

**EI-978**

**BETTY MADELINE RAGSDALE THOMAS**

**BIRTH DATE: APRIL 13, 1921**

**INTERVIEW DATE: FEBRUARY 19, 1998**

**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 76**

**RUNNING TIME: 29:40**

**INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.**

**RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY**

**INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO**

**TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JAMES COE 7/2007**

**TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: Irv Silberg**

**HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Ms. Thomas is a US citizen who worked for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at Ellis Island from 1949 to 1954**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, February 19, 1998. I'm at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in the recording studio and I'm here with Mrs. Betty Thomas. Mrs. Thomas worked at Ellis Island for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and she worked here on the island from 1949 to 1954. I should also say that Mrs. Thomas continues to work for the INS. Thank you very much for coming out. I should say Kevin Daley, who is running the equipment arranged to, to find Mrs. Thomas and I'm very happy that he did. Mrs. Thomas, can we begin by you giving me your full name, please?

THOMAS: My full name is Madeline Thomas.

SIGRIST: And maiden name?

THOMAS: My maiden name is Ragsdale. R-A-G-S-D-A-L-E-.

SIGRIST: Thank you. You don't have to but if you'd like to, would you give us your birth date?

THOMAS: Well I'll say that I was born in Hudson, New York, in April of the year that I don't want to reveal.

SIGRIST: Okay. (Both laugh)

THOMAS: But, of course, it's no big secret. I was born in 1921.

SIGRIST: So April...

THOMAS: Thirteenth, 1921.

SIGRIST: 1921. Thank you. In Hudson, New York.

THOMAS: Hudson, New York.

SIGRIST: A little bit upstate. Can we begin --- before we start talking about how you got your job at the INS, just give me a little bit of your family background? A little bit of information about your parents and where they came from and that sort of thing?

THOMAS: Yes. My parents were Lettie Harnett Ragsdale and William Ragsdale.

SIGRIST: Lettie?

THOMAS: Lettie. L-E-T-T-I-E. And they were both born in the state of Virginia in Halifax County. And they migrated up where we were born. The fam-- all the children were born there. And they lived there all our lives and that's where they died and that's where they're buried. I've never visited their

home because when we were growing up, we never got the opportunity to go to their birthplace. And I had nine siblings. Three brothers --- te --- uh, seven brothers and two sisters besides myself. And we all were born and reared in the same place and went to school there and everything.

SIGRIST: That would be Hudson, in New York?

THOMAS: In Hudson, right. And I left Hudson about 1942 and came to New York to live, Where I subsequently went to Washington, D.C. to work. And I came back to New York and I've been living there ever since, ever since I returned to New York.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about how you decided that you wanted to work for the Immigration and Naturalization Service and how that all happened.

THOMAS: Well at the time, I was looking for work so what I did was I got the phone book one day and I went through the entire book and copied down names of places where I thought I would like to work and sent out applications. And when the applications started coming back, I got applications from Governor's Island, Ward's Island, Ellis Island. I got applications from all the islands. And I turned down all the other applications because I had to work in hospitals directly with patients. And at the time I had an infant niece and I used to visit home very frequently and I didn't want to contract anything that I thought I might give her. So I waited and the final application came was Ellis Island and when I read the requirements, I decided that was for me and that's how I started working at Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Ha --- where were you in terms of --- were you out of school by this point?

THOMAS: Oh yes. Yes. I was, you know, working at various places like factories and what have you and I was putting in applications the whole time I was working on these odd jobs and finally was called.

SIGRIST: Was this the first job in government service?

THOMAS: Yes it was the first government job.

SIGRIST: What did you know about Ellis Island? What --- at that time?

THOMAS: At that time I didn't know anything, really. I knew that this is where the aliens came, you know, to be processed, but that was all I knew. You know? And when I came, we used to have orientation classes and meetings and what not and they would tell us the history of the island and how the aliens came in. And, and at some point, I can't remember exactly when, I did work at the barge office which was also connected with the --- with Ellis Island. And I worked there for a short time and it seems as though I worked there for a short time and then came back to the island. I don't know whether it was like an intermediate position or a, or a, you know, detail or what. But I do know I worked at the barge office for a time. And that's where they used to bring in the records from -- from the Quarantine where the men used to [not understood] to the ship and -- and testing people. You know, interview the people on the ship before they let them off the, off the ship.

