?

LEMONICK: Yeah, I—I—I thi—

LEVINE: In your personality and—

LEMONICK: Yes, I think—I think that's the greatest thing in the world. My—my one disappointment in my son was that he became a Cub Scout, and my one disappointment is the fact that I remember we went on an overnight hike together. And he became petrified and that ended his involvement with the scouting movement. And that sort of destroyed me because I used to look forward. I said, "Boy, I'm going to take my son and we're going to go camping and we're going to do this." And it never materialized.

LEVINE: What do you—what impact do you think it had on you, being a—being a Boy Scout?

LEMONICK: Well, I think one—one—I think it had many, many impacts. One, it gave me the ability of doing things, of—for example, while it may sound trite in terms of tying knots or building a campfire or cooking or doing—it gave me the ability of thinking. It gave me the ability of doing things. And I think it also taught me self-reliance. And that was later born out when I went from Cub Scouts to the Boy Scouts and even then when I went into the Army. Again, keep in mind, when I went into the Army I had never been away from home. And here I was, a nice Jewish boy, grew up in Brooklyn, who now had to go down to Fort Dix first, which wasn't bad, with Fort Dix being in New

Jersey. And my mother was able to come to visit me and I—I used to come home on a pass. But then I then had to go to Fort Benning, Georgia. And this is 1952. My first experience getting off the plane in Columbus, Georgia was when I saw black bathrooms, white bathrooms, black drinking fountains, white drinking fountains. And this was culture shock to me. So consequently, being—this was the—also, the learning experience of the Boy Scout, enabling me to be self-reliant, to be—to give me the ability of being with other children, being with other people and being in what I would consider a leadership role. This taught me—this taught me how to be a—for lack of a better word, an executive. My training goes back to the Cub Scouts and the Boy Scouts.

LEVINE: And how about the Army? How—how did that affect you?

LEMONICK: Well—

LEVINE: Personally. How do you think of that experience now as it affected you?

LEMONICK: In short, I would have paid a million dollars to go through it. Now, that I've been through it, I wouldn't take a million dollars to do it again. It was an experience. And again, this—this directly relates to the—to your previous question in terms of how people felt about America. When the Korean War broke out in 1950—it was June I believe, of 1950—there was still a draft going on. And consequently, everybody—now, we didn't say, you know, "Why are we going to Korea?" Or we didn't know where Korea was. But the government said, "We need people." And so therefore, I knew I was going to be drafted and I said to my mother that maybe I ought to try to enlist in the Navy. My mother said, "Oh, by all means. You know, you got to—you got to go to preserve this country." And she, herself, never knew where Korea was. So therefore, the Navy rejected me because I had had hepatitis the year before and I mentioned it. Needless to say, they rejected me. So I said, "Okay. I'll go to the Army." And I wouldn't tell them about my hepatitis. And what happened was I went to the Army. I was one of the last people to go in—into the Army as what they called a "contract person." In other words, I did all my physical and mental testing and everything like that prior to my going into the Army. I was under a contract with the Army where I either became an officer or else I was reverted back to civilian life. Because at that point, "all the so-called intelligencia was not going into the Army." And I took all—believe it or not, I took all my testing over here at Fort J, which is Governor's Island.

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEMONICK: Which was the headquarters of First Army. And then I went into the Army and I knew exactly where I was supposed to go because of this contract. I knew I was going through basic training in Fort Dix and leadership school in Fort Dix and then officer's candidate school in Fort Benning, Georgia. And that's exactly what happened. So therefore, I knew—I felt an obligation that if my country was at war, and I used to say it was at war even though it was not officially declared as a war—I knew if my country was at war I had to go. And to this day, I still—it's funny. I still feel that if an American is killed, we should kill. It's—it's maybe unconscionable today. I remember one of the rangers and I had a little to-do. We were talking about Korea and I said that as long as we were—we were losing people (and we lost as many people in Korea almost as we did in Vietnam) that we finally have a Korean Memorial in Washington. It took all these years. But my re—my reaction is, "Hey, drop the bomb. If it's going to save our lives, drop the bomb." And, "Oh, how can you do that?" And I felt that strongly. I still feel that strongly about the United States. There's no question in my mind that if my son had to go, would I ever send him to Canada? Or would I ever send him away like they did in the Vietnam War? No way would I ever do that.

LEVINE: Do you—can you draw any lines of associations, I guess, or memories between your mother and your family's attitudes about being American, your—your Boy Scout days, your Army days and now, you're—you're working here as a volunteer at this national monument? I mean, is—is there anything that runs through all those experiences?

LEMONICK: Yeah. The—what runs through all of those experiences is that this is part of my heritage. This is part of my culture. This is part of my background. This is part of my being an American. It sounds corny but one of my favorite pieces of music are the Sousa marches. And this sounds, again, crazy. But I think all of these things, my mother being an immigrant and taking to the United States, the Cub Scouts, the Boy Scouts where you start learning your Pledge of Allegiance and the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States—don't forget, the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts in and of themselves are "patriotic" organizations. This—and—and then, you know, my—my unquestioned or unfailing loyalty to the United States and going through Korea, which again, I never—there was never any doubt in my mind—

LEVINE: Hmm.

LEMONICK: —that this was an obligation. And to this day, I feel that my children should have this obligation. I would never allow my son to shirk that responsibility. I think I would disown him. And that sounds very harsh. But this is—the—all of these experiences led me, right down the line—the same thing, the national parks, to me, are preserving something that we should never lose sight of. And that is our heritage, our culture, because if we don't preserve it now, it's never going to be preserved. Again, one of my missions here at Ellis Island to myself is I've got to have all of this stuff preserved, because if my generation doesn't do it, it's never going to be done. My children know nothing about Ellis Island other than what they hear from me. My grandchildren certainly d—don't know about it. Rebecca, who's the oldest, has been here and she was absolutely enthralled with it. But it has to be preserved. I—this is one of the things, getting down to working at the information desk. I mean, you start meeting people of my generation and you start talking to them. Hopefully, I have been able to instill in some of these people the ability to go back and look up their genealogy, to go back and look up their family roots, because this is what's going to preserve our—our culture and our heritage. Let's face it. This country is a country of immigrants. I don't care what anybody says. The—the original Indians were immigrants; they came from Asia. So that if we don't do it and it's never going to be preserved, because I—even working here as a volunteer, I probably have, and again, I'm not blowing my own horn, but I probably have a more loyal and a more dedicated feeling to our national park system than the employees do. And I think a lot of the volunteers feel the same way.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: The—you know, it's not a job where we work because we—we—we're earning money. It's a job because we love being here.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

LEMONICK: And I think the volunteers here, or for that matter, in any of the other national parks, are doing the service of preserving our heritage and culture. The mission of the national park system is—park system is to preserve and protect. Always, as a volunteer, I would say is to preserve, through history, preserve our heritage and our culture and to enhance our knowledge of our beginnings. And this carry—this has carried me straight through. I think my working here at Ellis Island is a culmination of my Boy Scout, my Cub Scout and my Army experiences.

LEVINE: Hmm. Well, just before we end here, could you say your wife's name and your children's names?

LEMONICK: Yes, my wife's name is Gloria and my—

LEVINE: Her maiden name?

LEMONICK: Her maiden name is Ruben [PH]. And I know her grandparents are also immigrants. I knew her grandfather but we never really spoke about his imm—immigration experience. My oldest daughter is Ellen Beth. She's married now, so her name is Ellen Beth Lasky [PH]. And my son's name is Howard J. My youngest daughter is Lisa Hope. And I now have three grandchildren. [clears throat] Interestingly enough is that even though I was—I was raised in an ultra orthodox environment, that's how far I've probably gotten away from the orthodox environment. And yet, my children, who were also more like me, have named all of their children biblical names. My granddaughter's name is Rebecca. And one grandson is Joshua and the other is Zachary.

LEVINE: Okay. We have about one minute left. I want to ask you. We know you around here as Chick.

LEMONICK: Right.

LEVINE: And there's a little story connected with that?

LEMONICK: Yes. When I grew up, believe it or not, we had one person like myself by the name of Charles Lemonick, ending in a k. And we had another one that I went to school with by the name of Charles Lemonica, ending with an a. He was Italian; I was Jewish. And the only way they were able to differentiate us, I was called Chick and he was called Chuck. And believe it or not, my mother many times had to go up to the school around the Jewish holidays to explain why I was out of school and Chuck was in school. And by the time—by the time they—she ironed it all out, the name Chick and Chuck sort of—

LEVINE: Stuck.

LEMONICK: —stuck.

LEVINE: [laughs] Okay. Well, I want to thank you so much for a most enjoyable interview. It is the first interview with someone who's volunteering. But I think it's also particularly interesting because, for the oral history project, we never interview people who are the next generation. It's always the first-hand experiences of the immigrant.

And yet, you so—so—expressed so well that the—the effects of growing up with the immigrant—in an immigrant family, extended family, that I think that's really wonderful for us to have on record. And we're just about out of tape. So let me—let me just close here. I've been speaking with Charles, called Chick, Bennett Lemonick. And it's August 29th, 1995. We're in the oral history studio and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. And I'm signing off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]