

EI-998/WILBERDING

EI-998  
JOHN HENRY WILBERDING  
BIRTH DATE: MAY 9, 1922  
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 11, 1998  
RUNNING TIME: 1:00:43  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.  
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME  
INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO  
USING THE PORTABLE DAT RECORDER  
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL SIGRIST, JR., 11/1998

GERMANY, 1928  
AGE 6  
PASSAGE ON "THE COLUMBUS"

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the  
National Park Service. Today is Monday, May  
11th, 1998. I'm in the Ellis Island recording  
studio, using the portable DAT machine, and  
I'm here with Mr. John Henry Wilberding. Mr.  
Wilberding came from Germany in 1928. He was  
six and a half when he arrived in the United  
States. And he was detained here at Ellis  
Island for two weeks. Present also with us is  
Ella Wilberding, Mr. Wilberding's wife. Can we  
begin, sir, by you giving me your birth date?

WILBERDING: The ninth day of May, 1900 and 22.

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SIGRIST: And where in Germany were you born?

WILBERDING: Ruchendorf, Germany.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

WILBERDING: R-U-C-H-E-N-D-O-R-F.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little something about the town.

WILBERDING: Well, it's a small town. I was born a house that my  
great great grandfather had built. It was about  
three hundred years old when I was born there.  
And it had a thatched roof. It had the stork  
on. living in the chimney. And it was a small  
community where everybody knew each other. And  
it was a community of farmers; they lived in the  
community and then the farms lay outside the  
community.

SIGRIST: And where was your house?

WILBERDING: The house was (he clears his throat), there was a

main, there's one road, cobblestone road, and it  
was right on, right on that road.

SIGRIST: Do you know anything about the day you were born?  
Did anyone ever tell you a story...

WILBERDING: Yes. My mother told me that I was the fourth of  
the, of the boys. I had three sisters who had died  
in infancy. And I was the fourth boy and they  
were a little bit afraid they would lose me.  
Apparently, I had some lung problems so they  
decided to lay me in the sun. The sun, the heat  
of the sun, apparently, did some good because  
I've been able to talk ever since. And the  
name in question. They, some wanted one name and,  
of course, the neighbors were all involved in  
naming a child and, but my mother insisted  
on John and so that's what happened. And, of  
course, there was the usual growing up things in  
Germany, the fun and games that we played as  
children.

SIGRIST: What are some of the things that come to your mind  
when you think about your life prior to coming to

the United States?

WILBERDING: Well, I (he clears his throat), excuse me, I think about many times of the simplicity of games. For example, one was called coodling, C-O-O-D-L-I-N-G. You just took a, a round, you had a round log and you cut a slice of that log off. And then you chose up teams and it, you tried to get the, to roll that slab of wood across a certain imaginary line. And the other team tried to stop it by throwing sticks in front of it. That was one of the games. And, of course, hide and go seek and the normal children's games. But every child had a, had a chore to do also. They, it wasn't just the fun and games. And then hoops, we had the barrel hoops you'd hit with a stick and you played with that, you know. And there were swings and things of that nature.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a chore. Did you have a chore as a...?

WILBERDING: Oh, yes. Our, my chore was to help take care of the geese. But almost every family had a flock of

geese and you drove them to pasture. And then it was your job to watch them. And my brother, who was two years older than I, had that chore. And it's interesting to herd geese, I guess you'd call it herding, because once in a while you'd have a mean gander and they would really attack. And I remember this one time he had a hold of my brother, his beak had him by the hair. And he was beating him with his wings, and I was beating the goose with a stick. (he laughs) And it finally got, and, and also herding cows, had to watch the cows. That, that was the chore of the children. And then, of course, had to help around the house. But I was fortunate there. My, I was my grandmother's pet when she was living with us so I didn't have to do much of that.

SIGRIST: What are some of your memories of your grandmother?

WILBERDING: Oh, my grandmother was a rather strict, very proper, very loving at that, but it was difficult, it seems to me always for Germans to show affection for fear it might turn boys into sissies. And, so, the hug that she gave me was rare but she

always took care of me, though.

SIGRIST: Whose mother was she?

WILBERDING: She was my father's mother.

SIGRIST: And why did she come to live with you?

WILBERDING: Well, see, my father died in February and I was born in May. That left my mother a widow. So she came to live with us because her husband had died, Grandpa had died, and she wanted to be a part of a family and she could help my mother, also, in raising the four of us.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you can tell me about something that you did with your grandmother or something that happened that involved you and your grandmother?

WILBERDING: Yes, yes, indeed. (he laughs) In the, in the house that we had, the houses, on one end where the people, on the other end were the animals. And I loved to go with her as she did her part for the

animals. And then every afternoon she would take a nap. And they had, the beds were in the wall and they had the curtains there or some, some of them had door. And it was always next to the warmest place, next to the built in stove. And so I had a chance to take a nap with her. She'd, I, I can always remember, boy, that was such a cozy place. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Grandmother was warm.

WILBERDING: Oh, yeah, yeah. She sure was.

SIGRIST: You've, you've mentioned, you described the outside of the house. You've mentioned some of the details about the inside of the house. What are some of the other details about the inside of the house that stick out, stick out in your mind?

WILBERDING: Well, the, there were no stoves, per se, as we know them. There was a big, like a fireplace and that had an oven in it for baking the bread. And then it had the arms to cook the in the pots and, also, you could used the oven for cooking. And most of,

the wood was very scarce so the fuel was peat which was harvested at a, I can't remember whether the spring of the year. And that was another chore that children had to help with. They would go to the peat bogs and had a special spade that would cut it. And they were probably eight, ten inches long and maybe four inches wide and thick. And that was all wet and you had to stack it and so that was used as the fuel for cooking.

SIGRIST: Any other details about the inside of the house?  
Furniture, room arrangement...?

WILBERDING: Well, furniture was tables and chairs. The farmers didn't have that much furniture. What they had was sturdy and, of course, in those days, it was the kerosene lanterns. And other than that I really don't, I really don't remember too much about furniture.

SIGRIST: Okay. Well, you started talking about your father. You said he died a couple of months before you were born.

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was his name?

WILBERDING: His name was Henry.

SIGRIST: Henry. And what did he die of? What were the  
circumstances?

WILBERDING: Well, (he clears his throat) he was in World War One  
and he was gassed in World War One. I, I surmised  
with the gas that the Germans themselves used,  
and he died of pneumonia, had lung problems from  
that.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your father's family  
background?

WILBERDING: Well, I, he had two, three brothers. One of them  
died on the Russian front. His name was Frank.  
And the one, two came to America. And really  
that's about, there's very little known about,  
they were in the process now of trying to get a

history. And we can get that back so far to the 1700s.

SIGRIST: Were there things that your mother told you, maybe, as you were growing up, about your father?

WILBERDING: Oh, yes, yes. That he was the (he clears his throat), he loved, of course, his family. He was a hard worker. He always dreamed of, of farming and that was his goal, to acquire enough land to support his family, which he had done. Which was forty hectares, which is quite a, you know, sizeable farm for a farmer at that time. And we had many pictures of him as a soldier and also as, as a father. But, you know, other than that, there wasn't much that she said about it.

SIGRIST: Was there ever, were you ever given anything that was his?

WILBERDING: No. See, that was the tragedy. All the things that we brought from Germany and I'm reminded in the Great Hall there the, the rattan cases, you know, the suitcases and we had those. And then, in

1942, the house we had burned and it burned everything. Yes, I had been given, which she told me was mine, was a communal pipe. It was a long stem and they would sit around that stem and each had a bowl and they had a tube that ran to them and they would smoke individual bowls. And each one had a crest on it that belonged to whoever was smoking it. And we had two of those and one of those was supposed to be mine. But then, when the house burned up, everything burned. So memories and everything.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your mother's name?

WILBERDING: Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

WILBERDING: Glandorf.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

WILBERDING: G-L-A-N-D-O-R-F.

SIGRIST: And what do you know about your mom's family background?

WILBERDING: Oh, we know a great deal about them because the history was completed, which goes back prior to being a family name. And (he clears his throat) the ancestry there, the book tells so much that you can't remember it all. But my great great great grandfather was Christopher Glandorf. And I think the most interesting thing was the type of people in the background who were of the Catholic faith. And there were Anabaptists, there were Lutherans, they were everything. But one figure really stand out and his, he was a Jesuit priest, Father Johannes Glandorf. And he was a missionary in Mexico in the Terramara [ph] Indians in the 1700s. And the house in which he was born was the ancestral home of my mother. And, and she remembers seeing letters that he had written from Mexico. And the, we visited the room in which he was born. And the, uh, there was a cousin who had retired that wrote the book and he, he had his niece go to Mexico and meet with the Jesuits in Guadalupe. That's where he is

buried. And they gave her a piece of his coat.  
And they also (he clears his throat), she  
visited the area in which he was a missionary and  
they still have the story of Father Glandorf  
being "the priest with wings on his feet" because  
the mountainous areas, and, of course, there was  
no cars, no helicopters, no anything, was just  
the donkey perhaps. But when somebody got sick  
and on their deathbed, the story is from the Indians  
themselves that Father Glandorf would appear. And it  
seemed to be that they, they felt that he was the  
miracle priest. And so that has been the highlight  
in the Glandorf family that we refer to Father  
Glandorf.

SIGRIST: What about your mother's own childhood? Did she  
ever speak of this?

WILBERDING: Oh, yeah. Yes, she did. She was from a large  
family. And large families farm children out,  
you know, to do work. And she had a pretty hard  
life growing up working for someone else. And,  
but she had the tenacity and the faith to  
withstand it. And she finally got married and

she, she was a tremendous woman, though.

SIGRIST: What was her personality like?

WILBERDING: Oh, she was kind. She was, she was, oh golly, always willing to, to listen. She was always willing to offer advice, sometimes, you know (he laughs), even when we didn't ask for it.

SIGRIST: What was some of the advice that she gave you?

WILBERDING: Well...

SIGRIST: Do you remember certain things, certain sayings, perhaps, that she would say or...?

WILBERDING: No, I don't remember any, any, well, she had difficulty with the English language. And I think her grandchildren remember, or most of them, they would say, "Thank you, Grandma." And she would always say (imitating his mother's heavy accent), "Nothing to thanks." And, but her advice to me is whatever you want to do, do the best you can. That, and if you buy

something, get something that is good and you  
won't be wasting your money. She had a  
tremendous faith that she, she said if you take the  
Lord with you, you will never be alone. And she had  
a desire, you see, she had, she, three girls died in  
infancy. Then there were four boys. Then she  
married my uncle and they had five more. And with  
seven boys, she always felt that somebody would  
be a priest. Well, she didn't get a priest so  
that was a disappointment she had in life. She  
always thought I should be one but I, (he laughs)  
it didn't work out that way, thank God.

SIGRIST: Now soon after your father had died did she remarry?  
I assume this is a father's brother, yes?

WILBERDING: Yes. It was, well, 1922 he died. And she married  
him in 1928, June of '28. He made three trips  
back to the United States, from, back to Germany  
from the United States. And then the last trip he  
married her.

SIGRIST: Is there a, you mentioned rather emphatically about  
how kind your mother was. Is there a story that

you can tell me that, that reflects this kindness?  
Something that she did for someone or...?

WILBERDING: Nothing in particular. She just, it was always there, you know. And I think the kindest she would is she had everybody on her prayer list. That's before, before it became modern to have a prayer list. She had one and they were always included. And I know when I went in the service, that was a hardship because my father, my stepfather had gotten ill and we had a big farm and a bunch of cows and she would get right out there and she and I were doing the work. And she'd get right out there and encourage me. And that, I guess that it was just a general kindness, not something that, you can't, not something that you can put your finger on.

SIGRIST: What religion were you in Germany?

WILBERDING: Catholic.

SIGRIST: And were there ways that you can remember that you practiced your religion at home?

WILBERDING: Oh, yes, oh, yes. The rosary was an extremely important part of our, at home in Germany. And, of course, the Sunday Mass and the Lenten devotions and all of those things were extremely important. Nothing else took precedence. And so, yeah, and grace before meals. You didn't, you didn't sit down and, like the little girl said, "You weren't like my puppy, just sit down and eat." It, you said, you said grace before meals and thanks after meals.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of these prayers in German?

WILBERDING: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Could you...

WILBERDING: You know, (he recites the Lord's Prayer in German).  
That's the "Our Father."

SIGRIST: Thank you.

WILBERDING: And, yes, because they were so ingrained in us.

When we were here in the hospital [i.e. at Ellis Island in 1928], my brother and I, that's, we never forgot our prayers. We didn't understand anybody else but we could understand each other's prayers.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me a little bit, you mentioned your grandmother moved in after your father died. What are the things that stick out in your mind about your life, your daily life in Germany prior to coming to the United States? Did you go to school or...?

WILBERDING: No, I didn't go to school because you went to school, I wasn't old enough. And they knew we were coming to the United States so you went at six, so I missed that. And, as I mentioned, my chores were, and my games and so forth. And the, other than that, it was, oh, yeah, I remember we wore wooden shoes, you see, wooden shoes. And you had leather shoes for Sunday. And I remember wanting a new pair and I found a rock and I beating it on the rock and finally split one. Little did I know my mother was watching me.

Well, that's, I think that's the only time she gave me a licking. But, see, once a year a man came around making wooden shoes. And he, he sat under, we had a cherry and he would sit under there and make the, the shoes. And I thought sometimes I was making this up. But we went back several times and one of the neighbors was still alive and he remembered me when was a child. And, also, the neighbor, I remember he was a carpenter, a woodworker, and he made coffins. And apparently a little fellow died about my age and he wanted me to see if it was the right height. And my mother tried to get me to lay in there and I said, "No," you know. But they finally stood it up, I remember that, and then I stood in it and it, it seemed to fit. And another instance was the, the neighbor boy shot a stork and I remember that, you know, you weren't supposed to shoot storks. They were good luck and I, I can see that just as clear as can be. And I was crying and, you know, why would anybody kill a stork? And then, mentioning a stork, the reason we ended up with the measles, see, my mother had to be in the United States before we could leave and so we stayed with

relatives. And, well, we played with different children and this one little girl had the measles and we were strictly forbidden to visit her. Well, I had to say "good bye" to her and I crawled in the window and said "good bye" to her. Well, as a result we had the measles when we came into port. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: So that's why you ended up detained. I have to say for the sake of the tape that Mrs. Wilberding's pantomime of a stork (he laughs) over on the other side of the room to prompt your memory. (they laugh) That's where I wish we had video tape, just for that. (they all laugh heartily) Well, I guess that would be, was sort of going to be my next question, is tell me how it was decided that you would all be coming to the United States.

WILBERDING: Well, my stepfather had the farm and he had never been married, a forty four year old.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about your mother getting remarried? Or, well, actually, you'd be, you never knew your father, so...

WILBERDING: Oh, I thought it was, see, I thought it was great. See, my older brothers weren't so sure about it but I thought it was great, you know. Little things that he, when he first came over first time, he smoked Prince Albert [tobacco]. I had never seen a Prince Albert can in my life and he gave me the can. I thought, gee, I had the greatest treasure in the world. And things like that, candy. Candy was for Christmas for us. And I felt great. I thought, boy, we're going to go to the United States." I didn't have any idea what the United States was. I knew we were going to leave.

SIGRIST: Was it his decision to bring everybody?

WILBERDING: No, it was, it was both of them, Mother's too. Because he didn't want to come back to Germany and, so I, I'm sure it was both their decisions.

SIGRIST: So is he in America during this time?

WILBERDING: Yes, yes.

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SIGRIST: He's already here. And where is he in America?

WILBERDING: He was in the little town of Shepherd, Michigan...

SIGRIST: Shepherd.

WILBERDING: ...on a, on a farm.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing exactly?

WILBERDING: He was a farmer.

SIGRIST: So he had his own farm there?

WILBERDING: Yeah, yeah. He had, at that time, I think he owned  
one hundred acres.

SIGRIST: And what was your mother doing in Germany to support  
the family?

WILBERDING: Oh, we had a hired man and she was farming, yeah.  
She did, she was a good administrator.

SIGRIST: When you say farming to support the family, what, were things being sold, I mean, what...?

WILBERDING: Yeah, well, it was, in Germany you mean?

SIGRIST: Yes.

WILBERDING: We had cows, milk cows. And we had chickens and we had pigs. And then they were used as, as to sell to get some money. And, of course, some of the grain was excess they didn't need, and so that was sold. And that was the way they made a living.

SIGRIST: What did you know about America as a child in Germany?

WILBERDING: Not a thing. I didn't know anything about America. I'm not even sure that I knew there was an America because, you know, until they mentioned that we're going to America, I don't remember even having any particular thoughts about it.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the process that the

family went through to get ready to come to America.

WILBERDING: Well, that was a process because we had to do so many things, you know. The farm was, wasn't to be sold. My mother didn't want to sell it and she had a brother who would take care of it. And then, well, my mother, (correcting himself) my grandmother died, so that left us, uh, free to go without, you know, worrying about her.

SIGRIST: When did she die?

WILBERDING: She died just the year before, I think, before we came to America, 1927.

SIGRIST: Do you have any specific memories of that?

WILBERDING: Yes, I remember that's the first time I had seen anyone who was dead. And, of course, the remains stayed in the home and I knew all the neighbors came. And it was, there was a, a little different than, much different than it is today. It was in the home and there were people constantly, even

all night long. (he clears his throat) And it was sort of a wake service, continuous wake service until the funeral. And I remember there were lots of flowers and, but I, I didn't realize really what had happened until suddenly Grandma isn't there anymore when, you know, all the excitement had died down.

SIGRIST: So, so, then am I to believe then that Grandma was sort of a significant tie, you know...

WILBERDING: Oh, yes. (microphone disturbance)

SIGRIST: ...when she died, it made it easier for your mother to leave.

WILBERDING: Yes, it was. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

WILBERDING: (microphone disturbance) Because, see, her mother was alive yet too and to leave two. But her mother was being taken care of by her brothers.

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SIGRIST: In the same town?

WILBERDING: No, just a little ways from there.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: I see. So what else did you have to do to get ready to leave?

WILBERDING: Well, it was the, the usual packing and, I could sense the excitement. I really didn't know, you know, what was going on and we'd never been really away from home, taken any particular trips. So it was just something, well, what's going to happen next? And, uh...

SIGRIST: Do you remember if you had to be checked out, uh, medically at all before you left or anything like that?

WILBERDING: Oh, yeah. We had, we had to, I remember we had to

go to the doctor and that's about all. The rest  
was pretty much taken care of by my stepfather.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you packed or anything specific  
that you remember from being in America that you  
know...?

WILBERDING: Marbles. And I lost those on the way. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Is that, is there a story about that? (he laughs)

WILBERDING: No, no, no. It's just a, you know, you say that "he  
lost his marbles." (he laughs) I lost them early.  
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: Was there anything specific that your mother wanted  
to bring specifically to America?

WILBERDING: I don't remember anything specific but she did want  
to bring memories with her. You know, there are  
certain things that were of value to her,  
especially the pictures. Pictures were very  
expensive to take in those days and...

SIGRIST: Pictures meaning photographs?

WILBERDING: Photographs, yes. And she wanted those, you know, all her relatives and, and my father's relatives and we had a good number of those. And then, as I remember, there were some, some pieces of china that apparently had been in the family for generations and other than that, no. I don't remember anything particular.

SIGRIST: Do you remember leaving your house?

WILBERDING: Yes. We left the house and we had to go to a town. It wasn't very far away. But they came with a wagon and horses and they loaded everything up. And we had to get on the wagon and you, you drive away. And, you know, you just, you don't really, I guess what made me anxious to go was that my mother wasn't there, you see.

SIGRIST: That's right. You explained to me that she had...

WILBERDING: She had already gone and, apparently, there were some regulations that required that they be in the

United States prior to us leaving Germany.

SIGRIST: How long had you been without your mother?

WILBERDING: Well, at the time we left about two weeks.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her leaving?

WILBERDING: No, no. I, I remember, you know, it's so vague. I remember she left and, and we were farmed out to the relatives and, and I, one of them is a first cousin who is still alive. We saw him a few years ago. He said that I kept running away wanting my mother and I said well, (he laughs) I don't remember it.

SIGRIST: Now, who all is going to America? All the kids or..?

WILBERDING: Yes, there were, I had three brothers. There were, two were fourteen. They were twins. And the other one was eight. And my...

SIGRIST: Those were your natural brothers?

WILBERDING: Yes, and myself. And then there was a young lady  
that was a neighbor girl. She was coming to  
America and she was our guardian.

SIGRIST: And what about your uncle's children? Were they in,  
where were they?

WILBERDING: He, he didn't have any children yet.

SIGRIST: Oh, I'm sorry, I thought, I must have misheard you.

WILBERDING: No, see, he was, he was a bachelor.

SIGRIST: I see, I see.

WILBERDING: He was...

SIGRIST: Oh, I know, you said they had five children. That  
was it.

WILBERDING: Yeah, yeah, they had five children after they were  
married.

SIGRIST: After.

WILBERDING: So they had a total of nine. So here is a forty four year old bachelor, picks up two fourteen years olds, an eight and a six year old and has five more. He was a saint. He had the patience of a Job.

SIGRIST: So the four boys and the neighbor girl...

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...were traveling. Who was sort of in charge of the group?

WILBERDING: Well, she thought she was. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: The neighbor girl.

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: Uh huh. How old was she?

WILBERDING: She was, I think, twenty one or twenty two.

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SIGRIST: Do you remember her name?

WILBERDING: Her last name was Heightcamp.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

WILBERDING: H-E-I-G-H-T-C-A-M-P.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

WILBERDING: Geez, I can't remember her first name. I just, it  
escapes me. It seems like it was, for the, could  
have been Ann, Anna. That was a good, good  
German name. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: And where did you have to go to get onto the ship?

WILBERDING: We had to go to Bremen.

SIGRIST: And how did you get to...?

WILBERDING: Well, we took the horse and wagon to the town of  
Damme, D-A-M-M-E. And from Damme we took a

train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride?

WILBERDING: It was the first time I was on a train. It was, everything was new and exciting. It was just, there was, it was such a blur, you know. It was, no, I really don't.

SIGRIST: During the whole process of immigrating, was there one brother that you were particularly close to, that you sort of clung to?

WILBERDING: Yeah, my eight year old that, Ben was his name. The older ones were Frank and Henry, and they were the twins. But Ben and I got along. But kind of took care of me, well, he tried to. He said I was always three steps ahead of him, he said, so he had to catch up. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: That's a lot of responsibility for an eight year old.

WILBERDING: Oh, yeah. (they laugh) Well, he took that on

himself.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about arriving at the ship and impressions you may have about that.

WILBERDING: Well, we had, on the ship we had a devilish a lot of fun.

SIGRIST: Before you got on the ship, though. Arriving, getting on the ship...

WILBERDING: In Bremen?

SIGRIST: In Bremen.

WILBERDING: Well, they just loaded us on. And, and I, I do remember it was a beautiful day. And the sun was warm. And then we, with other people, went aboard and, another new experience. Gee, you know, all of this, I'd never seen anything like it, you know, the dining rooms and the room that we stayed in. Everything was just, just so, so new that it was so much to digest and you couldn't possibly do it.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

WILBERDING: S.S. Columbus.

SIGRIST: And how long did the trip take?

WILBERDING: Ten days.

SIGRIST: You said you had a devilishly good time. What sticks out in your mind about being on the ship?

WILBERDING: Oh, well, it was being able to roam all over the ship. And the crew just would make sure we weren't getting into areas that we shouldn't get in but, gosh, it was, we could explore everything.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing things specifically? Does something stick out in your mind about...?

WILBERDING: Well, the, the only thing that I, I remember really specifically was, there was, I don't remember, it was on the lower decks. And they were dumping

things overboard and it was, the water was splashing in and they would, it was an open, like a big door they had open and they were dumping things overboard. And I thought, "Gee, you know, they could fall in the water." (he laughs) The, and the rest of it was just grandeur. It was, we have a, I got the book on the ships. And we had a set a cards with a stereopticon and that was, that burned. But I refreshed my memory with the book on steamships that, it's just, it's just unbelievable. And especially to a youngster that was used to a thatched roof and black bread to eat.

SIGRIST: What was the, what were the sleeping arrangements?

WILBERDING: Sleeping arrangements there, the four boys, we were in, in the room. And the girl had her room.

SIGRIST: Did, was there any other person in the room with the four boys?

WILBERDING: No.

SIGRIST: There wasn't.

WILBERDING: There were four of us, yes. We had bunk beds.

SIGRIST: The ship took ten days, you said. And what time of the year is it?

WILBERDING: This is in the summertime. We got, uh, ten days, it was, I can't remember the exact date. I was going to, it is in August, fore part of August.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned that you had been playing with a young lady with measles...

WILBERDING: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: ...before. Did that manifest itself any time during the trip on the ship? When did you break out in measles?

WILBERDING: Well, I don't know when we broke out in measles but before we came into New York Harbor, the medical officer checked us and found we had the measles and...

SIGRIST: All four of you?

WILBERDING: No, two of us.

SIGRIST: Two of you.

WILBERDING: My eight, my eight year old brother and I.

SIGRIST: You and Ben. (they laugh)

WILBERDING: That, so that I can just vaguely remember, uh, what's going to happen to us, you know, we had the measles and that was dangerous. That's all we knew. And then my stepfather was waiting for us and we ended up here.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the things that, that you remember about being at Ellis Island for those two weeks.

WILBERDING: I remember the, now, the room because I, I, it was such a vivid thing. We had the beds that are, you have one of them out there, with the sides on it. You know, that was the type of bed that

was, and we see could the Statue of Liberty. We  
 didn't, at first, "What's the Statue of  
 Liberty?" But my brother knew a little bit  
 about it and he began to tell me about what he  
 knew about the Statue of Liberty. So it  
 took on a deeper and deeper meaning. And, but what  
 really took on the meaning of the Statue of  
 Liberty, "give me your huddled masses," was the  
 care that we got. We had, I'm sure there was an  
 interpreter, but they could speak High German and we  
 spoke Low German because High German was taught when  
 you went to school and I hadn't gone to school and my  
 brother had just had, if he talked to me in High  
 German I wouldn't have understood it so he had to  
 talk Low German. So we couldn't understand what  
 they were talking about. But they had sign  
 language and we did everything in sign language.  
 And I don't know how it worked but it, it worked  
 beautifully. And the kindness that the nurses and  
 the orderlies showed, I'll never forget. And to  
 combine that in later years with what liberty  
 really means was, has been my greatest avocation  
 in, in talking to groups and in my own family.  
 What, what, what that symbol really means was

first epitomized for us by those who took care of  
us. And, again, it's epitomized here today by  
the generosity. When I called first, whether I  
could see the hospital, Ms. Simpson [i.e. Diana  
Simpson, chief of interpretation] and then the park  
ranger and now you, the courtesy and the friendliness  
that you have extended to us is a manifestation of  
what America is all about. And those are the, the,  
one, I suppose, rather humorous thing that  
happened, we had never eaten spaghetti and had  
never seen tomatoes. And so, lo and behold,  
they come in with it. We had no idea what it  
was. It was spaghetti and with tomato sauce on  
the top and on a tray. And so neither one of us  
wanted to taste it. And so my brother said I did  
it, I said he did it, that we had the plate on the  
tray and we held it up to see how close to the  
edge the plate would slide and it dumped on the bed  
and this orderly was standing in the doorway.  
And we thought, "Oh, my God." And he  
started laughing and cleaning the bed up and I'll  
never forget that. But it was, and I still don't  
like spaghetti.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) That's a good story. Do any of the other patients stick out in your mind, other children that may have been in the ward or...

WILBERDING: No, we weren't in a ward.

SIGRIST: You weren't in a ward.

WILBERDING: No, we had, we had our own room. And that's how we found the room. [referring to a tour of the abandoned area of Ellis Island conducted by a park ranger with Mr. and Mrs. Wilberding immediately prior to the recording of this interview]

SIGRIST: Where were your older brothers through all this?

WILBERDING: They, they, my stepfather took them to Michigan.

SIGRIST: Had he come to New York to fetch everybody?

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did you get to see him prior to being taken to the hospital here?

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that at all? Or how you might have  
felt when...

WILBERDING: Well, I just, I said, you know, the best that I can  
think, uh, he assured us that he would come back  
for us and kept telling us he will come back. But  
I guess we felt a little abandoned, you know,  
here we are. We didn't know where we were going.  
We didn't know what was going to happen to us.  
So measles, what do you get? Do they operate  
on you? Or what do they do for you? I, see, I had  
no idea. And I suppose we did feel abandoned  
but God bless him, he came back.

SIGRIST: Did Mom stay in Michigan?

WILBERDING: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah. What did they do for your measles? Do you,  
do you know what, how, how they were...

WILBERDING: They kept the curtains pulled a lot (he laughs)  
because, you know, you're supposed, I don't know  
if it's a reality, a medical reality or not but,  
you know, measles can affect your eyes if  
there's too much light. And my brother kept  
pulling the curtains up because he wanted to see  
the Statue. And that's about all.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed out of the room at all?

WILBERDING: No, that's the isolation, the measles area. We  
stayed in our room. We had to, they didn't have  
plumbing in there so we had the "thunder mugs"  
and that was a change, too, for us, you know.  
And I...

SIGRIST: Did you have plumbing in Germany? Did you have a  
bathroom in Germany?

WILBERDING: No, no, we didn't either but it was the outdoor  
toilets, see? Whereas here you sat in plain  
view, you know. (he laughs heartily)

SIGRIST: I should say for the sake of the tape that "thunder

mug" is an old term for a chamber pot.

WILBERDING: Indeed, it is. (they laugh heartily)

SIGRIST: You mentioned the orderly who laughed at you with the spaghetti. Does any other staff member stick out in your mind specifically?

WILBERDING: The one, there was a girl, there was a nurse that saw us on the pot. And she didn't laugh, I know. She, she just went about her business, you know, as though we weren't there and I remember that it was so strange, you know. I'd never seen a nurse before in my life, you know, and here is, she's just straightening her beds up and, and kind of making things right, you know, and, that's, that's, I remember. I wish I could remember her, that I ever knew her name or, just to say, well, thank you because she didn't make a big deal out of it because I was sitting there and I was (? , braw-ten, ph)

(they laugh heartily)

SIGRIST: A pleasant memory. (they laugh)

WILBERDING: (he laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you or your brother receive a gift at all during the time that you were here, either from a family member or from here on the island somehow?

WILBERDING: I don't recall it. I don't recall any. Well, I guess, we did receive, we received a gift as I mentioned earlier, the gift of kindness and, and attentiveness. I think that surpassed anything else.

SIGRIST: Describe for me when, when Dad came back to get you, or how you got to Michigan when they finally released you. Do you remember?

WILBERDING: Well, when they finally released us he was, I suppose it was in the hall, the Great Hall here and we took the ferry from here to, uh, I remember him telling us to the train station. And then we took the train to Michigan.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about the train

trip to Michigan,...

WILBERDING: No.

SIGRIST: ...which is a long train trip from New York.

WILBERDING: It was, no, it doesn't really, other than eating in  
the dining car. That was an experience.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

WILBERDING: Because, you know, gee, white tablecloths and, we  
had tablecloths and all that in Germany, too, but  
on a train to do that, you know, gee. And then  
having, "What would you like to eat?" In Germany,  
we weren't asked, "What would you like to eat,"  
when we were kids. This is what you have.

SIGRIST: Did your, did your stepfather speak English?

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: Did he make any attempt to teach you any English  
words prior to arriving in Michigan or...

WILBERDING: I'm sure.

SIGRIST: ...did you learn any English words here, for that matter?

WILBERDING: Well, I'm sure we learned along the way. I, I just remember, when we started school he would help me read. And I went to, they call it the "primer" (he pronounces it with a short "I" sound) grades in country school. And shortly after we started school, he came to visit, my stepfather and my mother, and he asked whether they were helping me. And they said yes, my stepfather said yes. He said, "I thought so because he can read with his book upside down." I was memorizing what he was saying as, (he laughs) so, but he, yes, he helped us, you bet.

SIGRIST: Tell me what happened when you first arrived in Michigan.

WILBERDING: Well, the first thing I remember is getting off the train in the little town of Forest Hill and the

neighbor was there with a Model T to pick us up. And it was three miles from the train station to the house. And I met my stepgrandmother there and we took a liking to each other immediately. And I remember the next morning, we slept on the second floor, coming down the stairway and the sun was shining in the window. I'll never forget that, that coming down the stairway and here that sun making everything feel warm and good. And from there on in it was just, things kept changing and changing and evolving.

SIGRIST: Where did you see Mom? Where did she fall into this?

WILBERDING: I saw her down at the bottom of the stairs. And I saw her the night before, of course. Yeah, she wanted to make sure we were all right.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that struck you during your first, say, several months in America that were different?

WILBERDING: Oh, golly. The expanse here. We, in Germany everything was, you know, the houses were in the little village and here we are, a great big house on the farm and all kinds of buildings, separate buildings. The barns weren't connected to the house and, and the number of automobiles that were available. And the number of animals on the farm, my gosh. If it wasn't true in Germany, you just didn't have that many. And just, just big, everything seemed so big and so many, so much of everything. (he pauses) Other than that, I, it just seemed so natural.

SIGRIST: Was there anything that you really had a hard time getting used to? Some aspect of your life that, that was very difficult to adjust to?

WILBERDING: Oh, not really because I think I was young enough to, to adapt very easily. I hadn't been ingrained with any particular habits but I, I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Was Mom any different here in America than she had

been in Germany?

WILBERDING: Yes. Well, she, her responsibilities changed, that she was now a wife again and she was a mother. And there was, she had a, a, my stepgrandmother was there and she had to put up with that with her, which was, she was used to having a grandmother there but things were different. She had to learn and, at the same time to, to, to be a wife and to be a mother and in a foreign country not being able to talk English. She, she didn't have the time, you know, that she had had when we were in Germany.

SIGRIST: How old, or, how long was it before you went into school?

WILBERDING: Oh, in August, that same year. It started in September.

SIGRIST: And tell me what some of your first impressions of going to school were.

WILBERDING: Oh, God. Well, in Germany, you see, we all had a

dinner pail to take to, we went, there was two  
country schools. We went to the one country  
school where allegedly there were people who  
could talk German. Well, they couldn't talk  
German any more than our Fido could. And so  
they would make up things that we had said,  
you know, and we didn't say and we were in  
constant turmoil with the teacher. And they  
carried dinner pails and in Germany they never  
did. They went home to lunch. And we would  
walk to school and it was a mile, a little over a  
mile and, about a mile and a half. And we'd set the  
dinner pails in the ditch because we didn't, we were  
ashamed of carrying them. Well, that didn't last  
long. But it was that, see, here you are amongst a  
group of children and you can't talk English and  
if you say something, try and say an English  
word. It didn't come out right and they started  
laughing at you. And they would, see, my older  
brothers went, they'd already graduated from  
eighth grade in Germany, so they went one  
year to learn some English. Well, they were our  
protectors because they were big enough to (he  
laughs), to make their words stick if it had to

do with their fist. It, it came to  
fighting because they, some of those older ones  
thought it was sport, to make sport of us because we  
couldn't talk English. And then that has stuck in my  
mind how difficult that was and how difficult people  
who were immigrating, especially as I got at the age  
where I could do something about it, people of  
foreign extraction that, to look out for them,  
to help them because we didn't get much help.  
But we survived.

SIGRIST: Could, could your mother and your stepfather read  
and write in German?

WILBERDING: Yes.

SIGRIST: What about in English? Could your stepfather?

WILBERDING: My father could, uh, stepfather could write and read  
in English.

SIGRIST: Did your mother make an attempt to learn English?

WILBERDING: Oh, yes, oh, yes. She did, she did real well. She

learned the English language. She could write English and, uh she, mixed it up lots of time with a little German but it worked.

SIGRIST: We've got three minutes left, actually two minutes left, and I was wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about what you did in your adult life.

WILBERDING: Okay, that, uh, I joined the United States Air Corp in 1900 and 40. I was at Pearl Harbor when that was attacked and then I got my commission and was sent to Germany. I was in Germany for one year. At the Battle of the Bulge I was, uh, I had nearly six years active service. I then stayed with the Guard in the Reserve, retired as a lieutenant colonel. In 1900 and 45 I met Ella and we were married.

SIGRIST: What is Ella's maiden name?

WILBERDING: Stahlman.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

WILBERDING: S-T-A-H-L-M-A-N.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

WILBERDING: And we moved into the house that she was born in.  
And we have seven children.

SIGRIST: Can you name them, please?

WILBERDING: There's Elizabeth, John, Kathleen, Thomas, Pamela,  
Patrick and Anne. And my occupations were varied  
and many. I was, after the service, I was a barber  
for twenty three years. I was a justice of the  
peace for eleven years at that time, served on the  
Board of Education for twenty four years. I  
was in politics for a number of years and I was a  
rural mail carrier for fifteen years. And then,  
in 1981, I was ordained in, a deacon in the  
Catholic church. And in 1984 we both retired and  
we have been, I have a little, administrator  
of a little church at, in Winn, Michigan,  
St. Leo's. And I am also assisting at St.  
Vincent's in Shepherd [MI]. And our main, part of

the (?) is to visit the lonely, the sick and those  
who are in need. And it seems to be our vocation.

And somebody said, "When are you going to retire?"  
and I said, "When the Lord decides that he no longer  
needs us."

SIGRIST: Great, great. I want to thank you very much for  
letting me sit down and spend an hour with you  
asking questions. And I'm glad you had a chance to  
go over to the other side of the island and  
actually see the room...

WILBERDING: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Yeah.

WILBERDING: That was wonderful.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with John Henry  
Wilberding on Monday, May 11th, 1998 here at the  
Ellis Island recording studio, with Mrs.  
Wilberding in attendance. (Mrs. Wilberding  
whispers off-mike) Thank you very much, sir.

EI-998/WILBERDING

WILBERDING: Well, thank you.