SIGRIST: Where was the barge office?

THOMAS: It was downtown. I was passing there today and I couldn't locate the site because it's so changed now/ But it was near one of the piers and of course all the piers have been redone and some of them are not there anymore. So I don't know exactly the location but it was near the -- near the

boat site where we took the sh --- you know, the boat every day. But now the exact address, I don't know.

SIGRIST: And you think that your time at the barge office, you'd already been at Ellis Island for a little while and then you went to the barge office?

THOMAS: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: I see. So it was sort of in the middle of everything.

THOMAS: Right. It was in the middle of everything.

SIGRIST: I see. Great. Well maybe we can get back to that. After you filled out your application and you were accepted, what was the next step? Did you have an interview or something of that nature prior to beginning work?

THOMAS: Well, no. I was told to report for duty and that's where I got all of my training or information. After I reported for duty.

SIGRIST: And where did you report to?

THOMAS: To Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Oh. So you came out here.

THOMAS: Yes.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about that first trip out here?

THOMAS: Not much. All I know is that I recall riding on the boat and getting breakfast on the boat and, you know, exploring all the surroundings. But there wasn't

too much that was outstanding that I would remember on the boat. But I enjoyed the ride. (laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little more about your impressions about that first day that you were here. You said that they gave you a sort of orientation and tell me some of --- more about what sticks out in your mind about that.

THOMAS: Well I was assigned to, you know, a desk and an office and introduced to my supervisor. And as I say, I was given work to do and the work was explained -- you know, my duties were explained to me by the supervisor. And that was about, about it. It was mainly at the time typing reports on the incoming aliens. And as I recall there were little cards that we had to type up which gave the information about the person -- his name, his nationality, his time of arrival, his date of birth, his place of birth, mostly vital statistics. And the type of entrant --- entry that he came, you know. They had a, it had a symbol. And those, those cards were filed away for further information and this was part of the process of the alien. I didn't come in contact directly with the alien, but the information was given to me to put on these cards.

SIGRIST: And, and am I to understand that these are current incoming aliens?

THOMAS: Right.

SIGRIST: These aren't from forty years before...

THOMAS: No.

SIGRIST: ...this was all...

THOMAS: No, no.

SIGRIST: I see.

THOMAS: We, we processed them as they came in. Because at that time, the inspectors used to go directly to the ship and interview the aliens and they would bring back the material to the office. And then we would have to transcribe it, type it, whatever.

SIGRIST: How many other people were doing the same job that you were?

THOMAS: Well now, hmm, that's a good question. It must have been --- I don't know how large the staff was, but it must have been at least ten or twelve people. It must have been. I knew I wasn't the only one, but I was one of several.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where the office was located in terms of in the building itself or how you got to the office?

THOMAS: It seems to me a twelve sticks in my mind. Now I don't know if the building had twelve floors at the time or not, but that seems to be the number that sticks with me. And when I would enter the building, I would go up the stairs. And the entrance that they have now, it seems like that stairs on the right coming in are the stairs that I used to ascend. Now I'm not too clear on that, but I think that's how I used to enter my office. And as I say, if it was twelve, I don't know, I don't recall if I walked up twelve flights of stairs, but that number sticks with me. I don't really know how many floors there were at the time.

SIGRIST: What are some of the details of the office that stick out in your mind? The room itself?

THOMAS: Well it was just a room, a big room with desks all over it. It wasn't partitioned off like an office. It was just maybe like a pool like, you know, those that they call a typing pool? And it had several people in the one room doing the same work.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that you met your supervisor. Do you remember who that person was?

THOMAS: Molly Giossa was her name.

SIGRIST: Giossa?

THOMAS: Giossa. G-I-O-S-S-A, I think was her name.

SIGRIST: And what sticks out in your mind about her?

THOMAS: Oh, she was a very – a very nice person. In fact, she introduced me to the credit union and I didn't realize how easy it was to become a member. And the very first day that I came to work, I became a member of the credit union and I'm still a member of the credit union. All – all I had to do was contribute five dollars and I became a member [not understood] shares.

SIGRIST: Can you explain, for the sake of the tape, just what the credit union was at that time?

THOMAS: It, it's a, an organization that benefits the employees because you can borrow money, you can buy shares, you can set --- you can bank ---. Well, it's like a bank --- bank money. And you didn't have to go through any red tape to do it. You do it only on your salary, your name, your grade. You didn't have to involve anybody else. You can do it on your own, which made it very nice, you know?

SIGRIST: Tell me --- you mentioned the typing of the cards, the information, were there any other duties involved in your job?

THOMAS: Well mainly that was it. Typing up the information about, you know, the aliens and keeping records and, of course, file them away into proper places and just general office, you know, routine work.

SIGRIST: Were you ever asked to do a job that was very different than your usual job?

THOMAS: Hmm. I know one time (I don't remember whether it was Ellis Island or Seventy Columbus) I once had to escort an alien to an airport -- a female alien to the airport. And I have gone on details out of the city at various times and...

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about escorting the alien to the airport? What that experience was like?

THOMAS: Well yes. The person was a detainee and they were being sent back to their home country and they had to have, they always had to have another person in the car with the driver and they asked me to be that escort for this female alien. And we rode in a van that was --- we sat in the back. And the driver, of course, was in the front and the person was handcuffed and all that, you know. But it was just that I had to be there to see that they didn't escape and, you know, nothing happened and all that sort of thing. It was quite an experience.

SIGRIST: Do you know how you felt about having to do that?

THOMAS: Yeah, well, I didn't really feel afraid or anything because it was just a matter of being there, you know. I didn't have to do anything and so that didn't

bother me. And then at one point (after Ellis Island, when I worked up at Seventy Columbus) I used to chauffer people back and forth to Camp Kilmer, where was --- that was a place set up for the influx of the, I think the Hungarians or Polish people when they came in -- in the sixties. And I used to drive employees back and forth for that. I've had a bit of a variety of jobs in the service but as far as pinpointing detailed things about Ellis Island, which was so long ago, I can't remember all the little details that it entailed. But still, very interesting. I enjoy it.

SIGRIST: Well you're doing a good job. Well, of course, you worked for the INS for a long time so, I mean, it makes sense that your jobs would change. Tell me what your daily routine was from the time --- where were you living when you worked at Ellis Island?

THOMAS: I was living at my present address.

SIGRIST: Which is --- you don't have to give the address, but what part of New York?

THOMAS: In Manhattan.

SIGRIST: In Manhattan. So what was --- what time did you get up in the morning to get to Battery Park?

THOMAS: Well, I usually got up around five thirty, six o'clock. And by the time I was prepared to -- you know, because I had to make the every quarter an hour time. So you had to, you know, be here at a specific time to get the boat in order to get over here at eight thirty.

SIGRIST: So how did you get to Battery Park from where you lived?

THOMAS: Oh, on the --- by the subway.

SIGRIST: Right on the subway. And then you got on the boat and you said eight thirty was your...

THOMAS: Was my sign in time.

SIGRIST: You had to be at your desk at eight thirty. You said sign in. Is that what you did when you came in?

THOMAS: Yes, when we came in, we signed in at eight thirty.

SIGRIST: And then how long would you work before you got a break?

THOMAS: Well the breaks were, were time --- you know, mean you had a time to take a break, they gave scheduled times to different people. Like maybe my break might have been ten o'clock or might've been nine forty-five, but it was, it varied, you know. We didn't all have the break at the same time. We all had different times with the breaks.

SIGRIST: What would you do during your break?

THOMAS: Well I usually went down to the cafeteria and maybe got some munchies or something because they had a restaurant right downstairs and that's where I would probably go.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things you remember about going to the cafeteria?

THOMAS: They used to have delicious lunches and they were very cheap. (Both laugh) Every holiday -- Christmas and Thanksgiving and all the major holidays -- they'd have a special dinner, dessert included. And the whole

dinner was fifty cents. Now that I recall distinctly because it was unbelievable. You got the dinner and all the trimmings for fifty cents.

SIGRIST: The cafeteria and who, who else went to the cafeteria?

THOMAS: Well everybody practically because this was the only place we had to—to eat, unless you brought your lunch. And if you brought your lunch, you could go out on the grounds and sit on the grass, you know, and eat and spend your lunch hour out there because there wasn't much to do other than that, you know, because you couldn't go -- there was no place to go -- can't swim.

SIGRIST: Where couldn't you go on the island?

THOMAS: Well we -- we were restricted from the, you know, like the hospitals or the living quarters of the aliens and any of the aliens' quarters, we were not allowed in. That was their, their domain. But any place else on the island, we could wander all over the island. We could, you know, sit wherever we want, go eat wherever we wanted to, go walk around. But we just didn't go into the quarters of the aliens.

SIGRIST: Was there an occasion that you remember where you actually saw an alien or saw something going on that involved the aliens?

THOMAS: Well we would see them --- they had an area where the children played, I think on one of the roofs. And you could, you know, see them actin' -- you know -- active up there and playing and running around and whatnot. But not on the grounds. They were -- they were in their quarters. And they did have -- the quarters were sectioned off, you know, fenced in so they couldn't hurt themselves or anything. But as far as coming in contact with them, no. I never came in contact with the aliens.

SIGRIST: Now in the, you worked from 1949 to 1954...

THOMAS: Right.

SIGRIST: ...during that time did your job change in any way?

THOMAS: Oh, I might have gone from one section to another, because they did have different sections and some of the work involved, you know, some of the other sections. And in that respect I did. I would go from one place to the other.

SIGRIST: When you say sections, do you mean just a different location or a group doing something different all together?

THOMAS: Yeah. A different section of the s—of the same office. You know, I don't remember whether the seamen --- they had a seamen section here or not. But I do know I did work in a seaman section where I had to keep records of seamen, You know, when they came in and the time that they were allowed to stay in the -- in the States and things like that. But I'm not sure whether it was here. I'm confusing here with Seventy Columbus because they were close. You know, I went from one place to the other. So some of the -- some of my duties were -- might be the ones I did when I got to Seventy Columbus. Because I know I did work in the seamen section and that they did have a seamen section up there. Now whether they had one here or not, I don't know. And I don't know the name of the section I worked in when I was here but I do know that we had to keep records of the aliens.

SIGRIST: We should say for the sake of the tape, someone listening to this interview, should know that when you say Seventy Columbus, you're referring to

Seventy Columbus Avenue, which is where the Immigration and Naturalization Service moved to and is still there I think, are they not?

THOMAS: No, no. They, they, that's why we moved downtown. They had to give that place up, too. That place is now, I don't know what it is, but they tore the building down.

SIGRIST: I see. I'm mistaken.

THOMAS: See that was an office while Ellis Island was an office. So, you know, part of the staff, that's where this young lady came from. She worked at Seventy Columbus and that's why she used to come over here at intervals. See they used to, you know, people back and forth.

SIGRIST: [not understood] whom we're going to interview next.

THOMAS: Yes, yes. So Seventy Columbus is, you know, where the other part of this Ellis Island was at that time.

SIGRIST: Did you have a uniform that you had to wear?

THOMAS: No, I never wore a uniform.

SIGRIST: So what did you wear to work?

THOMAS: Just regular clothes.

SIGRIST: Well what's a regular clothes in 1950? Describe it for me.

THOMAS: Well in 19, 1950, you couldn't wear slacks. That's for sure. We had to wear, you know, either dresses or business suits or something along that

line. But there were no pants during that time. We didn't start pants until when they moved up Twenty West I believe, and that was years later.

SIGRIST: Because you were --- it was a government position, was there some sort of an evaluation process that you had to undergo as part of this job?

THOMAS: Well they, they, well they still do that, I think, every March. Every March they give evaluations and your progress and what not, progress report. And, you know, they...

SIGRIST: And they were doing that then. Was there something that you had to do here that you really didn't like to do? I guess what I'm saying is, what was the worst part of the job?

THOMAS: I don't know. I can't think of a worst part.

SIGRIST: Well, what was your favorite part of the job?

THOMAS: Well I really enjoyed the work that I did. I don't, I can't think of any unpleasant moments here in Ellis Island. The work was, the work was okay. I don't recall any, you know, any bad experiences or anything that I disliked to do.

SIGRIST: Were you here when they closed the island in 1954?

THOMAS: Yes I was.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about them shutting the island down?

THOMAS: Well we were forced to move to Seventy Columbus, I know that. I had just returned not long before they moved and -- because I was out on maternity

leave while I was here. And when I came back, I was here for a short time before they moved uptown. In fact, before I left here, they were transferring people up to Seventy Columbus and they were asking people to go and there was one girl who wanted to go up there and I didn't want to go. I mean, I liked Ellis Island. I was waiting until I had to go and they – they permitted me to trade places with her and they sent her there and let me stay on the island. Shortly after that, of course, they closed it anyway. So I had to go, but I didn't, you know -- I enjoyed working on the island. The whole experience was nice.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the details about closing down your office here at the island? What had to be done before you actually moved up to Seventy Columbus Avenue?

THOMAS: Well I -- what happened when we left, it seemed like they were just transferring people from here to there. But as far as closing down and packing up and what, I had nothing to do with any of that. All I had to do was take my body and go. But they would tell us when we had to leave.

SIGRIST: I see.

THOMAS: And when I had to leave, that's what I did. And I had to report up there at the date that I had to report. But I had nothing to do with the actual moving.

SIGRIST: It was sort of all done for you.

THOMAS: Yeah, all we had to do was report when, you know, when we were told to report.

SIGRIST: One question that comes to mind before we end, what was the, what was the ethic mix of your coworkers?

THOMAS: It was quite a mix, but I think there were more ---. When I, in fact, when I first came to this -- to this agency, I noticed the, the difference. It was --- I think there were more of -- the more of the -- the Negro population had the lesser jobs -- like worked in the file rooms and places like that. And the other people worked -- had, you know, other positions like typist and supervisors and whatnot. And I -- I noticed that when I first came in, I -- I thought it was strange. Because, see I had worked other places and I hadn't found that to be so. And I worked, like I say, I worked in Washington and even there it was, you know, the ratio was -- was not like it was here. And I couldn't understand it because that was supposed --- that was South and this is North and but -- that's how it was.

SIGRIST: Did you as an African American feel any kind of prejudice when you worked here at all -- during your Ellis Island time, anyway?

THOMAS: Well not really because the -- the job I had didn't entail any -- that much competition or anything. But what did happen to me while (this was at the barge office, which I said was connected) I did notice for a time there they kept -- people coming in, new employees. And I had been there by this time like two years or three years like this and there was (I had a supervisor, I think his name was Mr. Brown, Braun, whatnot). And I noticed that, you know, they -- I wasn't moving, I was just sitting there and people, new employees were coming in. So I went to him one day and I expressed my, you know, distaste for this sort of thing. And I told him that I had been there and I see people coming in daily and -- and not daily but, you know, periodically. And they were in higher positions and whatnot and I was wondering why I didn't, why I wasn't moving.

And this man -- that very same day, I have to hand it to him. He got on the telephone and I don't know who he called or what he did or what strings he

pulled or whatnot, but before the end of the week, I got a promotion. And that was, you know, a plus for me. Because, you know, by this time I -- I couldn't understand it, why this was happening. So whatever happened, you know, he made it possible for me to get a promotion and that was about the worst experience that I had, you know, during that time.

SIGRIST: I see.

THOMAS: And it worked out okay.

SIGRIST: And, as we said at the beginning, you're still working for the INS.

THOMAS: Yes, I'm still here. I'm still here.

SIGRIST: Well Mrs. Thomas, I want to thank you very much. It's been a pleasure to meet you and it was very nice of you to let me ask you these questions about your time here. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Betty Thomas on Thursday, February 19, 1998 at Ellis Island. Thank you very much.

THOMAS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW