KECK-101
SEYMOUR DAY VESTERMARK, JR.
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BORN ON ELLIS ISLAND
SON OF U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE PHYSICIAN AT ELLIS ISLAND

DANE: This is Debby Dane, and I'm speaking with Seymour Day Vestermark, Jr. on Wednesday, December 4, 1985. We're beginning the interview at 4:55. We're about to interview Mr. Vestermark about his experience being born on Ellis Island on June 8, 1933, and having lots of contact there until 1945. (Break in tape.) Okay, Mr. Vestermark, you were born on Ellis Island, uh, in 1933.

VESTERMARK: That's correct.

DANE: And your father was on the island. Can you tell us what his job was, and why you were there?

VESTERMARK: He was assigned there as a physician by the U.S. Public Health Service. At that time, in 1933, he was training to become a psychiatrist and was under the direction of Dr. John Davis Rickert. He was, essentially, an assistant surgeon in the Public Health Service learning how to go into his specialty, and during that time I was born on Second Island in the old rear central first floor delivery room, which I liked to go back and see when I got older and more aware of these kinds of things. Uh, in our second tour of Ellis Island my father was the head of the Neuropsychiatric Service and, as such, during most of World War Two he had responsibility for the many emotionally damaged victims of World War Two.

DANE: Uh-huh. So that, your cognizant years were during the war.

VESTERMARK: My best contact years were from 1939 to 1945. But I can recall, more clearly than you might think, events from '33 to '35. I have a lot of images in my mind from that period.

DANE: Uh-huh. And just for historical purposes, you actually lived on the island.

VESTERMARK: Yes.

DANE: When was that?

VESTERMARK: '33 to '35. And I can recall clearly living on the island. We lived, then, in the old Nurse's Home. We had quarters arrangements in there in the old, dark hallways. We took our meals in the nurse's or doctor's dining room, I should say, and since, uh, my mother did not have any cooking facilities available to her, we had to have me wheeled over, and I would wait outside while the parents ate, then I would have food brought to me later. In the 1939 to 1945 period, I lived with my parents at the Quarantine Station on Staten Island. And my father commuted every day by ferry boat to Ellis Island, and I would visit him over there very frequently.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And, at that point, the war was on the First Island, where the Great Hall was and where, uh, any immigrants that were still being processed. Were you allowed to go over there?

VESTERMARK: Not any more. As a young boy I have memories of being wheeled around First Island in my baby carriage and in my stroller. But during World War Two First Island had become a center for what were called detainees. We called them enemy aliens, which was a very neat term. They had fences, small miniature guard towers over there, and a few armed guards around

and dogs. And so part of the island was closed off to us. And the occasional Justice Department child, who would talk to a Public Health Service child, which I was one, would not that he could go where I couldn't go. Typical boy kind of stuff. Uh, one of our hopes was that we would see an escape. At that point, we were about eight, nine, ten years old and our dream would be to see an alien go for it. Would there be gunshots? Would he make it? Could we watch it, and so forth. Actually, I think they had a pretty good deal over there, and probably wouldn't have escaped if they could have.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Was it a spooky place for you as a--

VESTERMARK: To me, I have to answer that in several different ways. First Island, where the Great Hall is, was, to me, almost a kind of palace, a kind of magical Oz place, particularly in World War Two when you couldn't get over there. The towers I never liked very much. I thought the towers were rather ugly, the great bronze, domelike towers, the Byzantine kind of construction and aesthetically, even at that age, I had a few reservations about the place. And I felt much more that my home was on

Third Island or Second Island where I could go freely, particularly in the underground passages, and do all the things that boys like to do. Uh, First Island, even then, was becoming a historical monument and, of course, because it was being used for enemy aliens it was very much off limits. But even if it hadn't been, I'm not sure I'd have gone over there very much because it was a remote kind of place, psychologically.

DANE: Would your parents or, would you know, were they Germans, or did they bring Japanese there, or who--

VESTERMARK: We had all three. We had Italians, Germans and Japanese. And the ones we were hoping would escape were the Germans because they looked cunning in our boyish imagination. We could pick them out, because when the ferry boat would come and they'd be out walking and pacing along their fence like panthers, and we could tell they were scheming to escape and we had good looks at them. Maybe wear sunglasses, or some of them looked as if they'd had sort of Heidelberg dueling scars on their cheeks and were, in general, uh, an evil looking lot, in our eyes.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Here's a personal question. Your grandmother was German.

VESTERMARK: That's correct.

DANE: Had arrived in 1880.

VESTERMARK: Right.

DANE: One major war had gone by, now we're in the second major war with Germany as our enemies. Did you, you were awfully young at the time, but was that an issue ever--

VESTERMARK: It was indeed an issue. As I mentioned to you before, my grandmother's great story of arrival was when, in 1880, she had come Kiel, Germany and received a tin cup to hang around her neck. She would remember from there ever after having seen the Statue of Liberty, Miss Liberty, my Miss Liberty and she would tell all, given half a chance, that it was the American dream to have what happened to her happen. She had come here, now had a doctor son stationed there, and a grandson born there and, of course having seen Miss Liberty begin the whole thing in the right tone. Now, I learned with Granny, you never argued with her about that. Of course, she was six years too early, but in her mind she had seen Miss Liberty. Uh,

getting back to the issue, it was a very strong issue, but not at Ellis Island. In Kentucky, where we were before coming back to New York in the second tour in Ellis Island, I recall every clearly the day. I was about five years old when it happened, when my father came home from his assignment in the University of Kentucky and found grandmother teaching me German and he stated, in front of me, "You will not teach that boy that language." It was a problem for me, because I began to block on German in graduate school, and I had to go through some self-analysis and I found out what the problem was. It was Id' been forbidden to learn it. I had a good accent. Granny snuck it anyway to me, and taught me lots of German. But the grammar caused a problem and it went right back to that, I'm convinced. So it was a big issue and it was an issue which didn't go away. During World War Two, of course, she was in the midwest and was not close to us physically, but it was an issue and, uh, on one occasion, in fact, a mentally deranged individual stated he had seen my father at a meeting of the German American Bundt in Manhattan. At that time the Bundt leader was Fritz Kuhn, a very dynamic figure.

And that bothered my father because my father, being of Danish German background, uh, was emphatically loyal to this country, was commissioned officer, and became very troubled when anything would be raised questioning his own loyalty to his country. He was, after all, born in Illinois. He was not born in Germany and, uh, that was past history, to some degree. But one thing I will say, without lecturing on it, is that many German Americans, of which I was one, carry with us a certain degree of uncertainty about our heritage. It goes with being a German American.

DANE: Uh-huh. Interesting. Back to Ellis Island, as a young boy, exploring the territory, uh, you had mentioned that there were underground tunnels, and, what kind of activities would go on down there?

VESTERMARK: What you had below the islands were large passageways in which you could wheel carts and conduct a whole city kind of business. My favorite one was under Second Island, which ran the entire length od Second Island then curved and ran to Third Island. Johnny The Push, a very famous character on Ellis

Island, showed me how, if I took laundry carts, I could make the equivalent of a skateboard by going down and quickly turning the corners of the passageways, so I had a great time, um, in self-invented skate carts. Of course, this caused problems when they wanted to have the carts back and where they were. And the answer was the boys had them in the passages. They were scooting around in the passages. Another of my favorite people was Mary Daley who was the kind of saintly figure that seems to have vanished, to some degree, from American life. She was an Irish immigrant whose bony hands mended the garments, the torn hospital garments, uh, that the patients would, would leave to be fixed, or the doctors would see were fixed. And she had her sewing machine, an old fashioned treadle sewing machine down under Second Island in a dark cavern of a room, stacked with hundreds and hundreds of garments. Um, she had a dear smile. She, she should have been an Irish saint, and I always thought of her, in a way, as one. She always had something for me to play with, or a piece of candy, or perhaps a place to hide. One of my favorite things that my father made me stop doing

was to hide in the stacks of hospital garments. There were mountains of them down there and, of course, they were coming from all sorts of horrible places, sphilitic wards, tubercular wards, God knows what all, but they were very inviting. But my dad put a stop to that. In general, as a boy on Ellis Island, as I mentioned in the pre-interview, you were told clearly that you were an officer's son, and there were certain things that you, you did because you were an officer's son, and there were limits to your behavior. And there was a war on also. You always heard that. "There's a war on." And that was a constraint of behavior. So, because, uh, of that kind of thing, because of the sea walls being so close and so fall over-able and because of the ship activity in the harbor and everything else, you were made very clear that you had to conform to the standards of an officer.

DANE: Mary Daley, would you go down and chat with her? Did you--

VESTERMARK: Every time I was on the island. As I said, during

World War Two we lived on Staten Island so a great adventure on a weekend would be to go over to Ellis Island, take the ferry across the harbor, and then the Ellis Island ferry, and have Captain Nichols let me drive it. As far as I know I'm the only boy who was ever allowed to pilot that boat across the channel between Manhattan, South Ferry, and the Ferry Slip on Ellis Island. He did the docking. He wouldn't let me dock it, although one time we did dock. We docked it on Ellis Island, and we had a slight little nick as a result of it, but nothing that anybody could know. But, uh, coming into South Ferry you would never, uh, do a thing like that.

DANE: Would you stand in between his legs, or--

VESTERMARK: I had, I had the wheel to myself totally. He would stand by and point the boat and say, "just go that way." And I'd blow the whistle, um, and , uh, through most of the open water. And then when we got to the point where the ferry had to curve into South Ferry, it's kind of an S-Shape you have to make, uh, he would then take over. As I say, on one occasion, we did do the docking on Ellis Island, uh, with a certain jarring of the boat and its inhabitants, but nobody knew what it was. They thought

it was an unusually heavy landing. Over there, sometimes, the sea would cause problems and you would land hard.

DANE: Was that your secret, you and Captain Nichols?

VESTERMARK: My dad knew about it, and approved of it. And the commanding officer knew about it, that is, our commanding officer. We had a dual chain of command, and for me the commanding officer was then, at that time, Dr. Sweeney and Dr. Sweet. Dr. Sweet was the first one, I guess, but Dr. Sweeney was the one that I knew best. And he approved of this. (Another voice speaks.) Even though this was a Department of Justice ferry, uh, and, uh, not a Public Health Service ferry.

DANE: And when you went to school, would you keep this under wraps, or--

VESTERMARK: No. I made a great point of this, gleefully telling all, and if I thought it was a holiday and I had friends on the Staten Island ferry, I would blow the whistle extra long and loud as I went by and this would get back to me occasionally. "You showoff. Brat." You didn't say things like bastard and things like that, but they, they had equivalent words that were very, very, very, very pointed.

DANE: And you gave a wonderful description of the ferry.

VESTERMARK: The ferry was a great machine, and it agonizes me to think of it rotting over on the island now. It needs to be rebuilt, and God knows what it would cost if it were to be rebuilt. It was a great green enameled thing with gold letters and gilt Ellis Island on each wheelhouse. Great mahogany wheels, I recall, which you could spin and turn, and very responsive. Tile floors, lots of gleaming brass, lots of steam noises and puffing and huffing. The kind of age of steam industrial machine that was a jewel. In fact, I often thought it was a kind of music box. I don't know why I had that analogy in my mind, but it reminded me of something very well engineered to the point of sheer perfection, and I had a sense, at the time, that this boat was at the top of its own art. You would not see its like again. Uh, so it, as I say, it's a sad thing to see what happened to it.

DANE: And its function was bringing workers, or also--

VESTERMARK: It brought almost everybody who came to the island, uh, and, uh, except for prisoners, even in those cases. We would have prisoners aboard once in a while. But generally they came separately by a private launch. The Justice Department had launches that they would bring prisoners over and the very dangerously ill would come over on Public Health Service boats and the Coast Guard, at that time, also had a very active set

of picket boats in the harbor, which were always ferrying us around on special assignments. On one great occasion, a picket boat took me to a ship commissioning with my father in his full dress uniform. That was a grand experience. But the Ellis Island ferry primarily was for maintenance staff, but also for ambulatory patients, who were safe, and for kids like myself. And one of the great things about the ferry was its symbolic role in relation to what Ellis Island was for me. The ferry would be held for me at South Ferry if I was late. My mother and I would go shopping, uh, along the wharf over there and it would get late, and we would call ahead and they would hold it. And what the Ellis Island ferry meant to me then, as did Ellis Island, was it was the New Yorker's solution to survival. New York, as you now, was a city of neighborhoods. What makes New York livable is because you have neighborhoods where you can go and be apart. Ellis Island was my neighborhood. The ferry was part of that neighborhood. It was part of my recipe, not only for survival, but for being happy.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Tell me about Mary Daley. When you could, did she live on the island, or was she--

VESTERMARK: I thought she did. It was my theory that she lived in her cave under Second Island. Actually, she had a nunnery, or some such place, where she would go. (Another voice speaks.) Little room, somewhere on

Third Island, I think, that she would repair to. And she was a fixture. She was one of those left over pieces of immigration where her home became where she arrived and never left it. And--

DANE: Would she tell you stories of the Ireland, or the early days?

VESTERMARK: Not much. She did not want to de-Americanize me, and she would emphasize, you know, what a thrill it was to, uh, have a father who was an American officer, and what an honor that was for her to know his son and what a joy it was to have me come and see her. And how did I feel that day, did I want to have a lollipop. And when my sister was going to be born, how is your sister going to be? Is she going to be born here where you were born? A lot od that kind of seemingly trivial chit chat, but wrapped in real affection. And she was kind of an aunt.

DANE: A brogue?

VESTERMARK: Very strong brogue, and a charming brogue. Not an embarrassment brogue, but just a very charming brogue, of the kind that I'm sort of imitating to you now. A very broguish woman. She did tell me, one time, as I recall, about the banshee. Ireland had banshees in, of course, I

love witchcraft. Uh, the sound of fighting tomcats on Third Island, the enemy aliens. Anything spooky, mysterious, dramatic, bizarre. And that's the way boys are. So, the banshee stories intrigued me. And she, apparently, had seen, as a girl, genuine Irish banshee. Very frightening. But we don't have them in America, you see. Only in Ireland do you have the banshee. But that was about her only Irish story.

DANE: And Johnny The Push, because he sounds like an interesting character, is that because he used to push the cart?

VESTERMARK: Yes. He would push the carts and he, he was Italian. And he'd say, "The Push is comin', the Push is comin'." And you would know he was coming down the hallway with his pushcarts. And he would enter-- In fact, Johnny The Push's name had become his psychology. He would come through doorways in a kind of pushing way, like a wrestler. Just, bang, in the doorway. Uh, he said, "The Push is here." And it was always the Push, the push.

DANE: Carrying laundry--

VESTERMARK: Laundry carts, yes, and anything. He was a kind of

beast of burden, really, for the island, and he could do anything heavy. Move pianos, uh, move boxes. There were lots of crates of things in Ellis Island. There always seemed to great steamer crates of things arriving. I have no idea what was in them. One of my friends thought maybe dead bodies. But, uh, I thought it was, you know, more routine kinds of things like uniforms and hospital supplies. And Johnny always had to push those around.

DANE: So he was like the head physical plant maintenance?

VESTERMARK: I'm not sure if he was the head maintenance man, but he was a character. He was one of those island characters who had developed his own role at the island. And his purpose of being on the island was to do all of these things. And he seemed to be almost outside of any formal organization. And he may have been.

DANE: Did he come through Ellis Island himself?

VESTERMARK: I believe he did. I believe he must have come over around 1910, that's my perception as a kid.

DANE: Uh-huh. Also, in those tunnels, you were saying earlier that there were several rats, and so they had a cat control mechanism.

VESTERMARK: Yes. I have been told, and I believe it to be true, that the large cat population on the island, particularly around Third Island, and they hung out around where the doctor's dining room was, for obvious reasons, because that was the guaranteed source of food. But i had been told, and I believed, that the cats were allowed to multiply because of the rats. There were many rats in Ellis Island, and I have seen many of them as a boy. And they were sort of neat. I wished I'd had a gun to shoot them. I always wanted to have a BB gun or a .22 rifle so I could have gone rat hunting, which would have gone over very well, of course, among the professional staff there. But the cats were the control device, and they would seize the rats and would hear the most awful moaning, screaming, agonized sounds, of the cats clawing over their, their booty. And then, when that got done, they would claw over each other. And so you had a constant screaming cat fight going on at the edge of Third Island by the sea wall, which seemed to be the optimum rat place.

DANE: And the population, are we talking a dozen, two dozen, three dozen?

VESTERMARK: We're talking at least fifty. There was a regular pack of cats over there and, uh, they were ugly hideous things. The older ones had vicious scars, bitten off ears. They'd been through the wars.

DANE: And would you guys torment them, or--

VESTERMARK: We would encourage them, if we could. We would encourage them to fight. Not, we never, we were not beastly kids. We did not torture them or poke them, but we would make sure they knew which, where they were. There were several toms that were great fighters, and we would make sure that we knew where those toms were and try to encourage them to get together and interact. And they did. And then you would hear that distinctive screaming cat sound, which I only heard on Ellis Island because of the galleries. The galleries made that cat sound, uh, echo and reflect. And so what you got out of this was a kind of almost hypnotic wail. Ellis Island had very distinctive things in its environment because of, because of this kind of structure and architecture and population that it had of cats, people and what have you.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. I want you, because this is going to be interesting, Ellis Island is in close proximity to the Statue of Liberty.

VESTERMARK: Yes.

DANE: And especially from Third Island.

VESTERMARK: Yes.

DANE: As a little boy, what impressions did she give you?

VESTERMARK: She was my big sister in bronze. I would go out and watch her light up at night, and it was a great thrill to do this, and it may be lost now with the new gold torch, because this was the days of the old sort or turquoise amber torch. As dusk would come down, and the harbor would go from orange to copper to deep copper to a kind of mud color in which the sea and the sky all came together. And, of course there was no Verrazano Bridge in the distance then, and you couldn't see anything except just water and sky and stars. There'd be a sudden turquoise blip, and the light would come on. And I was always reassured by this because to me she was out there protecting me, she was the barrier between me, uh, and the unknown, as a very tiny baby and, as a boy, between me and the Germans. I knew if she was out there, they weren't going to get through. So the light would come on and I would once more feel safe for the night and ready to go to bed. (Another voice speaks.)

DANE: Did you ever go over to Liberty Island? At Bedloe's I guess you called it--

VESTERMARK: Yes, we called it, we called it Bedloe's Island. Uh, my parents went over there with me and-- (Another voice speaks.) Uh-huh. And, of course, we had the classic discussion over there with my grandmother, who took me over there. And I was less enthusiastic about those trips, um, because of that, because she got into an argument with the Park Service declaring that she had, in fact, seen, of course, the Statue, when, of course, she hadn't. And as the Park Ranger learned, uh, you don't argue with Frederica Vilhelmina Doz Vestermark. So that also made those trips less inspiring than they could be-- (Another voice speaks.) We're on tape here, so you want to be a little careful here. Uh, you, I preferred to go by myself when I could. It was better that way. But I'd only been over there four or five times and I guess the reason why-- I have, by the way, been up in the arm. Don't ask me how I did that, but I had, I had been in the arm. Um, and, uh, another boy, a boy's secret. But, uh, I felt that that I knew her so well, why visit? She was there anyway. I, I knew her backside, as very few people did. I could see her holding her torch out to the harbor mouth, uh, and that's all I had to know.

DANE: Uh-huh. Was she yours, or did you know that you were sharing her? Did you--

VESTERMARK: I knew it was a national monument, of course, but I felt, I think, like many island kids do, and I mentioned this in my letter,

island kids feel very special and very unique, and that goes with being an islander. Uh, and I felt, and have felt all my life, there were certain things that I knew that very few others knew, and that was one of the things that I knew was the backside of the Statue of Liberty, and was a special view of how she came on at dusk and I knew that, while everybody else owned her, and while the light would come on across the harbor and across the world, that only I was seeing her from my vantage point. And that was very special.

DANE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Lots of boys, as friends on the island?

VESTERMARK: There were only a couple that I can recall. There were very few kids living on the island, particularly in World War Two. In World War Two I don't know of any families that were living there with kids, because it was so jammed and so full of really badly maimed people. So most of us kids lived off the island and then came to visit. I probably was there more than any other kid, (?) Public Health Service. Uh, but, uh, some of the people that you saw had been so badly hurt, and there were so many of them, because so many of these were people from the torpedoing that was taking place outside New York harbor that, uh, there wasn't room for kids. It was not a kid-friendly environment, really, as it was when I had been a tiny baby.

DANE: And the war was going on. The hospital there was being used for torpedo victims. Describe your contact with the people that came to the island.

VESTERMARK: Well, there was several different uses. The hospital itself, of course, was legally required to take care of certain categories of federal patients including merchant seamen, Coast Guard, naval personnel and so forth. Then, beyond that, there would be an occasional enemy alien who would be in the hospital. That was very neat. Uh--

DANE: How did you know that it was an enemy alien?

VESTERMARK: We'd be told, and occasionally he'd even come over in handcuffs. We'd know that way, too. And the Justice Department agents loved to do this, and the looked very much like Edward G. Robinson movie figures with their fedora hats, floppy coats, and bulges. They were quite a sight, and a parody of themselves. Since Ephraim Zimblass [PH], Jr. that has all changed. Mr. Hoover's gotten that, gotten that act cleaned up, or got it cleaned up, I should say. But my contact with the wounded of World War Two came primarily from being allowed to watch and, in some cases, help unload, the wounded. My most vivid recollection was when the British cruiser Malaya, H.M.S. Malaya, came into the Narrows after having been

torpedoed at sea and having had an immense hole knocked in its side. As I recall, several hundred wounded came off that ship the day that, uh, the ship hoved too off of the quarantine station. And because Ellis Island was so crowded, the patients went to the Marine Hospital on Staten Island and were taken there in an enormous convoy of ambulances. And this was a very striking, tragic sight. Many of the men were still bleeding, uh, had been only hastily cared for aboard the ship. Uh, there were some obvious amputations, and some obvious people rather close to death. People obviously close to death. And it was a, that made the war real, and it made it even more real when the boys would go exploring. I had a gang of junior commandos that I belonged to. I had a gang of junior commandos that I belonged to, and we would go exploring for fragments of the torpedoings down below quarantine and when we could, on Ellis Island. Ellis Island was a bit too far up the harbor to get much, but, and you also had the sea walls, but occasionally a body might float into the ferry slip, that kind of thing. But Staten Island was a real treasure trove of things to see and do and once we began to find our first debris from the torpedoings, and that, coupled with the wounded, uh coming ashore, all of that began to make the war real in a way that it has never ceased to be for me. Uh, and as I had mentioned to you also in the pre-interview, uh, the experience of World War Two left a certain pall, how are we on time? Do you want to cut or do you want to keep going?

DANE: Keep going.

VESTERMARK: Okay. Uh, that's, it remains for me a time when I had great fun. I loved being an Ellis Island boy and a Staten Island boy in World War Two. I had a grand, grand time watching all of this, and being a part of it in certain ways. But there was a lot of deprivation. There were lots of things you couldn't have, couldn't do, couldn't say, couldn't think. As an officer's son again, I was conscious of all of this. Uh, whether he was out on his role as an air raid warden, which had made me very proud, because I felt that he was doing something important in the war instead of just commuting all day to Ellis Island, uh, uh, or whether he was on Ellis Island himself, or I would find out that he had had to disarm a dangerous mental patient. Uh, and all of this, uh, all of this pastiche and collection of things, uh, made the war, the war effort, the being at war, something of a shadow, as I look back on it. Uh, and, it affected, I think all of us who are in our early fifties and late forties who recall World War Two, uh, that isn't comfortable with it, isn't happy with it, because it

was a time of stress and worry and strangeness. And it was a strangeness, things you couldn't have, things that you couldn't do. And always for reasons that were never totally clear.

DANE: This is the end of side one, Seymour Vestermark, Jr. It is 5:25.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

DANE: This is the beginning of side two, Seymour Vestermark, Jr., it is 5:34. You were on Ellis Island about thirty years ago, almost forty years ago really. New York City had changed a great deal. The use of the harbor has changed a great deal. Do you remember what it looked like out in the harbor? Was it a busy time, during the war?

VESTERMARK: It was marvelous. The harbor used to be subject to being counted by us boys on Staten Island, but you could see them best from Ellis Island, the ships, that is. At one time I counted one hundred and

twenty-five ships in Upper Bay alone, of all kinds, descriptions, ranging from little tiny junky freighters, tramp steamers, which we often thought were Q-boats. Q-boats were ships that were rigged up to fire artillery out of the sides when the plates were raised or dropped. And a Q-boat was one of our favorite kinds of things to watch for if we could. Uh, but of course they weren't . They were simply stock that had been pressed into wartime service. There would be immense liners, such as the Queen Elizabeth, in her wartime grey, and, in fact, one of my boyhood experiences was going out from the quarantine station on the quarantine boat to meet her on her first voyage across the Atlantic when she escaped from England. Um--

DANE: Was that impressive?

VESTERMARK: It was overwhelming, because when you came below her in the small Public Health Service quarantine boat, she was truly a mountain over you. And you could go so far under her that there seemed nothing else. It seemed as if only just this vast ship hovering over you for miles and miles and miles. It was truly impressive and overwhelming. Uh, there would be battleships. One night the North Carolina snuck out, and we snuck out to see her sneak out. And, of course, this was top secret. But boys had ways of hearing things, if you lived on the quarantine station or what have you. And we were sworn to secrecy by the officers who told us about all of this.

DANE: Is that right?

VESTERMARK: Yes. Uh, the Normandy was the tragic ship. She was my favorite ship. And she is the first ship that I really loved and can recall vividly. She, of course, burned about 1942 at her slip in New York and was lost and, uh, even then, as a kid, I sensed she was something special and now, as I see Bloomingdale's selling reproductions of her art deco work, I can see why. Um, the ships were immense, varied, there was an enormous group of sailors always coming shore in exotic uniforms. One, I recall, clearly had nothing but silver teeth in hid head. He was a Russian sailor. Our great ally, the Soviets, were coming over with one of their ships, even. Um, so it was another one of those exciting, enchanting places to be, the harbor, always changing, jammed with activity, and with a more proper sized kind of skyline above it, I used to love the little cluster of, um, stalagmite kinds od buildings, the tip of Manhattan. Now that has all, of course, as we know, have been changed by boxes, huge boxes, huge, forbidding boxes which, to me, underscore how empty the harbor is. There is an enormous collection of new architecture, and no boating. And so what you essentially have is a kind of a dead lake out there where there was once a vibrant, exciting place of people dashing, turning to and from, with big ships, little ships, picket boats, ferry boats, all sorts of things happening all at once. That reminded me, it took me, years later, to realize what I had seen. In 1980 I visited Venice, Italy for the first time

and the pool of Venice is abuzz with boats. Little Baferrti, little commuting boats. (Another voice speaks.) Yes. Um, uh, (Italian word), steamships, warships and so forth. Um, and that was New York. That was New York as I remember it as a boy, and I said, "What am I seeing today?" And what I'm seeing is the old New York harbor as it used to be, a place of activity and of enthusiasm and of excitement.

DANE: And your sense, as an islander, that had to get on a boat to get any place--

VESTERMARK: That's right.

DANE: Did you feel that you were in a marine environment as opposed to an urban?

VESTERMARK: Yes. Again, that's part of the special thing that comes with being an island boy and being the son of a government officer. You were living in different kinds of special worlds. The island, first of all, was a special world. Then, as a Public Health Service son, we had a world inside that world, and it was like walking through doors. You would, and I had a sense, very strongly, of walking into secret places nobody

else could go to. And, of course, I would tell my classmates at school about this and drive them batty with it. But, uh, it was part, it was, I guess, a kind of compensating joy for the sacrifice you make as a Public Health Service son, because there are certain things you can't do, or couldn't do then, and there had to be a reward, and the reward was being an island boy and feeling that yes, in fact, you were going home to your island. And, in fact, even when we lived on Staten Island, a much larger island, I always felt Ellis Island as being my real home. That's where I really belonged, and I always carried that feeling with me very strongly.

DANE: And, back to Ellis Island, the buildings, and where you could go as a child, would you ever be allowed to check in on patients, or to scurry around the rooms, or--

VESTERMARK: We didn't get much into the wards. My dad, being a medical officer, he was very, very emphatic about that. And we had patients with syphilis and tuberculosis and very, and other varying kinds of contagious and chronic diseases. And I was told to stay away from them. But I used to enjoy checking on the syphilitics if I could find them,

because they would, sometimes, on rare occasions, appear with horribly mangled features, with a jaw rotted off or something happening to the, happening to the arm, or some kind of postulating thing happening to the forehead, and that was neat for a kid to watch. Uh, with that kind of a cruel perspicacity that kids have. Uh, but, in general, we were also told those men are dangerous and they could make you sick if you came too close. So don't. And in general they were so well confined you couldn't see them anyway. They were kept behind locked doors. You could hear the metal patients once in a while and one of the things I recall from my boyhood are the occasional screams of mental patients and when we moved from Ellis Island the last time, to Fort Worth, Texas, where my father became the executive officer of a hospital there, I heard those screams at night from the hospital on the hill above us. And that brought back that sense of constancy that one has in one's life. One has certain themes in one's life that one develops, and one of these is the sounds of patients screaming at night. You could hear that. Uh, but in general, the harbor noise masked that. There was always tinkling around Ellis Island. There were several that I used to like to listen to, because I liked their music. And just, "Jingle, jangle, jingle jangle, jingle, jangle," and flash on and off and then ships would blow their whistles and you'd hear motorboats going by, and all that formed a kind of background noise which tended to make the sounds of the hospital, and the sights of the hospital, less threatening.

DANE: And you had a sister, younger sister.

VESTERMARK: Yes.

DANE: Would you, was she there on the island already?

VESTERMARK: No. She was born in 1944 and we left Ellis Island in April of 1945, and she has no memories of the place at all. She was born, in fact, on Staten Island. My mother loves to tell the story that her children were all born on islands which, for a midwesterner, was a very strange kind of thing. If you come from the flat country, it's quite a contrast. But, uh, Sandy has no recollection at all of any of this, and it's something that she regrets.

DANE: There were the tunnels. Any other secret places or adventures?

VESTERMARK: There were additional tunnels going out from the tunnels, and I explored a few of these. And where they went, I don't know. One of my friends had the theory that these were secret escape tunnels in case we got invaded by something, but I think they were probably utility tunnels and things of that sort. The big tunnels were regular streets. They were tunnels where you could go and really be on a kind of a concourse,

an underground world. Uh, today's equivalent would be Montreal's underground city or underground Atlanta, places where you have a complete life below the surface. Uh, and there was lots going on down there, lots of activity, even occasional business deals being cut in the hallways just among people, staff. Uh, and, of course, Johnny The Push, with all his vehicles going up and down them. But we found, in World War Two, you couldn't go any farther towards First Island than underneath the ferry tunnel. Then it, the tunnels would be blocked. Um, so we, my tunnel experience was primarily confined to Second and Third Island, and I never had a chance to explore much on the side tunnels because, again father said there were certain things that officers' sons have to do.

DANE: Activity, transport of food, or--

VESTERMARK: Yes. There were food transportation areas, if you wanted to use them that way. Often the patients, as I understand it, and I would have to go to my mother and other's to be corrected on this, were fed in their wards or in closed facilities. But primarily what you did underground was to push the vast array of hospital supplies. The, in those days, you did not have disposable hospital garments, and you had an enormous quantity of these garments always, it seemed, headed toward Mary Daley, who was in her underground cave sewing them all the time. And a hospital pushcart full of these garments was a very, very heavy kind of thing. It

might weigh several hundred pounds by the time it got down to her. Then there were needs to move people around underground. Occasionally, uh, Justice or Coast Guard would have prisoners that had to be moved underground. They'd move that way, uh, from island to island. Uh, but, in general, beyond the service needs that the island had to have met in these tunnels, what you had down there was simply the underground circulatory system of the islands. This was where you moved around between bad weather. When weather became bad out there it became very bad. Uh, fog, sleet, and it could come very quickly. And in that kind of marine environment, suddenly, where you could see Jersey, you couldn't see Jersey any more just behind. It would be gone. Miss Liberty would be gone. You couldn't, you couldn't see her light any more. Uh, you could hear ships, you could hear fog horns, with their distinctive resonating big sound, um, but in those times, you went underground. And the underground tunnels became a very, very critical was of just doing the business that had to be done of living on the island. And I also might note, at this time, too, I've seen the island from a far recently, and I am astounded by the luxuriant growth all over the place. It has, it has gone berserk. In those days, when I lived there, there wasn't much at all. There were small trees that had been just stuck in. I guess they were sycamores, or something of that sort. Uh, but there were still lots of cinders, lots of scratchy cinders where kids could scratch their knees and backsides, where it wasn't much fun to play. Um, there wasn't much grass. An occasional, some, occasionally some of the fill

would come forward. For example, one would occasionally trip over objects in the fill. My mother mentioned, in the pre-interview, about bed stands and things of that sort that had been used to fill in between Second and Third Island. Sometimes that stuff would surface and you would trip over it. So there were lots of inducements to going down and staying underground.

DANE: So it was unpleasant in that big open space.

VESTERMARK: It could be very unpleasant up there, very windy. You felt very naked up there. I didn't particularly enjoy being out there. And I had the sense, also, which I hadn't mentioned before, of having been rather spied upon out there. That's a huge kind of parade ground area, and it wasn't very well covered in terms of the center. And when you walked across there you knew that "they" were watching Dr. Vestermark's son cross between Second and Third Island. They being patients and enemy aliens and people like that who really shouldn't be observing me, but who were doing so illegally. Uh, so, uh, the tunnels were, were enticing, and again the sea walls. One of the things that you learned, and kids learn

these things, is to be careful of the sea walls because, as you've mentioned in your own experience over there, one could fall over very quickly. And, uh, I was assured by many well meaning friends of my father that a boy could drown there instantly. They might have hoped that he would. In any case, uh, I gave that a pretty wide berth. So by and large you felt better if you were inside or underground, except at dusk, when I would go and watch Miss Liberty come on, or go out and watch ships go by, or run over to catch the night ferry into South Ferry for a ride.

DANE: Uh-huh. Also it was, uh, a place where immigrants still were coming through. Do you remember--

VESTERMARK: Yes, I have very vivid memories. And, of course, this was past the great stream in which my grandmother came, Mary Daley, Johnny The Push, and all the rest. Uh, and it trickled down to a very small number. But I can still recall families of them, people I was told were immigrants. I would say, "Who are they?" And they would say, "Those are immigrants." And I knew enough to know that

immigration service was still doing things to them over on First Island. And, I must say, uh, semi-facetiously, that Public Health Service kids and personnel and Justice kids didn't always get along. There were turf battles that were going on. One second here. (Addresses someone else in the room.) Don't call cats yet for supper here. We're on tape still. That'll be an interesting bit of history here. Um, cats. Theme of cats. Um, there was some friction, some tension, uh, some feeling of a forced marriage between the two services on the island out there. And so when we saw the immigrants in their black clothes, they always seemed to wear black, and they did have bundles, and they did have satchels, and they seemed to be like little flocks of wounded birds walking around the island. When we saw them we would think, "That's what immigration does. They do things to those people. They process them." The word process was heard a lot. "They're being processed." And it's the middle of a war, of course. Where'd they come from, why they were here, I have no idea how they got there, because we had been told you couldn't cross the Atlantic Ocean safely. We'd been told there were

subs out there. I knew there were subs out there because I had found evidence of it out there. Uh, leftover pieces of, in fact, one day, uh, what appeared to be part of a body that had washed ashore. So we knew the German subs were out there just beyond the submarine nets, just beyond where the Verrazano Bridge is today, we knew they couldn't get over, so how'd they get here. But they were there in their black clothes and their bundles.

DANE: Would you ever make up stories that they were indeed spies, or--

VESTERMARK: No, because we had the real spies there, you see. The real spies were the enemy aliens, and they were over on First Island. And then, of course, we had real spies on Staten Island. In fact, the FBI made several arrest during my boyhood. In fact, one not far from our house where, in fact, a German spy had been logging ship movements from the tower of his old Victorian house. And he was sent to prison for it. There was no doubt this was, this was true. And, but, of course, us boys, therefore, were even more

diligent and we had our junior commando organization designed to ferret these spies out and the leader of our outfit, I wasn't the leader, I was just one of the troops in it, would occasionally call the police and inform the police that we thought we had a German spy picked out. And the police were all, "Thank you. That's wonderful. Keep up the good work, boys." Etc., etc., etc. Uh, I wonder how that would go down today. I would love to hear somebody comment to me about that way of doing police work forty years later. Uh, but since we had real spies, and since we had real enemy aliens on First Island, the immigrants were obviously immigrants. They were nice people. They were confused, lost people who had been tossed up by the war and were here for us to save and take care of, which we, in P.H.S. did, and which Immigration probably did not.

DANE: Right. Right. Would they, would you know where they were coming from? Would that be explained to you if they were from--

VESTERMARK: I never got a very satisfactory answer. Uh, I think, in some cases, uh, they were Latin Americans. In some cases they were

people from the south of Europe, or perhaps even the Middle East. I don't know, and I've always wanted to know more about that. There were so few of them, that when they did appear they were very intriguing.

DANE: Would they be allowed, would you see them walking around outside?

VESTERMARK: They were always walking in little groups, and they were always being processed in some way. They were always going from someplace to someplace and since the enemy aliens were interned on, just outside and in part of what is now the Great Hall, where they, where these immigrants went, I don't know. And they weren't there very long. They would come and they would go. And the enemy aliens were always there behind their fence.

DANE: And in the wing that, uh, some referred to as the contagious disease wing.

VESTERMARK: Yes.

DANE: Were you ever allowed to go over in that part on Third Island?

VESTERMARK: I was expressly prohibited from going near that, that contagious disease ward. I did, however, have a rabbit named Thumper which I gave the rabbit to the laboratory over there for experimental purposes, and I was allowed to go visit Thumper on Third Island. And Thumper was not very far from the contagious diseases people, so I could sneak a look, but that was strictly, uh, against the rules. And while I was welcome to go visit the animal house and to feed Thumper and to make sure Thumper was doing all right, uh, that was the limit of it right there.

DANE: And the animal house, was that in the laboratory?

VESTERMARK: I recall it only as being Third Island, and I don't have any fix as to exactly where it was. I would have to go back and take a look again to try to find it.

DANE: Other animals there besides Thumper?

VESTERMARK: They had rabbits, a lot of rabbits, and they had some monkeys that were being used experimentally, I understand. The monkeys I wasn't allowed to play with. The rabbits I was.

DANE: And would you see the monkeys?

VESTERMARK: Yes. I recall, monkeys, over there. One of the neatest things I ever saw on the laboratory side was on Staten Island, however, not on Ellis Island. A man named Dr. John Mahoney, who became later a prominent health official, was growing penicillin from scratch over at the Stapelton Marine Hospital, and I was allowed to watch it being grown, and I was told then by Dr. Mahoney, on a night visit to his lab, that this was going to be a miracle drug that would save mankind. And of course it didn't, he wasn't far off that. And, uh, on Ellis Island, we didn't have that kind of research going on, to my knowledge, although there was some research being done on war trauma, because Ellis Island was so full of badly hurt people. But that was more, I think, in a kind of ad hoc way. I think, as you treated patients, you would do research on them. I know my father was, at that time, using experimental electroshock therapy over there on some of the more badly emotionally damaged, uh, patients, and I saw his equipment, uh, and I saw a few of his patients from afar. But they were rather fearful, because the mentally disabled from the war often could become very violent and, on several occasions, my father had to disarm them. On one occasion he and a friend had to take a large shard of glass away from a man who was going to try to attack my father with it. Another time my father found a very dangerous knife under the pillow of a patient. I still have that knife. Uh, which I have kept for various reasons, just as a souvenir of that era. But, uh, you, you became careful. I have emphasized all of the enthusiasm that a boy has for the exotic and the interesting and,

certainly, Ellis Island was full of the exotic. But you were warned to be careful, and you were also warned that, as a doctor's son you shouldn't do anything which would involve yourself in interfering with the care of these patients. That was the way it was put, you see. We were caring for them and you must not be involved in anything that would, perhaps, hurt them, or make them feel bad, or interfere with their recovery. But the patients were a striking lot. The syphilitics I described before were the most interesting to look at. Uh, the tuberculers were sort of scary. The mental patients came in all shapes and sizes and form, uh, except they were all male. Uh, and they were very hard to read. Uh, but the true contagious disease, uh, personnel, were really kept behind locked doors. They had to be.

DANE: And the population were mostly from the war, or were they also civilians?

VESTERMARK: As I said before, you had several categories of personnel that were entitled to receive care there. One were the merchant seamen and, in fact, Public Health Service came from the original congressional mandate in 1798 to take care of merchant seamen and others who might, uh, need that kind of care, who served at sea. It was originally called the Marine Hospital Service. Uh, and then the Public Health Service functions broadened out dramatically only really after World War One. Uh,

and the hospital at Ellis Island was a residue of that primary mission of the Public Health Service. So you would have seamen. You would have, uh, military personnel who were entitled to care there. A lot of Coast Guard personnel over there, and a lot of Navy personnel. And then they would have the overflow from the tragedies going on as a result of the U-boat war in the North Atlantic, but most of those, uh, I recall, went to the Marine Hospital at Stapleton in Staten Island and not Ellis Island.

DANE: Uh-huh. Tell me, do you remember the entertainment hall that was between Second and Third Island? Was that in operation when you were there?

VESTERMARK: I don't recall that at all.

DANE: Uh-huh. What about festivities on the island? Were there ever occasions that the personnel would get together and, as a child, do you remember?

VESTERMARK: Yes. I don't recall anything in the way of the, a large scale collective, uh, celebration, if you will. Of course, uh, July Fourth was a very special day. But especially important to me, as a kid, was Christmas, because we would always go over to the commanding officer's house, and even if we were on Staten Island we would try to get over and pay

him a call on Ellis Island which, I think, shows you the psychological pull of the island. And I recall the fires in the fireplaces, Christmas tree, a lot of old dark mahogany feeling and, of course, Miss Liberty out the window. A great place to watch her come on at night. Uh, but our kind of social life was more familial, it was the Public Health Service people of our level and rank and, in general, this is typical of the old military lifestyle, you didn't mingle much below your rank. And then, to be a senior surgeon, for example, which was one of my dad's ranks, which made him a commander in the Navy, as I recall. And to wear three stripes, or two and a half stripes, gave you real status. And, uh, much more so than we see today. Uh, and, uh, I'm not sure I'm pleased to have seen that gone the way it did. I mentioned in the pre-interview, up until about 1935, as Public Health Service officer, you would appear at your commanding officer's house on New Year's Day in full dress and with your dress saber. And I have seen a few of those worn on Ellis Island. When I say that, now, to a Public Health Service officer, they just can't believe it was ever like that, but it was. It was like that. Very military, very old fashioned, very punctilious. You left your visiting cards. And at Dr. Sweeney's house, even though he was a dear family friend, even though one of his daughters was a baby sitter of mine, there was always a status difference. He was always Dr. Sweeney, the medical officer in charge, the M.O.C., with the rank of Captain in the Navy. And a naval captain, even today, is a pretty impressive character, uh, as is a colonel in the army, the equivalent rank.

Uh, but our celebrating went on that way. I don't ever recall having been to an island-wide party. There were no such things, as I recall, during my time. And I think one reason, well, there were two reasons. One was the war. And the war tended to skew everything. You didn't do much partying during World War Two. Uh, you couldn't get many party things, and it was somehow not right to go partying. Again, a different attitude than we have seen in recent years. Secondly, it was a dual jurisdiction. Justice and Public Health Service didn't mingle much.

DANE: Tell me, there's something else that someone, actually, the first time on the island-- (Addresses the recording engineer.) How are we doing, O.J.? Back to the Statue of Liberty and its close proximity to the island. You'd go out, as a little boy, and watch it, would you be joined, or would the older people--

VESTERMARK: That was sort of my favorite thing to do alone, and, because people knew of the feeling that I had toward the Statue, my own private islander's feeling of the Statue from island home, if you will. The question, would always be, when I came back, "Is she on?" And the answer would, of course, always be, "Yes, she is on." And that was kind of our addiction for the evening. She is on protecting us, glowing, raising her torch, she's there.

DANE: And you were the messenger of the news.

VESTERMARK: I would bring the news back that she is indeed on for those adults who were individually curious and didn't look out the window.

DANE: I see.

VESTERMARK: But, of course, that was a thing I could do. But she'd be on, again, as part of that private view that I mentioned before, uh, as I've emphasized several times. One does not understand her until you have been close by to her when she comes on at dusk. Now, particularly in the war because I knew that as long as she would be on at night we would be safe, and even during World War Two she was on part of the time. There were times when she wasn't but, uh, she was muted down, as I recall.

DANE: Were there any nights you'd go and she wouldn't come on?

VESTERMARK: I never saw one. And the psychological symbol was too important, but when we had a full blackout in New York she'd be out, of course, and we'd occasionally had full blackouts when we felt that we

were going to be attacked by the enemy, and we did. On several occasions we genuinely felt that German planes were going to bomb us.

DANE: And the feeling of insecurity? Was that there when you knew--

VESTERMARK: When the air raid sirens went off, I was scared. The only time in World War Two I was ever scared was when those air raid sirens came on at night and the search lights would come on and try to finger out planes. Uh, and, uh, it is a very spooky thing. It was not like that cats screaming and calling, it was not like the banshees, it was real. Uh, and the sirens were very powerful, and could be heard all over the harbor, and, uh, it meant we were being attacked.

DANE: An historical question, and I'm not sure you would even have been aware of it anyway, as a young child. I've been told that during, um, the mid part of the century, the doctors that were put on Ellis Island were some of the very best. Uh, for research purposes. And I'm not sure if that's fallacy or founded in fact. Do you have any idea?

VESTERMARK: I'm a hard person to ask on that because, in general, the quality of immigrant care, as has been described to me, was somewhat

sporadic given the ebbs and flows of the people. But I'm very prejudiced. Uh, I feel the doctors that I knew were, in many cases, as a boy, were distinguished men. I knew this because I saw, for example, Dr. Mahoney's research, even though it was Staten Island and not Ellis Island, but he had close Ellis Island ties. My dad went on to become a very famous administrator in Public Health Service after he reached his career peak, and many of the doctors over there went on to distinction later on. So there is evidence that, in fact, the quality of medical personnel was very, very high. One of their concerns was that they felt that some of the Justice personnel there weren't fully cognizant of some of the medical needs the patients had, and I think part of the undercurrent between the two divisions that ran the island was based upon the perception, true or not, of the Public Health Service doctors, that patients, particularly in immigration, had needs that weren't being met. But, uh, you know, I am not qualified to offer an opinion, except historically, in terms of what I know happened to some of the doctors who were there. Beyond that I can't say.

DANE: And then, in closing, sort of as a wrapping over the whole thing and your experience on Ellis Island. For many of us it's an immigration center, it's a place that they came through to find America and the future, uh, hopefully was better. For you, or someone that's lived there, was born there, how does it tell you, as an american, as someone that has a very unique experience relating to the island?

VESTERMARK: It's always mad me feel a very special person. That is why I think I became a social scientist myself, uh, because of the experience of growing up there. It was always pointed out to me as a child that I was unique and that I was the only child ever born there. Well, that is not true, apparently, historically, but I may be the only child of native American parents born there. I don't know that to be true, either. But I had a sense of tremendous specialness that I would be, had been bon at this great meeting place of historical forces. And even then I knew about this. I was reading history when I was ten years old. Uh, and I was also very conscious of the written word as a way of accessing knowledge. Uh, so I knew a lot about the history of the place. But beyond that I loved it. I simply loved the sense of specialness that was involved in having been born there at the crossroads of the world in some ways, uh, of having had unique access to it, of having done unique things as a kid, and for me it was, you know, as I mentioned earlier on, my way of surviving in New York City. And in New York City, as a New Yorker, you have a neighborhood. That was my neighborhood. It was my home, and it has always been my home in a very special sense, but full of images about which I have a private view. The Statue of Liberty, after all, is perhaps our most prominent symbol of what this country stands for. And I grew up on very close terms with her. I saw shipping go by of a way that has now peaked and vanished. Uh, I was allowed to do things that I would have done no other way, and I came away from the

experience of Ellis Island, of an Ellis Island boyhood, if you will, uh, always having felt that I had been given a very special look at things I'm still trying to determine the meaning of. You might want to re-phrase that grammatically on the transcript.

DANE: And as someone who has been involved in history, and knowing the importance of, as you say, crossroads at Ellis Island, um, American-German parents, grandparents, any of that come through as, as looking back on your time on Ellis Island?

VESTERMARK: Never very prominent, except that I was aware very early that I was there because my grandmother had come here, and that I was part of something ongoing. I did not know what it was. Now I know that it's life.

DANE: This is the end of side two, Seymour Vestermark, Jr. It is 6:10.