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ROY MARTIN

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**Commissioned Officer in the US Public Health Service
Sanitary Engineer, Ellis Island, 1970, 1971**

LEVINE: Today is October 13, 1995. I'm here in the Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Roy Martin, who was, was commissioned—

MARTIN: Commissioned officer.

LEVINE: A commissioned officer in the Public Health Service, a Sanitary Engineer, and had a project that he worked on here at Ellis Island in 1970 and 1971.

And I want to say that this is unique. We have never interviewed a sanitary engineer, and, and also at this very late date at Ellis Island, who worked at Ellis Island. So this is a real pleasure.

So let's start at the beginning. If you would say your birth date and where you were born.

MARTIN: All right. My birth date, June 17, 1933. And I was born here in New York.

LEVINE: And did you grow up in New York? Did you live in New York your whole entire childhood.

MARTIN: Yes. I lived in Flushing, Long Island and stayed there until 1956 when I joined the U. S. Public Health Service, and went down to Washington, D. C. for the first five years of my career in the Public Health Service. Then the service sent me to school, to graduate school and I went to Berkeley for a master's in sanitary engineering. And then I came on here to New York, to the New York regional office. The regional office, by the way, was located initially at 42 Broadway, which is just a five-minute walk up from Battery Park. And the reason I went to live in Staten Island rather than return to Long Island or Queens again was, number one I was, I was tired of subway travel. I had done that on small, on jobs previous. And number two the convenience from the Staten Island ferry of the office. And, also, because we had the Public Health Service hospital on Staten Island, which served not only medical care for me and my family but also social things as well. So it was natural for, for me to be, to--.

Well and then I mentioned 42 Broadway because quite often we would come down at lunchtime and, to Battery Park, with a bag lunch and watch the, the ships go by and see Ellis Island and Liberty Island, you know, right there in front of us, day after day. [Laughter] That was my first connection with Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Did you have any connection with Ellis Island family wise? Did anyone in your family come through Ellis Island?

MARTIN: Not in my immediately family, no. My--. However, my wife, Joan--. Her maiden name was Joan Schmidt. Her folks came through and their names appear on the, on the Wall here.

LEVINE: And where did they come from?

MARTIN: They came from Germany.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And so, let's see. Well let's, let's just give a little background here. Why did you decide to join the Public Health Service? Do you remember why you made that very large decision?

MARTIN: Oh yeah. Yeah. It was, it was, it was very logical. It was the time when the Korean War was going on. And I knew that I would have to join a service or be inducted. And a good buddy of mine went with the Public Health Service after graduation from Manhattan College. I graduated in '55. And he was down in Washington. He wrote and said, "Hey, you know, why don't you look into the possibility of getting into the, into the commission corps of the Public Health Service. For the first two years in the Public Health Service, in the commission corps, why it would serve as your draft time as well as, you know, the possibility of career opportunities". And I applied. I went to the Public Health Service hospital in Staten Island for a physical, made out some papers, went down to Washington for an interview. And I started a, what I thought was a two-year assignment. And it ended up to be a twenty-six year career.

LEVINE: Wow. (Mr. Martin laughs.) Well, what did you do in the Public Health Service when you first went in?

MARTIN: When I first went in I was a, actually paid--. My salary was

paid by the National Park Service because I was involved in some headquarters work on National Park Service matters. I got out on--. As a, as a new recruit in the Public Health Service I went out with others to Park Service sites to see what the sanitary facilities looked like and to, you know, to learn the ropes.

The Public Health Service has been responsible for the sanitary conditions in the National Park Service areas for, for a good long time, certainly before I, (clears throat) I got into the Public Health Service. At any rate, we looked at things such as the water system, water supply, the sewage disposal system, the solid waste disposal, the garbage disposal, food service and things of, you know, sanitary significance. And so we--. And, and we had done inspections, annual inspections, at least of park facilities for, as a routine.

Now with respect to Ellis Island why the National Park Service, as you know, took over Ellis Island, I believe, in '65 according to my notes and my report. And the Superintendent at Liberty Island, at the Statue of Liberty, was the person responsible for the administration here at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: So that when you came here, were there other Public Health Service people stationed here or working here?

MARTIN: No. As a matter of fact, the reason I came here is that the National Park Service got into a special permit with, with a group. Let me refer to my reports here. I'll, I'll leave copies of these reports with you of my inspections. But I--. To save time let me just read this, read this paragraph to you. I think it lays it out pretty, pretty easy.

"Ellis Island is the property of the National Park Service and under the direct supervision of Mr. Arthur Sullivan, assistant superintendent, Statue of Liberty National Monument. There exists a special use permit granted by the Park Service to the National Economic Growth Reconstruction Organization." And the initials are NEGRO. This, of course, was a black

organization. "Effective September 1st 1990 to August 31st 1975 for occupation of buildings and grounds on the south portion of Ellis Island and temporary use of the immigrant building at the new ferry house. NEGRO is permitted restricted use of this property. But not the buildings on the north side of Ellis Island, which includes the main immigration building, to pursue a rehabilitation program for drug addicts, alcoholics, ex-convicts and chronic welfare recipients. The permit clearly authorizes National Park Service to conduct inspections and retain general awareness of activities on Ellis Island. A clause in the permit states that the permittee agrees to comply with all applicable federal, state or county laws concerning public health, sanitation, safety and fires and water pollution, and to submit reports, public inspections and otherwise comply with procedures and requirements of those governmental bodies."

So, that—

LEVINE: So in 1970 that was when they were just beginning to, to do their program out here. And you were called in.

MARTIN: I was called in to see if this group would be safe to be here whether there would be conditions conducive to healthy living, sanitation; whether they could prepare food without perhaps getting a communicable disease or what have you. And that's why I was called over.

LEVINE: And, and what, what was your experience then? When you, when you were called over and you came to Ellis Island, what happened?

MARTIN: Well, my first visit I came over with—

LEVINE: I think it'd be better if you didn't read it—

MARTIN: Okay.

LEVINE: Just because it'll make it more spontaneous.

MARTIN: Sure. Okay. Well, my first, my first visit over here was, was kind of scary because the, the person who headed up NEGRO, a Dr. Matthews, whose had a, was associated with a hospital up in Harlem, he wasn't, he wasn't there that day. And so we had made a formal request or, to come onto the island for our inspection purposes and he wasn't there. And we were met with a, a, a kind of belligerent attitude in that we were told that since he was not there we'd have to get off. And there was a little confusion so we left. [Laughter]

LEVINE: How many of you were there?

MARTIN: It was just myself and two or three of the National Park Service people from the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: I see. And, and so you weren't received very well. (laughter) Did you go back?

MARTIN: So we went back. So we went back and Dr. Matthews accompanied us.

And we had a very strange experience in that we allowed to only go into places that he wanted to have us go into. For example, we asked about toilet facilities in the morning. And he said, "Oh we'll put that off until the afternoon". And somebody scurried off. (Mr. Martin laughs.) And in the afternoon we were finally directed to a toilet, which had obviously just been cleaned up. Of course it wasn't operable because there was no water on the island. However, the room was, and he said that all of their toilet needs were handled in this room. Well we had—

LEVINE: It was one?

MARTIN: One, one, yes. And there was, there were several people here at the time. I believe the number was--. Oh I don't know. I think there were fifteen at that point in time, men and women.

LEVINE: These were people who were being rehabilitated, the fifteen?

MARTIN: These were people, yes, who were under rehabilitation. One of their jobs was just to make, try to make this island a home for them, for themselves. And they were doing some cleaning up. But, as I say, as far as toilet facilities, we, we passed several areas that were obviously being used for toilet waste, you know. The stench was obvious. So things were not too sanitary over here.

We--. There was no, no water on the island. The twenty-four inch pipe from New Jersey had been broken , so they were just bringing water in in five-gallon cans for all purposes. There was, there was no way of cooking food. What they were doing was using fifty-five gallon drums to make fires. And they were actually cooking indoors with, on grills over fifty-five gallon drums. So that was an extreme hazard.

And we, we did get to--. They were not supposed to go over on the north side of the island. They were obviously going over on the other side of the island into the old Public Health Service hospital areas and what have you. Much of, much of that area was dilapidated, windows broken, the rain and snow coming in for years and plaster falling off the walls. And the bird dung on the floor was, was over your ankles. It was, it was just a horrendous thing. Hazardous, unsanitary. So as a result, to make a long story short, as

a result of my one day over here with Dr. Matthews and the Park Service folks, why I wrote a report recommending that the permit be revoked. And I came back out, they, they asked for more time to clean things up. And, you know, I came back I think six months later. And the clean up had not been that great. And I repeated my request. Then that was, my reports went forward to the sanitary engineer consultant in Washington, D. C., who dealt directly with the Park Service day to day.

I was not doing Park Service work day to day out of the regional office. My usual job was in water supply and other activities, other sanitary engineering activities. But he then came down personally—or came up rather—from Washington personally to make his, make an inspection. And his inspection verified my reports. And they did close this down. I don't know whether there have been other, there have been other permits, similar permits, granted to any other outfit, you know, by the Park Service. But hopefully, there weren't because this place was not habitable at the time.

We suggested that--. And, of course, the Park Service at the time had its long range plans in place, as far as the buildings that they wanted to fix up, the ones that wanted to take down, destroy. And, and they had their twenty or twenty-five year plan on, on, on making the Ellis Island the place that it is today. And they were hampered by, in, in this permit business of they couldn't even come on the island themselves. The Park Service, you know, except for the fact that there was this need by law of the, by agreement in the permit, that an inspection should be made, why the Park Service had, had a tough time getting onto the, onto the, onto the grounds here at all.

LEVINE: Do you know anything about why that permit—the circumstance under which that permit was granted?

MARTIN: There was--. I think there was an assistant secretary of HEW, Health Education and Welfare, which was the department that the Public Health Service was in at that time, who granted this permit. And he was a very close, this is 1970, I think he was to the administration at that time. And somehow it happened. I, I, I don't know the details. But Robert Finch, whose name is still in the, in the paper with his parties, activities, was, was the person who appears in my report as the, now I had, I had to report not only to my people in the Public Health Service but I had to report to the regional director for HEW in the New York regional office my survey results because there were political, you know, connections.

LEVINE: So is there anything else that you remember about, about Those, was it just two times that you came out here and observed and then made your reports?

MARTIN: Two different days.

LEVINE: Two different days. Do you--? Is there anything else you remember about the place, the people you met, the conditions, anything else that you haven't already mentioned?

MARTIN: No. I, you know, Ellis Island was just there, you know. Until I made that inspection I'd pass it every day coming across on the Staten Island ferry twice a day. And I, I, I knew a little bit about it. I think after that inspection I got more interested in Ellis Island. And I looked into a bit of the history of the island.

And you mentioned that you have interviewed a couple of psychiatrists, Public Health Service doctors who worked here, and I'd like to hear their interviews. It was interesting to me to see the, the extent of the Public Health Service Hospital that existed here. I guess some of the buildings are

still standing. I don't know what's going to be done with those but they were in pretty bad shape when I saw them.

LEVINE: Yeah. You're the first person connected with the Public Health Service that hasn't been a patient provider, let's say, that we have interviewed, that I know of.

Okay. So, so, you also—I think we should mention—is the report that the regional director wrote when he did his visit is also going to be in, in a file with your name on it.

MARTIN: This was Ron, Ron Speedy, was the man's name who did the actual follow-up environmental health survey of Ellis Island. And he concluded very, very directly that the permit should be revoked. And that Ellis Island does not meet any of the sanitary criteria that we are expected, expected it to meet.

LEVINE: So he endorsed your, your reports.

MARTIN: Yes he did, yeah.

LEVINE: And, and did, did you know, ever hear anything about the, the clearing out of this organization from the island or, how, how that went? I mean did you ever—

MARTIN: No. I, I, I did see Dr. Matthews's name in the paper a couple of times after that and it was not--. I know that his, his license to practice was revoked at some point in time, that he had some interests were not exactly professional. And I'll leave it at that. [Laughs] Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. And so then after you, after you did this were you then consulting on different projects related to the public, where the Public Health Service was

called in to make those kinds of reports on, on situations? Is that what you continued doing after that?

MARTIN: As far as the Park Service facilities is concerned, I, I had the opportunity to do inspections on sanitary facilities in several of the parks. I've been down to Philadelphia and I've gone through the parks there. Had some interesting times there and the regional office that I, that, at that time up to 1970 or thereabouts the regional office included New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. So I did inspections in those, the park sites in those states. And then we had a regional boundary change. And we retained New York and New Jersey but then picked up Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. But by that time I was into a program where we did not—I didn't have the opportunity to do many Park Service inspections. I was doing other things.

LEVINE: Well, when you look back on, on, on your, your career in the Public Health Service—and particularly this one small assignment that you had at Ellis Island—how do you think about it now in retrospect?

MARTIN: I had a wonderful career in the Public Health Service. I had the opportunity for travel. At one point--. I mentioned this Park Service work. At another point in time I was doing the radiological health surveys at all of the Public Health Service hospitals and out-patient clinics throughout the country looking at the, the dental machines, the isotope use and what have you to, to make sure that the, the both the employees and the patients were properly, properly, were not, were not getting contaminated. So that, that gave me an opportunity to, to get to San Francisco, and Seattle, to Carville, Louisiana where the, we, we had the—and still have the—leprosarium. And, you know, all over the country.

For a while I was doing work on ship sanitation. And this gave me the opportunity to travel overseas because I did the sanitary design for two ships in Italy. And then another trip I took to do the sanitary design review of the QE2. And as a matter of fact, a few months ago, I was a passenger [laughs] aboard the QE2 and that was fun.

LEVINE: You mentioned your wife. Why don't you mention your wife's name and maiden name and your children's names?

MARTIN: All right. Joan Schmidt Martin is my wife now, and always has been. And I have four children Stephen, and John and Barbara and Karen. And they're scattered all over the country with their own families.

LEVINE: Well, we just have a minute left. Is there anything else you can think of that we haven't covered that pertains to Ellis Island or—

MARTIN: No, I don't think so. I, I just want to say I, I enjoyed this opportunity. You know, if it hadn't been for Knud Hansen being interviewed here I wouldn't have had this opportunity myself, so thank you very much.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, thank you. I think it was a serendipitous interview all the way around.

This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on October 13th 1995. I have been speaking with Roy Martin who was a commissioned officer in the Public Health Service, a sanitary engineer. In 1970 and 1971 he visited Ellis Island and made a report on the project which, the acronym for which is, was, NEGRO. Signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW