

EI-876

SIGVARD RICHARDSON

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

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MERCHANT MARINE

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, May 12th, 1997. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio and I'm here with Mr. Sig Richardson. I'll spell Sig, it's S-I-G and we may talk (he laughs) about your first name in a minute.

RICHARDSON: Okay.

SIGRIST: Mr. Richardson was a civilian sailor in the Merchant Marines and came down with pneumonia and was brought to the Ellis Island Hospital, he thinks probably January of 1947, and he was here for two or three weeks. I also want to say for the sake of the tape that Kevin Daley is running the recording equipment.

Mr. Richardson, can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

RICHARDSON: October 2, 1927.

SIGRIST: Okay, and location of your birth?

RICHARDSON: Aberdeen, Washington.

SIGRIST: Aberdeen, Washington. Washington state, yes?

RICHARDSON: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Yes, Washington State. Just very quickly, can I have a thumbnail sketch of your family background? Nationalities, ethnicity, where your parents came from, that sort of thing.

RICHARDSON: Both of my parents came from Sweden and they both came through Ellis Island, but not married. They didn't meet until—they came from different parts of Sweden. They met in California, Eureka, California.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

RICHARDSON: Werner Richardson.

SIGRIST: Spell Werner, please?

RICHARDSON: W-E-R-N-E-R.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what year he came?

RICHARDSON: It was either he came here when he was fourteen years old and he was all by himself, and I can't remember at the moment whether he was born in 1886, which would make it 1900, which would make it 1898, but I'm not sure this open was 1898 still.

SIGRIST: Yeah, it was. There was a processing facility.

RICHARDSON: Something here, yeah, okay.

SIGRIST: The early part, the turn of the century he came here.

RICHARDSON: Yeah. My mother came five years or so later.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

RICHARDSON: Signe Johnson.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Signe, please?

RICHARDSON: S-I-G-N-E.

SIGRIST: And spell Johnson for me.

RICHARDSON: J-O-H-N-S-O-N, but she had her name anglicized, as my father did, also. Her name was J-O-N-N-S-O-N, which I still have relatives over there which I know by that name. (They laugh.)

SIGRIST: And she came, you say, about five years later, after your father.

RICHARDSON: Uh-hmm. My father's name was Rikerson.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the original spelling of that?

RICHARDSON: I believe it was R-I-K-E-R-S-O-N, Riker being Richard in Swedish, and they anglicized it.

SIGRIST: Well, all of that done—

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how you got involved in the Merchant Marines.

RICHARDSON: I got in the Merchant Marines when I got out of high school and the war was still going on in '45, and so I decided I would stay in. When the war was over, I would stay in and make a few trips and see the world, and I did manage. Went to the Panama Canal, got over on this side and I got on a ship in Baltimore. I'd just come back from a trip to Sweden, got off in Baltimore.

SIGRIST: Did you go to Sweden as a Merchant Marine?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit—because we don't find that many Merchant Marines who ended up here. If you could explain to me a little bit about what the appeal was of the Merchant Marines. Why did you want to become a Merchant Marine?

RICHARDSON: Well, when I first got into it, my peer group, almost all of them went in the Merchant Marine in high school, and some of them dropped out immediately when the war was over. I got in, the war only lasted about three months while I was in. In fact, I was on the first cargo ship that docked in Yokohama. That was the first ship I was on.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

RICHARDSON: President Taft, and so anyway, I probably could have got out anytime when the war was over. I don't remember how long the draft lasted. If you were in the Merchant Marine, you weren't drafted. But anyway, the draft was no longer a concern, but I figured, well, this would be one chance in my life to see the world a

little bit, so I decided to sail for three years and that's exactly how long I did sail.

SIGRIST: What were your duties as a Merchant Marine?

RICHARDSON: Well, I was in the deck department and I started out the first few trips I was an Ordinary Seaman, and then I became an Able Bodied Seaman.

SIGRIST: I'm just wondering what some of the duties—if you could elaborate on what you actually had to do on these ships.

RICHARDSON: In those days we didn't have automatic—well, there were automatic pilots, but in the ships I was on, they didn't use them. You had to put in your time as a helmsman and a lookout and climb the masts to paint the masts. Everything that was done above decks, was done by the deck department, and it was good experience, really. Learned how to wire splice and rope splice and tie knots and paint and all that stuff.

SIGRIST: When you went to Sweden, can you tell me a little bit about how that felt for you to go to where your ancestors all came from?

RICHARDSON: Not so much because we just went into Stockholm. We were there about three days and I would be working during the days and we had a little bit of shore time. But I didn't really—particularly in those days, I didn't have nearly the feeling of my heritage that I acquired as I grew older. Unfortunately, I didn't learn nearly as much as I should have learned while my parents were alive, but I guess a lot of people have that experience.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me how your parents felt about you going into the Merchant Marines?

RICHARDSON: Well, as far as going in during the war, I had a brother who was in the army who was over in Europe and I think their thoughts were, "Gee, the war will soon be over, we hope," even though it was a surprise because when I joined the Merchant Marine in June, the war was just about ending in Europe. I can't remember if it had ended or just a few days after I graduated, but I mean the war was still going full blast in Japan and we were on a ship heading for the Philippine Island when the word came over about the atomic bomb. I mean, for all we knew, we were going to have two or three years of terrible battles, as valiantly as the Japanese were fighting there. So the atomic bomb was a horrible thing for a lot of people, but it was a wonderful thing for some of us who might not have made it,

because the Merchant Marines suffered tremendous casualties during the war, particularly in the early stages. And I'm sure they would have, too, if they would have had to invade Japan.

SIGRIST: Sure, sure.

RICHARDSON: So I think my folks only thought of it in terms of whether I'd be safe or not.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me—you mentioned to me earlier that you came down with pneumonia.

RICHARDSON: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about maybe how you came down with pneumonia and where you were?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, I got off—I got off this other ship in Baltimore. In those days, once the war was over, it became a little bit more difficult to get a job on a ship, even though they were still relatively plentiful. But unless you had a union certification that you had been in for so many number of years, you got permanent status, then you could stay on a ship more than one trip. Otherwise, you had to get off. You took one trip and got off, and then you had to get another ship, make a trip, get off. So that had happened to me and the ship that came back from Sweden docked in Baltimore and that was the end of the trip. Then you were discharged. You have to get off, and so I don't know how long it took, maybe a week and I got on this ship. It was a wonderful, exciting thing for me because I was going to Africa. I had never dreamed of going—most of the ships were going to Europe after the war, carrying stuff back and forth, as fast as we could haul it. So to go to Africa was really exciting. So we started out of Baltimore and we made five or six stops going up, little ports. I couldn't tell you where now, in New Jersey or Pennsylvania, maybe. Yeah, we were in Philadelphia. Yeah, we stopped in Philadelphia or the port to Philadelphia. So we finally got up here, and this took maybe ten days the ship was getting more loaded at every port coming up and then the final—we were in about three days here and wherever we were anchored—not anchored, docked in New York, and we pulled into that dock and we were taking on our final cargo and a couple days later we were going to be taking off for Africa.

Well, we no sooner got there than the next day—I hadn't been feeling well and I got this fever and felt lousy and they had a Purser on the ship who took my temperature and it turned out to be 102. So she says, "Well, we can't take you out on this trip with that

fever.” And he says, “In fact, we have to take you to the hospital.” So they called and it was right in the middle of winter and it was really a snowy, blizzard type day and they told me to get dressed. So I had all my—a couple guys I knew helped me pack up all my stuff in a duffle bag and this ambulance arrived from Hudson J. Ambulance. I don’t know, are they still around? That was the name of the company. That was a big name. I even had heard of it before I got here. I guess they had really controlled the ambulance business here. So two guys came up on the ship and they were carrying a gurney or a stretcher or something and like I say, I was all dressed and they says, “Well, we can’t—our regulations are that we have to carry you off here,” and I was worried about them slipping because it was all icy and snow. But they insisted. I felt like a fool, anyway, being carried down the gangplank. They put me on the ambulance and they got outside the docking area and they turned on the sirens and were flying through town taking me to this ferry boat. I didn’t consider myself an emergency case at all, but I guess they had their own agenda.

And so we got to this ferry building, which I don’t know where it is. It was in the area where I was today. It was an actual—

SIGRIST: Somewhere in Battery Park.

RICHARDSON: It was an actual ferry building. Then they said, “Okay, this is where you get off, and there will be a boat coming in from Ellis Island.” I don’t know, it was an hour or two. They told me what the time was, and so I climb out of the gurney and they hand me my duffle bag and I go sit in this cold reception room, or whatever it was for an hour—[clears throat]—an hour or two and eventually the ferry boat comes in and this guy comes running out there pushing a gurney and says, “Get in.” So I climb on that. I felt ridiculous climbing on a gurney in the middle of this ferry terminal. So I got on there and he puts a blanket. There was just one guy on this end, and pushed me on the ferry boat and took me across here to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What happened on the ferry boat? Did they put in a special place on the ferry boat?

RICHARDSON: I don’t remember. I had to lie down. It was very exasperating because I wanted to get up and look around.

SIGRIST: Were there other people on the ferry that you can remember?

RICHARDSON: I don’t remember where I was, but this whole episode I felt very conspicuous and silly. I remember (he laughs) that was the

biggest, and I wasn't really feeling that sick. Feverish and all that, but I wasn't, you know, real sick. [Laughs] So that was my main memories of feeling ridiculous, that episode.

SIGRIST: So the ferry came here.

RICHARDSON: Uh-hmm.

SIGRIST: And then what happened?

RICHARDSON: So then, of course, I was already on the gurney and they wheeled me in some place and I don't know. I'm trying to figure out whether that was a dock over here that is no longer being used where the ferry boats came in.

SIGRIST: Could be. There may have been other docks.

RICHARDSON: I'm almost sure it was like end loading, rather than pulling up to the side of it.

SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape that you've actually just come back from Island 2, where you've been walking around looking at the abandoned hospital building.

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But it could be that there were other docks in different places.

RICHARDSON: It could be and I really can't—I don't know how. But anyway, they wheeled me in and I don't remember much details there, but I was taken up to this ward, which now I think is this—what did you call that, these buildings over here?

SIGRIST: On Island 2?

RICHARDSON: Island 2.

SIGRIST: The hospital buildings?

RICHARDSON: Either that or the ones beyond that. We didn't walk over there, and I was placed in a ward, which I told Bridgette, that I remember as holding about forty people.

SIGRIST: Bridgette was—for the sake of the tape, Bridgette was the employee, the National Park Service employee who brought you over to the other side just before we did the interview.

RICHARDSON: Yeah. And as I mentioned to her, there were I would say fifteen to twenty beds, I would guess, on either side. There was a lot of guys in there, forty, and all spaced apart. Very neat and clean.

SIGRIST: Are there certain details about that room that stick out in your mind, about that hospital room?

RICHARDSON: Very neat. Clean. Very few appointments there. It was just stark bed, bed, bed right down the line, as far as I could see. It's something, I've been visiting a lot of hospitals in those ensuring fifty years and I don't recall seeing any wards with that many people in it.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the other people that were in the ward?

RICHARDSON: I don't. That's what—I've told my wife that when we were discussing this today. I don't recall—normally, because I was here two or three weeks, you would think I would meet a buddy or something. I don't know if these people were coming in out. I don't recall. I only remember one person specifically when I was here, and that was not a patient. That was what I assume, the head nurse or the nurse who oversaw the ward and she was a veteran nurse, very kind of tough, take charge. I mean there was no ponking [PH] around in that ward, but I really liked her. In fact, when I left there after two or three weeks and they discharged me, she called me in this room and she said, "I have some advice I want to give you." She says, "You're far too skinny and weak looking." She says, "I think you should go out to a farm some place and work and get plenty of good food and build yourself up before you go out to see again." I remember that advice from her.

And the other, I remember a doctor telling me when they gave me pen—because penicillin hadn't been—of course, it saved so many lives during the war and it was [unclear] developed after World War II. It was still a big thing, penicillin and he was saying—he said I had a rather severe pneumonia and he says, "Really, you're a very lucky person that penicillin was invented or developed during the war by the English."

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how sick you were. How were you feeling? What was—you mentioned the fever already, but I mean once you got here, what happened and specifically how did they treat you? What was the regiment of treatment?

RICHARDSON: All I remember is getting penicillin shots, and I don't remember how many I had, but that was it.

SIGRIST: They did it as a shot?

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—

RICHARDSON: In the buttocks and I remember just almost immediately I felt fine, you know. I felt weak and I don't know if my appetite resumed right away, but I didn't weigh much in those days anyway. So I looked more feeble than I actually was to her.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any other kind of medication that was given to you while you were here?

RICHARDSON: No, just penicillin, that was it. That I remember.

SIGRIST: What about in terms of exercise?

RICHARDSON: Well, I don't know how many days, but it wasn't long before I was out of that bed and then I would get up. I would still stay here and I would get up and I would dress. At least I would dress enough so I could get around, because I wandered around that building a lot over there. I kept thinking—I didn't realize this other processing building, which is the main building we're looking at today. I didn't realize it was here. I never got over here and I envisioned my parents over there, wherever I was, and I remember there was one ramp going down, which I have seen a ramp like that in newsreels or something, since then. We couldn't get in the building, so I don't know where it is over there, and I remember envisioning them coming down there, each one by themselves.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting.

RICHARDSON: But that's not where they were. (laughs)

SIGRIST: That's interesting that you would sort of envision, you know, that's your experience of Ellis Island, so you just sort of assumed that that was their experience.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, and I had plenty of time. I was just putting—I felt like I could go home, but they were really wonderful to me and they wanted me to stay here and recuperate before I went out and got a relapse.

SIGRIST: What do you remember seeing as you were wandering around? Did you see things that stuck out in your mind as being unusual or interesting?

RICHARDSON: Oh, I think that that age you don't find things interesting. Now I find everything I see here interesting. In those days, I mean, but I was only eighteen at that time. Nineteen, I guess. No wait, let's see—

SIGRIST: Well, you were born in '27. So you would have been twenty, I guess, later on that year.

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, I just—

RICHARDSON: You just want to get on with your life and do things. I mean, I wasn't in a history mode then. Now I'm in history and—

SIGRIST: Well, I don't even mean history so much as things that just struck you, like a certain part of the room—a certain part of the area that you walked in that was unusual for some reason. Or maybe an unusual patient that you saw. Something that would have stuck out in your mind. But maybe not.

RICHARDSON: It didn't because to me, just thinking back on it today, it's just amazing how I can't think. Every other place I've been in my life practically, on different ships, we'd meet a group of guys and you always remember one or two guys you get to be a buddy, but I don't recall that happening here.

SIGRIST: What about eating? Where did they feed you here?

RICHARDSON: Oh, I eat in bed, and then I went to some kind of a hall to eat later, as I got well.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any details about that?

RICHARDSON: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what they fed it?

RICHARDSON: Whatever was good. I thought it was fine, yeah.

SIGRIST: What about eating in bed when you first got here, do you—

RICHARDSON: I probably wasn't eating too much at that time, but I mean the penicillin was just unbelievable. You know, in a day or two—you were deathly ill one day and then the penicillin, I just felt wonderful.

SIGRIST: What about visitors? Did you have any visitors? Anyone who came to see you?

RICHARDSON: No. I had one friend on the ship who came from the same part of the country, and we were buddies. We had made the trip to Sweden together and then we parted, and as far as I know, I have never seen him to this day, even though he lives out in California now. So I was strictly on my own.

SIGRIST: I see. So no one was coming to see you. What about entertainment? Did they offer any kind of entertainment to the patients that you could enjoy?

RICHARDSON: I don't know if there was a movie or something or not. I don't—I just don't recall that.

SIGRIST: You probably just, like you said (laughs), wanted to get it over with and get out of there.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, I guess, but I have pleasant memories of being here. It wasn't like I was being detained some place. It was pleasant.

SIGRIST: Do you remember walking outside for any reason? Or being allowed to go outside of the building?

RICHARDSON: Oh, I'm sure I was and I'm sure I wandered around out here, but I think it was so cold. It was right in the snowy time of the year and there was snow all over, that I don't think I would spend much time. But I did—walking in these—going in these tunnels that I did today, I know I walked around a lot of those. I just wandered around an awful lot.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh.

RICHARDSON: And I don't know to this day if only—when they sent me here, they said, "We're sending you to the"—yeah, they called it the Marine Hospital, which a term they use not for US Marines, but for Merchant Marine. The Marine Hospital at Ellis Island. Now, I don't know if there was any other kind of hospital here at that time.

SIGRIST: No, it was the Marine Hospital at that time.

RICHARDSON: Is that what they called it?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: The Coast Guard was out here at that time and, you know, different—

RICHARDSON: Well, we were kind of under the wing of the Coast Guard. In fact, I think the Merchant Marines still is now.

SIGRIST: Well, that would make sense in terms of, you know, what was being used here.

RICHARDSON: So maybe there were so Coast Guardmen in here, too. I don't know.

SIGRIST: Does anything else stick out in your mind about being here? You said that you were here for about two or three weeks, and for instance, we could talk about being let go of here. What do you remember about the experience of actually being released?

RICHARDSON: I remember that little lecture the nurse gave me. She thought I'd be better off, because she was certainly concerned about a relapse and going out in this winter. I don't know where I could have gone to a farm (laughs). That was the last thing that I could do. I appreciated her mentioning that, the concern that she seemed to show.

SIGRIST: Do you remember—you speak of this nurse that you remember and one of the doctors. Do you remember what kind of staff they had here? I don't mean about individuals necessarily, but who were tending the wards?

RICHARDSON: I don't know.

SIGRIST: I mean, were there other nurses? Were there male orderlies?

RICHARDSON: I think there were other nurses, but I don't know. I just don't remember.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

RICHARDSON: I don't remember that. I remember this one, one nurse who would stop by and chat with me all the time and maybe she was the only

one nurse. It wasn't like a private hospital with somebody (laughs) waiting on you all the time. You did everything yourself.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to communicate outside of the hospital? For instance, could you make a phone call if you wanted to?

RICHARDSON: I suppose. I had nobody to communicate with. Then when I left here and then I got off, I went to Union Hall and I got a ship that was going back to San Francisco. So that's what I did.

SIGRIST: So you were released from here and you got on another ship.

RICHARDSON: Oh, wait a minute. Now, did I? No, I made a couple trips to Europe first, that's right, and then I come back.

SIGRIST: So the ship to Africa went without you (he laughs)?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, that was one I'd have loved to have made because it went in the Mediterranean and through the Suez Canal. I remember it went to Portugal and Durban. It would have been a fantastic trip.

SIGRIST: Well, since Mrs. Richardson has been so patient (laughs) today through all this, let me just ask you, when did you get married?

RICHARDSON: We just celebrated our fortieth anniversary. Our daughter threw us a terrific party three weeks ago.

SIGRIST: So 1957?

RICHARDSON: Ah, yes.

SIGRIST: And can you say what Mrs. Richardson's name is?

RICHARDSON: Ah, Louise.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

RICHARDSON: Howard.

SIGRIST: H-O-W-A-R-D?

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned a daughter, is that your only child?

RICHARDSON: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And what is her name?

RICHARDSON: Her name is Janet Hogan. She just married Michael Hogan.

SIGRIST: H-O-G-A-N?

RICHARDSON: H-O-G-A-N, uh-huh.

SIGRIST: And just tell me today, this is the first time you visited Ellis Island since 1947?

RICHARDSON: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: How did it feel to be back here or did it feel any way specific to actually go back there and see the hospital?

RICHARDSON: Oh, I was very excited. I can't believe my fortune of running and talking to Bridgette there who—

SIGRIST: Bumping into Bridgette.

RICHARDSON: Who had, number one, got me involved with you, but also the fact that I got to see that area because I would have gone home tonight wondering, "What the—am I having hallucinations? I know that's not the Ellis Island I know." This I recognize. I recognize those little wings sticking out.

SIGRIST: The layout of the hospital building.

RICHARDSON: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Which is very different, of course, than here in the main building.

RICHARDSON: Yeah. The only thing, I do not have memories of even looking over at that time big edifice over there, which is quite striking.

SIGRIST: Well, of course, a lot of the wards all face going in the other direction.

RICHARDSON: Maybe that was it. Maybe so I didn't see over that way too much.

SIGRIST: My last question is for you to explain your first name. Sig, what is that?

RICHARDSON: Well, that comes because my mother was Signe and in that part of Sweden, which is Öland, which is an island off the coast of Sweden.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

RICHARDSON: O-L-A-N-D, and the O's umlauts, whatever they are. Two little dots over the O. Apparently that's the name because I did go back there. A few years ago we went back there and I met the first Sigvard I have ever met in my life.

SIGRIST: Sigbar?

RICHARDSON: Sigvard, V.

SIGRIST: Vard.

RICHARDSON: V-A-R-D.

SIGRIST: S-I-G-V-A-R-D.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, and I met the first one.

SIGRIST: Is that your full name, Sigvard?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, that's my first name.

SIGRIST: And Sig is short for that, Sigvard. Okay.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, probably should have said that, but I never use that.

SIGRIST: It's a great name. I've never interviewed anyone named Sigvard.

RICHARDSON: I'm not sure. [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Great. Mr. Richardson, than you very much for taking some time out from this trip and answering our questions, and I appreciate it.

RICHARDSON: Well, thank you, Paul, it's been fun.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Sig Richardson on Monday, May 12th, 1997 at Ellis Island. Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

