

EI-763

OSCAR W. HILL

BIRTHDATE: JANUARY 3, 1909

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 6, 1996

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW:

RUNNING TIME: 41:00

INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

RECORDING ENGINEER: PETER HOM

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

FINLAND, 1913

4

SHIP: MAURETANIA

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

LEVINE: Today is July 6th, 1996 and I'm privileged to be here in the Ellis--Ellis Island Oral History Studio with Mr. Oscar W. Hill.

HILL: Right.

LEVINE: Who was born Asser Wilho Huuskonen.

HILL: Huuskonen.

LEVINE: Huuskonen.

HILL: Huuskonen, that's right.

LEVINE: Huuskonen. He was born in Finland in 1909, and came to this country in 1913 when he was four years of age.

HILL: Absolutely, that's correct.

LEVINE: So I'm delighted that you happen to be visiting today and we got a chance to do this interview.

HILL: Well, so am I. Very much so.

LEVINE: So let's—I'd also like to mention that Mr. Hill's son, David, is here with us and he's in the engineer's quarters there with the tape.

HILL: And he's forty-eight years of age now.

LEVINE: Wow, okay. So, okay. If we could start at the beginning. Would you give your birth date and tell where in Finland you were born?

HILL: Yeah. I was born on January the 3rd in 1909 in Finnish it was a village by the name of Oosdegabongy, but it is actually known in Swedish as Nustadt, and more known in this country the same name.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, do you remember, since you were four, but do you have any recollections of that town?

HILL: Well, I do, in one respect that it's—it was a seaport and they had a lot of sailing ships there and all of the men relatives that I—that my family had, were sea captains. And they had a place up there where they had windmills and I specifically remember that they, those windmills were really something.

LEVINE: Really? What can you remember about them, from the eyes of a small child?

HILL: Well, they—they were—they were really large and they were one that they ground the grain with them because there were a lot of farmer people and they had to have their bread. So they have to had it grind.

LEVINE: Wow.

HILL: And they were—they ground it with this and the wind did the work, gave the labor because at that time I don't know whether we even had electricity.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember seeing the grain being ground by the wind—

HILL: No, no, that I don't remember actually seeing, but I learned as I grew up that that was the purpose of it.

LEVINE: Wow, and what was your mother's name?

HILL: My mother's name was Ava Amanda—do you want her maiden name?

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

HILL: Palmros, P-A-L-M-R-O-S, and that was a Swedish name at that time.

LEVINE: So your mother was Swedish and your father Finnish?

HILL: No, it was—she was definitely—she was born right in that Oosdegabongy [PH] as well and—but at that time the Swedish, the country was more under Swedish control and everything had to be—my father built a house there and I was told that he had to get all the deeds and everything else, they were all in Swedish. And that's why my mother had the name of Palmros.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh. Do you suspect she was born with another name or—

HILL: No. No—

LEVINE: That was—

HILL: That was—that was her name.

LEVINE: That was—that was it, uh-huh.

HILL: Yes.

LEVINE: Well, how about your father, what was his name?

HILL: His name was actually Hoos Gonin [PH] and he was born in the middle of Finland, which is more or less of an industrial city, Guappio [PH], and in that Finland is kind of split up in areas, and those people that are around that are where my father come, they call those Savolizia. They are—that means that they're more or less of interior people. Whereas, where I was born is all a coastal. They're all sailors and seamen, etcetera.

LEVINE: How—how—um, that word that you used that means that you're from the interior of the country, what was that again?

HILL: Savo—Savolainen, and that's what they call it. That's what they call the people in that area.

LEVINE: Could you spell that, by any chance?

HILL: Yeah, S-A-V-O-L-A-I-N-E-N. Savolainen.

LEVINE: I see, uh-huh.

HILL: Yes.

LEVINE: And do you—did your mother and father ever talk about how they happened to meet?

HILL: Well, my father he came to Finland—he came to where my mother was Oosdegabongy because in that city, although it was a seaport, they had a lot of very good stone and the stone masons had to use drills to make the holes and that, and my father was a blacksmith. So therefore, in that case, he came to this—this—this city where my mother was, and that's how they met.

LEVINE: Wow.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, did you have grandparents around, or did you have aunts and uncles that you remember from Finland?

HILL: Well, I—I don't remember on my—well, I do on my mother's side. My mother had five brothers and I think there was no ladies in the family. But I do remember my uncles, after I came to this country because they were seamen and they sailed trips around the world and they would stop in New York and I would visit them.

LEVINE: Oh.

HILL: Yeah, but they're both all passed away now.

LEVINE: Do you remember any stories that they came back with, your uncles, when you were a little boy that they told about sailing around the world or—

HILL: Well, I'll tell you, they—when they left on a trip from Finland, they generally—it was on a sailing vessel and they sailed to England, and then from there, they would get on steam ship, on a steamer and they would go down and they would go all the way down to South America, Chile, and they would load the boat there with this fertilizer, because they have a lot of birds there in Chile. And then they also

told me of trips that they made to the Indies, West Indies, where they had a lot of bananas, but he said it was a shame to have the bananas, some big load of bananas and not able to eat them, but they took some of them and they had to sleep on them to soften them up and ripen them. And then they ate them.

LEVINE: Yeah, and so do you remember anything about ceremonies or festive events or large occasions in Finland?

HILL: No, not really because, as I left there, when four, when I was only four and of course at that time I was able to not travel very much of anywhere.

LEVINE: Well, I see, if you left in 1913, then you left before the First World War started.

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: Did you—was—did that have anything to do with why you left then or why did you leave then?

HILL: No, my father actually and my—my parents left for on account of employment because he had heard, of course, that in this country the wages were much higher than they are in Finland, and being he was a blacksmith, why, he was able to sharpen his drills. And he had heard about Montana. That we have a Finnish population out in Butte, Montana, and that they are miners and that the bit drills have to sharpened. But that was a surprise when he got to Butte. They had already made some improvements on the drill. They were all diamond pointed and you didn't have to sharpen them at all.

LEVINE: Oh.

HILL: So he had to go and work in the mine as a miner.

LEVINE: Wow. Well, before—getting back to before you left. Did he have correspondence with—with some of these people in Butte? Is that how he came to go there?

HILL: No, I think that evidently the word got to him by some of these Finnish people that lived in—in Butte were from the part of the country where we lived, and they were the one that told him that in his profession as a blacksmith, he could—he could really make a good living.

LEVINE: I see. Now, did people tend, when they came to this country, when they immigrated to the United States, did they tend to come back to you—to your town in Finland and—and—and tell you about America or—

HILL: No, not really. Not that much at all. I—I—I—I haven't heard stories that—where—where—because they were all, all seafaring men and they didn't—my father and my family was the one who spent ten years in Butte. Went there in 1913 and we left there in 1923.

LEVINE: I see, but—so for the most part, the people who were coming back were really seamen. They weren't people who had immigrated.

HILL: No, they—they were not. They didn't come here to stay like we did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I see. So do you remember, once the decision was made, who was going? Your mother, your father?

HILL: And myself. Just the three of us.

LEVINE: The three of you traveled together?

HILL: Yeah, because I have no brothers or sisters.

LEVINE: I see. So when the decision was made, can you remember what transpired? I mean, did—did you have examinations before you left? Do you remember anything your mother packed?

HILL: Well, not really but I have the—the—the inspection card here where it says that the people were inspected or whatever. Yeah. And I do have—my father had been to this country. Oh, yes, before—before we left he had been because I have his passport here. I think it's back in 1905, and this is all in Russian now.

LEVINE: So your father left in 1905?

HILL: But he came back and picked us up.

LEVINE: So was that the first time he was back, in 1913 when he came to bring you and your mother?

HILL: Yes, that's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: I see. So you really—oh, wow. You really didn't know your father.

HILL: No, not really. Not that well. Not at all.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was it like seeing your father at that time? Can you recall that or--

HILL: Well, not—not really, but—but it was—it was—it was his desire, I guess, to bring his family to this country and have a better living.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So do you remember the family leaving and—and taking off for the seaport? Do you remember anything about that?

HILL: No. No, not at all. Not in the least. I have no recollection, but I have heard that I—that we left at this particular place because it says right in here we left, Hongo. [PH]That's Finland.

LEVINE: Ha.

HILL: Yeah, and this here Mauritania, that left from Liverpool because it says here "left in Liverpool."

LEVINE: Right, so you probably left from Liverpool.

HILL: And this Mauritania, I had—I saw an article in the Florida paper. Look at this here.

LEVINE: Oh, my. [pause] So her final voyage was in 1934 when she went from New York back to Liverpool.

HILL: I guess so, yeah, and then this fellow was on the original. You see, he came when they—when they—when they came originally.

LEVINE: Right.

HILL: In 1907. You see, we came six years later.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you have any personal recollections of the Mauritania?

HILL: About—no. Well, my boy—I have pictures. My boy lives in Connecticut and he had a picture, a big picture on the wall and he had a big boat on the—on the—on the picture there, and the Mauritania being the finest boat at that time, had four smoke stacks. And that I says, "That's Mauritania," and sure enough, that's what it says on there, Mauritania.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do—do you remember your mother and father telling you later about—or talking later about the trip?

HILL: No, not—not really because it—when we went to Montana we didn't have any relatives there and there was nothing much discussed about the relatives. And, of course, he was very interested in—in—in trying to get his profession as a blacksmith working, but there was no hope in that at all.

LEVINE: Okay. Now, do you personally have any recollection of Ellis Island, seeing the Statue of Liberty, getting to Butte? Up until you got to Butte?

HILL: No. No, I—I—I just heard about it after I—I got to Butte and I grew up. Being that I was four years at age, and at that time I only spoke Finnish. I didn't understand any English, but when I went to school, it didn't take me long and I—I graduated from grammar school out in Butte, Montana. And I had heard about at that time in my history lessons, etcetera, that there is such a thing, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Yeah.

LEVINE: Did you feel sort of special that—that you had actually seen them and come through?

HILL: Well, no, because when I come now, when I get to be, at eighty-eight, why I lived—after we came back from Butte, my father still remained in Butte because there was a little bit of family—little disturbance there, and so my mother and I came to New York in 1923, after I graduated from grammar school, and it was a few years later, I did make a trip to the Statue of Liberty. But I didn't make a trip to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: When you got to Butte, do you remember any things that struck you as new or different?

HILL: Well—well—well, of course the first thing was the language barrier because I only spoke Finnish, but being it was a lot of Finnish neighbors up there, why the—the youngsters then they didn't know hardly any Finnish at all, but being that I couldn't talk any Finnish to them, I had to talk, to start to learn English and I sure learned it fast.

LEVINE: Was there a time when you knew English better than your mother and father?

HILL: You mean Finnish?

LEVINE: No, learned English. So that you were actually ahead of them in learning this language.

HILL: Oh, they didn't learn—they didn't—they didn't learn English hardly at all.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-hmm.

HILL: See, they—my mother was very poor and my father, of course, in his line of work, he didn't need very much discussion all his—and there was a time I think when I was growing up and I was getting that I was going to start to forget Finnish completely and my mother was right after me. Says, "Oh, no, that you got to keep," and it just came back to me and now I read and write and speak fluently. Finnish.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So when you were growing up in this country, you were speaking Finnish at home?

HILL: Yes, definitely with mother, and father, too. But what—but most of the time I didn't—I don't think I ever spoke English with them.

LEVINE: I see. Now, did—did your mother and or your father have the attitude of holding onto the customs and the ways of Finland?

HILL: No, I don't think so. I—I—I—I—well, of course we—we—we had out in Butte, Montana we lived a little bit on the outskirts and of course my father was able to get his own home, house, and then we had a little backyard where we had our chickens and I—I had a few rabbits and—and—and we didn't have any land to do any farming, but we—we got used to the American customs.

LEVINE: Did you—were you part of a community there?

HILL: Not a Finnish community, really, but there was several families in the area, so we had friends.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Would you have—would you get together, the Finnish people in the area, for certain occasions?

HILL: Well, in—in—in a way, but, you know, the Finnish people are really funny because if there's three Finnish people that are discussing something, everyone has got three different ideas. It's hard to kind of—kind of get together. Although here in—I live in Florida now and we have the largest community here in Florida of Finnish people in the entire USA.

LEVINE: Really? In West Palm Beach?

HILL: No, in Lake Worth and Lantana.

LEVINE: Oh,

HILL: Which is a suburb of Palm Beach.

LEVINE: Wow, interesting.

HILL: Yes.

LEVINE: So you—so you find yourself going back to your original roots more now that you're retired and—

HILL: Well, of course I have a lot of Finnish friends and I get the Finnish papers. I read the Finnish papers and I have a lot of friends, distant—distant cousins that are still alive because I've made trips to Finland and I correspond with them, and they write me in Finnish. But they're getting educated over there so that if I write them English, they can answer me in English, as well.

LEVINE: Oh, so you sometimes write in Finnish and sometimes—

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well, then—now you mentioned that at some point you and your mother came back here to New York, came here to New York.

HILL: That's right, just the two of us, yes.

LEVINE: And your father stayed for a while in Butte?

HILL: Yeah, he stayed for maybe possibly a year, but he found out that living alone wasn't exactly the best thing in the world. So he came

here, but he didn't actually come to live with my mother and I because we just only had a small, small one-room apartment and—but time went along and then my mother passed away in 1934 and then when I got married. And my father passed away very shortly. I think he—being that we didn't know very much about him, I think he just in New York disappeared. Yeah.

LEVINE: Hmm. So, but you mentioned now you became a citizen.

HILL: '36.

LEVINE: In '36. You came to New York in what, about 1923?

HILL: '23.

LEVINE: Okay. So now did you go back to school at all once you came to New York?

HILL: I went to business school. That's why I—I says, well, you know, generally the Finnish and the northern people, they're all [unclear] or carpenters and I says, "Well, that's—that's too hard of a work," so I thought of the office line. So I went to business school.

LEVINE: I see, and did you finish business school?

HILL: Yeah, I finished business school. I got a diploma on that and I got my first job and I had my first job and I held that for twenty-five years.

LEVINE: What was your first job?

HILL: That was as a book keeper and at that time we didn't have no computers. It was all hand and just a little bit of a adding machine.

LEVINE: So you kept that job through the Depression?

HILL: Very much so and I—I—I—I had a good time in Depression.

LEVINE: You did?

HILL: Well, I didn't make very money, but I didn't have to spend very much.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. How do you remember the Depression? What are your personnel experiences at that time?

HILL: Well, it was very, very tough, I'm telling you, because I think the first job I got, I think I got seven dollars a week and from there I—I—I

started to progress and I—I remember that it was—it was really—I remember the Wall Street Crash of 1929 very, very well. I was in the office. Of course, I had nothing because I didn't have any money to invest, so I didn't lose anything.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Wow. So, what was that company that you worked for for twenty-five years?

HILL: It was—it was a Scotch outfit. It was in the textile industry and they—they made—they wove textile material in Scotland and the grandfather came to this country and established a mill here and, of course, he had to have an office and he had a few people working for him, and I was one of the bookkeepers.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: So were you happy with your chosen profession?

HILL: Oh, yes. I thought that it was very good. It was light work, but it was—it was—you had to use your head, you know. It was because we didn't have the computers and we didn't have anything that—outside of the adding machine. And I had to balance the books every months, so if I was out a penny it was—you have to work a week to find it.

LEVINE: Oh. So—so then let's see. You worked there for twenty-five years.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Then did you work somewhere else after that?

HILL: Oh, yes. I had—I think I had two or three jobs after that because I was employed in New York City for about fifty years. So I had one next job I think I was in the service, you see, also here.

LEVINE: Oh.

HILL: This one here.

LEVINE: I see. So you went into the service. You went into the army.

HILL: Yeah, that's right and I got a job in the Finance Office.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Let's see. So November 10th, 1945.

HILL: Was I still—was I still working for the—

LEVINE: I'm trying to figure out if you were coming or going at that time?

HILL: No, I was still working in that textile—my original job.

LEVINE: Well, this seems as though you separated from the army with a Good Conduct Medal.

HILL: Well, I was there a little over two years.

LEVINE: In 19—

HILL: Well, the reason I was—I was discharged because on account of my age. I was getting up to thirty-eight years of age, and they says—I was the oldest man in my company. We—all the boys that I was training with, they were nineteen—eighteen, nineteen and twenty years old and here I was over thirty. They said, "Hey, Pop, you don't belong in this outfit."

LEVINE: So in other words, you went in in '43 and you came out in '45.

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: Why was it—did you volunteer?

HILL: Oh, no, I was drafted.

LEVINE: Or were you drafted?

HILL: Drafted.

JL You were drafted, uh-huh. Okay. Well, so you served your country.

HILL: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: How did you feel about serving in the United States Army?

HILL: Well, I'll tell you what? My Finnish—I served in a military intelligence post outside of Washington, but we had about a hundred and fifty

Finns in the—in the post, but of course Finland was not a very popular country and the language wasn't that much used—used, so they, being that I had the experience of an office, they put me into the Finance Office. That's where I worked for the two years.

LEVINE: I see. Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, when did you meet your wife?

HILL: Before I was in the service. Before I went into the service. 1934 we were married.

LEVINE: Oh, I see. Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: So let's see. You became—you came to New York in '23.

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: You became a citizen—

HILL: '36.

LEVINE: '36. And so before you became a citizen you married your wife two years earlier.

HILL: That's right exactly.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and how did you meet her?

HILL: Well, I met her, being at the—in New York City, there was a Finnish congregation and a Finnish dance hall, and of course I went down there and she was great at dancing and I wasn't such a hot dancer, but that's how it started. But we didn't get our son until fourteen years later.

LEVINE: Oh.

HILL: He was born in 1948.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: He's forty-eight years now, you see, so it's '96.

LEVINE: Wow. Uh-huh. Now, did you—you lived in Manhattan when you were in New York?

HILL: Well, we lived in the Bronx.

LEVINE: In the Bronx. And where was the Finnish—

HILL: It was in Manhattan on 125th Street and 5th Avenue. That was before the—before Harlem. Before it became very, very dark and as a matter fact, they finally had to get out of there completely.

LEVINE: I see. I see.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: So that—your mother—not your mother and father. You and your wife sort of socialized with other Finns in the city.

HILL: Oh, yeah, very much so and we spoke Finnish because she was from Finland, also. As a matter of fact, she was over there from the Russian border. These people that had to evacuate, but she came into this country in 1927. So it was the time that the Russian conflict in Finland was in 1939, but she was already in this country and she was married. But she had to make a trip to Finland so that she could get legalized in this country, but she never took out American citizenship. Yeah, she passed away in Florida in 1980—let's see, in 1980—she's been fourteen—yeah, 1984 I think. '82. Yeah. Fourteen years ago because it's '96, yeah.

LEVINE: And what was her name?

HILL: Her name was Saimia, S-A-I-M-I-A like in Adam, Virsu. V like in Victor. V-I-R-S-U.

LEVINE: That was her maiden name?

HILL: That was her maiden name, but she—she used the name of—

LEVINE: Hill.

HILL: Hill, of course.

LEVINE: Why don't we talk about that? How did you come to go from Asser Wilho—

HILL: Huuskonen.

LEVINE: Huuskonen to—

HILL: Well, it was so difficult in English—

LEVINE: Oscar Hill.

HILL: When I was in the business college, I was still using the Hooskunum, but the A-S-S-E-R, I changed that to [unclear] in Montana, in Butte. I says, "Gee, that's a non—that not Americanized at all." So I picked up a name which is Scandinavian, Oscar, which is close enough. But my mother, when I was born, she picked that name because that's a Biblical name. If there—the—there was what, seven of those disciples, you know, and one was Asser.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember anything particular about that one?

HILL: No. No, at all. No, because I'm not that much of a church goer.

LEVINE: I see. Did you grow up in a religious family?

HILL: No, not def—not—not that much, no.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So then how did you come to pick Hill as your name?

HILL: Well, that—that was a—that was a problem because we—I wanted something that—because these Finnish names are so difficult and they're so long. I says, "I don't want anything that is just about four, five letters, and that's just about all." And I happened to think that out in—when we went to Butte, Montana, you know what the Butte, Montana was? That was what they called the richest hill in the world on account of the copper mining company. The Anaconda Copper Mining Company was the richest hill in earth. So I says, "Well, I must use Hill."

LEVINE: So when you changed it was exactly when you—you received your United States citizenship?

HILL: Right on the back, yeah. I couldn't use Hill before, but I used the Oscar all the time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: And so they made it legal at the time of your American citizenship.

HILL: Oh, sure. That's right.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah, that's right on the back.

LEVINE: Yeah.

END SIDE A
BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: So—so by the time you got married and had your child, you were—

HILL: I was—

LEVINE: Using Hill for quite a while.

HILL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, how was your mother—how were their attitudes as far as keeping up with things Finnish? Did they have certain customs or ways about them that they kept?

HILL: Well, no, I don't think so. My—my father, of course, he was [unclear] because he was from the middle part of Finland and they have their own ideas over there, but my mother was from coast where I was born and she was more of the sticking to what the—what the Finns—and wanted to follow their footsteps.

LEVINE: Did it have to do with cooking?

HILL: Yeah, she cooked as a Finn. We had Finnish cooking, absolutely.

LEVINE: Can you remember any Finnish dishes in particular?

HILL: Well—well, I'll tell you, we were great fish eaters because we lived right on the coast in Finland and fish was one of the main staples. What they called kala soppa, fish stew, but it's not like a chowder that we have here, but it's they put the whole fish in there and cook it.

LEVINE: Wow, could you spell that—that fish stew?

- HILL: Yeah, kala, K-A-L-A and soppa. That means soup, S-O-P-P-A. Soppa. Kala soppa.
- LEVINE: Yeah. How about baking or anything like that, did your mother do that?
- HILL: Oh, yes, they make the—the make a delicious what they call a Finnish coffee bread, bulla.
- LEVINE: B-U—
- HILL: No, B-U-L-L-A, and it's made out of cake dough, I think, to that extent and molded and kneaded and put in the oven and it is—it is very, very good. I still eat it and it's—it's sold in Finnish neighborhoods, very much so.
- LEVINE: Oh. How about you yourself, have you ever cooked anything Finnish?
- HILL: No. Well, I'm a bachelor and I've been—I've been a bachelor for fourteen years, and I can boil water.
- LEVINE: Okay. Tell me about your mother and father. How do you remember them? I mean, as a boy growing up, what—what were their qualities that stick with you?
- HILL: Well—well, I think that my mother was for myself and my father was more of a—he didn't—he didn't exactly—we didn't have what you might call, what I've been learning a father and son relationship at all. But mother, that's why when we left—because I told my mother when I graduated from—from—I didn't go to high school at all. I just had to get my grammar school. I'm not never going to be a miner and I'm not going to go down to that thing because those mines were a mile deep in the earth.
- LEVINE: Can you remember anything else about those mines in Butte, Montana when you were growing up?
- HILL: Well, I'm telling you that they were all—all of the miners, they were all consumptionists because they had to drill. The drills—while the drills, you didn't have to sharpen them, but they was—you had to breath that dust and they all had lung cancer. Consumption. Consumption. But my dad was able to keep out of it a little bit so that he didn't—he didn't die from consumption.
- LEVINE: So he actually went to work in the mines?

HILL: Oh, absolutely.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

HILL: It was the only way to make your living.

LEVINE: Yeah.

HILL: And I think when he got a payroll, I remember the payroll he got was twenty-five dollars a week and it was paid in gold. One gold piece.

LEVINE: Wow.

HILL: Yeah, by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company. Yeah.

LEVINE: So more or less most of the people in the town were working in the mines. Was that the most—

HILL: Every one of them, a hundred percent. There was no other industry there. As a matter of fact, Butte had what they called the School of Mines, where they had their engineer students and etcetera.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm, and were a lot of the people working in the mines immigrants, too?

HILL: Oh, yeah. I think most of them were because the younger crowd, they—they—they were leaving the city. At the time when we—I think when we went there, they had a population of about forty thousand people, but when we left there, I think it was getting more down to the thirties and the twenties. All the younger people were leaving. They wouldn't work in the mine, like myself.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Did you hear of accidents in the mine and that kind of thing?

HILL: Oh, very much so. They had explosions there. They'd had some terrible explosions because they had to blast all that rock in the ground, and sometimes it went off accidentally and was a lot of miners killed.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything like union strikes or—

HILL: Oh, very much so. They were there. The—the unions were very, very, very, very what they call one of the IWW, Industrial Workers of the World, they wanted to combat the wages and get—get into a decent wage, but there was always strikes. That's one of the

reasons, too, why my father says that—and I figured, too, that the employment is not steady.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. So after you and your mother arrived in New York and then a year later your father came, was he—was he—did he then find other work?

HILL: Well, he looked for a little bit of blacksmith work here, but I don't think he did. But he lived alone. He didn't live with us, so that we—I didn't actually know how he subsisted. But he didn't die a rich man because he didn't leave me a nickel.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah. So did you have any other relatives besides your mother then who were here in this country?

HILL: Well, I had—I had some cousins from—from my own hometown that their—their—it was their family here that I had association with.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: They were Finnish people.

LEVINE: Yeah. Yeah, and had you remember—did you know them in Fin—Finland?

HILL: No, no. Well, I knew their—as a matter of fact, I think one of them was my mother's—on my mother's side. I think it—it wasn't—oh, it was her—I think it was her brother, yeah. They were there. They were here.

LEVINE: I see. And you mentioned that her brothers who were seafaring men—

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did they—they stopped and saw you in—when they came through New York?

HILL: They sure did because they would—all the Finns would congregate in where they had the Finnish dance hall there, 125th Street and 5th Avenue and I—I would go down to the dances down there and I would—somebody would say, "Oh, there—there's these sailors that

came from Finland again. They're over at this particular room," and I always said, "They must be relatives," so I went over to see them.

LEVINE: And what kinds of things would you talk about with them?

HILL: Well, mostly of the trips that they had. Like they were just came back from South America and they would sail out next week again. They didn't stay long.

LEVINE: So—

HILL: They had their families in Finland, you see.

LEVINE: I see. So, when you say in this other room, was this a great big Finnish Center where you—where you would meet them?

HILL: Well, yes, it was a dance hall. We had a dance floor there where we would—had as many as eight hundred people dancing.

LEVINE: Wow.

HILL: Yeah, so it was a good time.

LEVINE: So this—so these were mostly Fin—Finns.

HILL: Oh, they would come from any distance and most of these here, the Finnish girls, if they came from Finland, they worked as domestics and they would have the weekend off or a few days, especially Thursday night. They would come to the dance.

LEVINE: Uh-hmm. Did you have in mind that you wanted to find a Finnish wife?

HILL: Well, no, not necessarily but my mother passed away just about the time that I—I got serious that I got to get some help. That I can't do it, and there was one young lady that I used to dance with and she said, "I understand your mother is sick, and if you need any help," she'd be glad to help me. So that's how it started.

LEVINE: And that's the one you married?

HILL: That's the one I married.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

HILL: Yeah.

LEVINE: Yeah.

HILL: It was really, really quite a story.

LEVINE: Yes, yes. How does it feel to you today, just coming back here and sort of reliving that whole time?

HILL: Well, it's—when I talk—when I think about time, and next January 3rd I'll be eighty-eight years of age and that's getting up in the years. My boy is only forty-eight, half of practically what I am. But we're making a trip to Finland and Sweden here Christmas time with my boy. He's a great traveler, although he was stricken with polio when he was five years old and he's got a bad leg now even. But he got—got slightly over it. He drives a car and travels. He's traveled all over. He's been in China and he's been all over the map.

LEVINE: Wonderful. Wonderful.

HILL: Yeah, and he's been in Finland about, oh, at least a dozen times. Whereas, I've only been—this will be about my third trip or fourth trip.

LEVINE: And you have actually some relatives there that you know.

HILL: Yeah, I have some relatives.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

HILL: Very distant cousins.

LEVINE: Yeah. What do you feel very proud of that you've accomplished in your lifetime?

HILL: Well, I'll tell you, in athletics, I don't know whether you're a very athletic woman or heard about track and field, Bob Ornumy. [PH] Bob Ornumy is the greatest runner in the world.

LEVINE: Oh.

HILL: He came to this country in 1925 and had exhibitions here and he won every race that he ran against. He ran against the American best, Joey Ray, and he beat him every time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, we need to turn the tape over, but—no? Oh, well, then tell me what you were going to say about—

HILL: Well, I've—I've studied and I've done a little bit of track and field myself. I'm not very much of a runner, but I'm very interested. We have the Olympic games coming in in Florida—in Georgia, Atlanta, and I don't think I'll go to the games because they're so crowded all the time.

LEVINE: So did you—did you do track meets and—

HILL: Well, I—I—I had very good buddies of mine, Finnish fellows that did that and that's how I was—palled around with. As a matter of fact, I bought a car in 1928, a Pontiac and I had transportation when these fellows had to go running somewhere. Well, I would drive them over.

LEVINE: [Laughs] That's great, and we neglected to say your son's name is David that you were talking about earlier.

HILL: That's right.

LEVINE: Is there anything else you'd like to say before we close?

HILL: Well, no, I don't think so. This is my newest passport right here that I can use right now that—that's good until 1999.

LEVINE: Right.

HILL: Yeah. I probably won't have to renew that anymore because that will—that will be probably my last—last overseas trip that I'm going to make maybe this coming December.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, I want to tell you it's been a pleasure talking with you and thank you so much for your reminiscences and remembrances.

HILL: Well, thank you. It kind of gets the cobwebs out of my brains.
[Laughs] Thank you.

LEVINE: Okay, you're very welcome. I've been speaking with Oscar Hill, who came in 1913 at the age of four from Finland on the RMS Mauritania. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW