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DECK HAND ON ELLIS ISLAND FERRY
1941-1954

GUMB: This is Dana Gumb and I'm speaking with Mr. Ronald Whelan on the 28th day of May, 1986. We're beginning this interview at 9:45. We're about to talk to Mr. Whelan about his work experience on Ellis Island from 1941 to 1954. Okay, Mr. Whelan, if we could begin with where and when you were born.

WHELAN: I was born in Brooklyn May 8, 1920.

GUMB: Okay, and how did you first get involved with Ellis Island?

WHELAN: I was working on a mud-towing tug with the boys dredging,

we were going to sea, towing mud to sea when I came across an article in the New York Sun. At that time, it a paper on the Civil Service column and they were looking for deck hands at Ellis Island. I made application, I was sent over with two ex-Navy chiefs for the same job. And it seemed like the ex-Navy chiefs had a lock on the job for all the jobs that were there. I was the first one to break that line of employment. And the District Director at the time was Mr. Byron C. Uell, and the Plant Engineer was Mr. Herbert L. Boot, he was the one that hired me, and everyone down at the ferry then was working. What ship was I on in the Navy? I says, "No way, I just came off a tug towing mud to sea." They didn't know how the hell I was, you know, I was a little outcast for awhile, you know, I broke their chain of command, they thought they had a lock on that job, but that was it.

GUMB: Well, first, what year was this?

WHELAN: Nineteen forty-one.

GUMB: Okay, and you said the position was deck-hand?

WHELAN: Deck-hand right.

GUMB: What were the duties?

WHELAN: Well, the duties was tying up the ferry at both ends, at Ellis Island and at the Battery in New York, and you put the hook on the padeye at the end of the ferry, and spun the wheel with the pawl on, and you lock the ferry in place, open the passenger gates, drop the chain, made a count of the head before they boarded the ferry, and you see that no one disregarded the regulations such as smoking in restricted areas and one thing or another, and didn't act like a ruffian, and jeopardize other passengers on the boat. Kept order, that's it, and you had a weekly fireboat crew in case of an emergency. Used to go to the shipyard with the ferry, paint it down, scrape the blisters, and red lead it and paint it all over, put it back in shipshape, every year you done that.

GUMB: Okay, we could go back to your duties. You say something about a pole, drop the pole and spin the wheel?

WHELAN: Oh yeah, the pawl, like when you come to the dock, you

stepped on the dock, you put your hook into the padeye and you dropped your pawl on the wheel and you spun your wheel and it locked the ferry into the bridge. And we didn't carry vehicles on that ferry, just passengers.

GUMB: Maybe you could go back to that, just a little more slowly, of exactly how the ferry operated, I think that might be interesting.

WHELAN: Well, we left the Ellis Island, we made approximately a 15 minute crossing to the Battery, where we docked into the Battery Slip, and as the boat got to the bridge, west to the bridge, the deck-hand stepped onto the dock, took the end of the line with hook on it, and out it into the padeye at the end of the ferry, and he then tucked back down the bridge, dropped the pawl over, spun the wheel there and then locked the ferry into the bridge, solid, and you'd open the passenger gates, drop the chain barrier and then you let the passengers off that way.

GUMB: Yeah, I understand everything there except the pawl?

WHELAN: Pawl, it's like it goes over a cog-wheel, and as you spin it, you hear it clicking as it's going on until you

can't get no more slack out of the line and she locks herself into position, the bridge is nestled, the ferry is nestled right snug up to the bridge, that it shouldn't fall away from it.

GUMB: Okay, well this is the line that goes to the dock, it locks?

WHELAN: Right, right, the line from the dock comes on to the rounded part of the ferry, you have a padeye on each side, and each deck-hand puts a hook into each padeye, spins his big wheel on the dock, and that takes up all the slack on the line and locks the boat into position.

GUMB: Okay, then you said spin the wheel, what, that was the wheel that--

WHELAN: Like a big ship's wheel that was on the dock, and you don't see that around anymore, everything is electrified, but that was on the old hand manual system there, and if you, the bridge wasn't locked in position tight enough, why then you put more pressure on the wheel to get it snug, right centered into the dock.

GUMB: And maybe we should get the spelling of pawl.

WHELAN: P-A-W-L, pawl.

GUMB: Okay, so how did you manage to get this job?

WHELAN: Well, as I told you, through the advertisements in the paper, and then when I made the application. I still didn't know if I had it, but three months later, I was the one that was appointed after the interview with the three men.

GUMB: Well, I mean as far as you said that you were the first non- Navy person to get this position. I'm wondering how did you manage to get it?

WHELAN: Maybe the boss didn't like hiring strictly all Navy personnel and he wanted to break that there barrier, that lock on the job, and he hired me. I was what you call a civilian. I wasn't a Navy man, you know. These guys were all excellent seamen, don't get me wrong, nothing wrong with them, but I had just as much experience in the

harbor as, three years I had at the time, so I was an able seaman also at the time. Of course, you had, going to sea, you had to have able seaman towing the mud out, you know, you go beyond the limits, the demarcation line.

GUMB: So who was the Captain of the Ferry at the time?

WHELAN: We had six Captains. It was one master in charge. His name was Captain Nils J. Anderson, and they called him Captain Ya-Ya. He was Scandinavian, and every time you asked him a question he always answered you with, "Ya-Ya," and he was a good man though, he broke you in good. And under him you had five other Captains, but he was what they called the Master in Charge. And you had the two weeks on each rotating ship, two weeks of eight to four, two weeks four to twelve, two weeks of twelve to eight, you made about eight round-trips on the eight to four watch, five round-trips four to twelve, you made about three round-trips on the twelve to eight, that's 16 round-trips in 24 hours, and the last job I had was 16 round-trips in eight hours, bingo, every 15 minutes, blow the whistle. I used to tell the SP and MP, "Why don't you swallow it and blow it somewhere else." (He laughs.) But I can't put that on.

GUMB: So how many crew members were there on the ferry?

WHELAN: At the time, at Ellis Island, we had a Captain, we had a Quartermaster, and we had two deck-hands, we had a Chief Engineer, we had an oiler, and we had a fireman, which gave you seven crew members.

GUMB: And they were on the vessel every time?

WHELAN: The whole eight hour shift we spent aboard that boat, you didn't have nothing to do with the dock whatsoever, you didn't leave the ferry. And in between trips you swept down the deck there, and kept a look-out for passengers. Sometimes you had passengers that were going over to the hospital and sometimes they were not up to par with their health and menta;-wise, and sometimes they would just take a jump off the end of the ferry and take a swim to cool off, and then they gave us the headache, after they got into the river, they decided they didn't want to swim, they wanted to be pulled out, and they would hang onto a missing plank from the rack. We'd get the sound of their voice when we'd have to go on top of the rack, drop a line, and haul them in or drop a life boat and rescue them from the water, one or the other. Had to rescue them half of the time. One of them would like maybe to shove you off the top of the rack after pulling them out of the river. They like to give him a nice belt there, you know, straighten him

out, but you couldn't touch them, they were a little sick.

GUMB: This was on the Ellis Island side?

WHELAN: On the New York side. This was on the New York side, before they were going back to the hospital there for their, probably they were on a weekend pass maybe, and some of them a little too much, a little inebriated, and boisterous, and some of them violent. A lot of times you would take a punch from one of them, and for no reason at all, and all the doctor at the Island was concerned was that you didn't touch him, it's alright for him to go and take a belt at you, you know.

GUMB: So, you mentioned the shipyard.

WHELAN: We used to go up to a shipyard in Staten Island, it was called Brewer's Shipyard, and then there was another shipyard in New Jersey, Todd's Shipyard, up there in Hoboken. I don't think either one of those shipyards are in that location anymore.

GUMB: Well, there's a Todd's Shipyard in Redhook, Brooklyn.

WHELAN: Brooklyn, right. The one in Hoboken, I think, I don't know if it's still there. But we'd go to the shipyard with the ferry every year and they would dry-dock the ferry, they would re-paint the hull, check the propeller, and then the deck-hand would take care of the painting of the ferry, inside and out, and get it back in shape for another year.

GUMB: What time of the year would this usually take place?

WHELAN: This would come around springtime, more or less March or April.

GUMB: So this was the same ferry boat that was used early?

WHELAN: It was 50 years, it was operating there 50 years. She was built around 1904, I think, in a shipyard called Hollandsworth Shipyard somewhere in Virginia, somewhere down there.

GUMB: So then she continuously operating?

WHELAN: Fifty years, the only ferry operating there for 50 years.

She was built in '04, they tied her up in '54, she was 50 years old. And the interim, when we went to the yard, for repairs, they hired some other, put out a bid on contract for some other small, side-landing boat, like the Statue of Liberty, or one of the Circle Line boats, would take over the two-week run for the passengers. They would make side-landings on New York side at Pier Nine, and over on the Ellis Island side, up against the stone wall.

GUMB: You say side-landing? The Ellis Island ferry--

WHELAN: At Ellis Island, we made head-on landings into the regular ferry bridge, was curvatured to the contour of the bow of the ferry, and these other vessels were pointed bows and rounded sterns, so she didn't fit into the ferry ridge, she came alongside this sea wall. You put out a springline, a headline, and a sternline, you put your gangway put and let your passengers off, sidelanding.

GUMB: So the name of the ferry was the "Ellis Island?"

WHELAN: "Ellis Island," right.

GUMB: How long was it?

WHELAN: How long? Approximately, maybe 140-50 feet long. I think she was about 800 and some odd tons.

GUMB: What was the capacity? Do you remember.

WHELAN: Uh, capacity was about maybe about 600 passengers, foot passengers.

GUMB: How many decks were there?

WHELAN: We had the main-deck, then you had your upper deck, two deck for the upper deck, then you had the top deck which was what they called the boat deck for the life boats, and the second deck was, a lot of the office personnel didn't like smoking, you were not allowed to smoke on the upper deck. And then the Commissioner, what you call the Commissioner's Room there for the District Director used to come on, read his mail in the morning before he got off on the Island, then he would check out his mail properly leaving the Island at night, had his own little private settee and table and chairs in there. You

know he consulted with his other officials, with business pending that day, or the following day.

GUMB: District Director of what?

WHELAN: District Director of Immigration. It was Immigration and Naturalization Service. And then at one time, I think prior to me coming on the ferry, it was under the Department of Labor, under a woman called Ma perkins, and then when I was there, it came under the department of Justice, the Immigration/Naturalization Service, but we were employed by that department.

GUMB: You said there was a boat deck up above?

WHELAN: It was a boat deck on the top deck and the passenger deck up above and then the lower deck was for all like all the hand luggage used to come over. They used to deliver a;; the supplies, the food supplies, everything went to the island by handtruck. And then, after a while, they got some sort of flatbedded trucks there was pulled bu a little tow- truck, tow-engine pulled it on the ferry. But the meat, supplies, everything wnet to the hospital, the food supplies, the immigration, the Coast Guard.

Of course, it came over by hand truck.

GUMB: It all came by this ferry?

WHELAN: This ferry was the only means of communication for anything that came to that island.

GUMB: By hand truck, what do you mean?

WHELAN: Well, we had some sort of a two handles, and they used to sometimes come down the bridge on the New York side, on the Battery, I understood, that at low water one of the men taking the truck down couldn't control it, and the brass rails that used to go from the main deck up to the upper deck were at that time, pointed with a knob on each side and he run into that. So then after a while they just curved and rounded the knobs over so that would never happen to another man again. But that was the way, it was all hand labored in them days, and then they got away from that there. After a while you could only lead the ferry at a certain tide, they frowned on low water beacuse the bridge, the boat was down and that ramp went down too much of an incline for the degree of

the stuff.

GUMB: Did you ever know very much about the engine in the ferry? What kind of motor there was?

WHELAN: I wouldn't know too much of that, no, no. They originally burned coal, I did know that, in the engine room, it propelled the ferry by steam, and then they converted to oil, and that was before my time also.

GUMB: Alright, so in 1941 you started out as a deck-hand, and then what happened?

WHELAN: And then came along, and then, I was not there even a month, that came along Pearl Harbor. I was on the four to twelve shift, and then I heard the news on the radio and everybody screaming about Pearl Harbor being bombed and all the Coast Guard personnel had to get back to the base at Ellis Island. And that evening immediately, the government agency and the FBI had rounded up a lot of the top Japanese business executives in this country and Germans, and they were detaining them at Ellis Island for over-night or for a few days until they processed them and then those undesirables were sent out west, most probably

into the area of the Rockies, Oklahoma territory and they detained them there for the rest of the War. And the same thing applied for the West Coast, they shipped the Japanese in shore also I heard. But throughout the evening, we did not tie up at one in the morning, which was the normal tie up time, we continued to run that ferry all that evening, rounding up these people. And you had one Hari-Kari fellow, you know, he just didn't like being taken in, and he done an act on the ferry, and they had to rush him back to New York because they didn't have the medical facilities at Ellis Island to handle that kind of case.

GUMB: What did he do?

WHELAN: Hari-kari, you know what hari-kari is, you know, knife guys.

GUMB: Where did he do this?

WHELAN: On the ferry. On the ferry. And then you had a few try jumping over, you know. They just didn't want to be taken in to tow, you know, they probably maybe were guilty, maybe they were, who knows, leaking a lot of stuff to Japan even before the attack. But the government knew what

they were doing, they had them all figured and they picked them up that evening.

GUMB: So you were on the boat?

WHELAN: Yeah, well, I was decking on the ferry at that time and I saw these different incidents, I saw them. They kept them to one side of the ferry. all those that they rounded up, on the port side of the ferry, they kept them separate from the passengers.

GUMB: What did they look like, these people?

WHELAN: What did they look like? What does a Jap look like, I don't know, we called them everything in them days. Slanty-eyes and Japs and every other damn thing, if you'd like to go them. But they were innocent as far as I was concerned until proven guilty, you know. We couldn't say nothing to them.

GUMB: Were they wearing business suits?

WHELAN: Oh, very, very business like and executives. They looked

like the class there that had plenty of money, too, you know. Some of them maybe didn't have a chance to dress through the evening, they probably took them from their homes.

GUMB: Did you see this hari-kari incident?

WHELAN: No, I didn't see it but I heard the screaming and the commotion. We had to take, orders to back the ferry into New York. And then they had an ambulance back down from Beekman Downtown Hospital, and the police came aboard the ferry to make, jot notes there and they took the patient on to the Hospital, Beekman Downtown Hospital.

GUMB: Well, before, going back, before Pearl Harbor, for a minute, you said a little bit about the sort of passengers that were on the ferry. I guess it was just a month, wasn't it, before Pear Harbor.

WHELAN: Right, right.

GUMB: Typically, what were the kind of passengers that you had?

WHELAN: Well, there was some detainees there, maybe their papers weren't in order or one thing and another. And then you heard a lot of

expressions, you know, prior to this term of me coming, you had the expression "without papers" there, and it seemed that a lot of, a group of people from Europe who fit into that category, more or less, they called them "wops," if you know what I mean, which meant "with-out-papers." And that stuck to one group of people. They resented it, but that's the way they marked them, you know, when they didn't have their papers they sat them aside and this particular group from this particular country in Europe, they were called "wops." And that stuck with them, but that's how that originated. But you had a little business maybe, a seaman's papers weren't in order or another party came here illegally, they were detained there and they were being sent back to their country again, either Greek or English or from other countries. But that wasn't too lively, the activity there, and it was a peaceful little job for that one month, you know. Then all of a sudden after Pearl Harbor then the Coast Guard got pretty active, you know, and all the boys waiving the flags coming on with their valise "Remember Pearl Harbor." They were all signing up, you know, going back after jobs. But it was quite a busy place then for a while there after the War, with the Coast Guard, but not with immigration, that seemed to slow down at that time and then--

GUMB: So after Pearl Harbor you kept working on the ferry?

WHELAN: Yes, I worked there until maybe March or April of 1943, and then I decided I wanted to go to sea, they were

looking for able seamen. And they had, over the radio each day they were asking for able seamen, and I just felt like I was a shirker, you know what I mean? Decking the ferry boat there in the Harbor in New York, I felt that anyone could have done that job, you know. And they were asking for able seamen, so I went and volunteered my time to go to sea. And I signed up and I went to the Brooklyn Army Terminal and my first ship out was a troop ship. I served on that ship, the James Parker, which was formerly the Panama of the Panama Railroad Line. And I sailed six months with her carrying troops between Africa and England and Scotland and New York. Then I applied for that Officer's School at New London, Connecticut. And I went up there for about three and half months and we got a commission as an ensign and then we got also a Third Mates license there, to go to sea.

GUMB: So you were still on the ferry, on the Ellis Island ferry from Pearl Harbor, from '41 to '43.

WHELAN: November, '41 to approximately March, April 1943.

GUMB: How was it different from before Pearl Harbor, the days

before Pearl Harbor, how was it different from Pearl Harbor day to '43 when you left/ How was the routine, the daily routine different, do you remember?

WHELAN: The daily routine was the same each day. You didn't know who was coming on. The Immigration Guard had somebody in tow, sometimes they were in handcuffs, but when they boarded the ferry they had to take the handcuffs off, you couldn't manacle them on the boat in case of an emergency, you know, they had to be able to swim for themselves. And there was other normal business, lawyers back and forth there seeking information on their clients, pleading their case there, and something not, papers not in order. After a while, I think then they started after, later on they opened up another branch uptown around 70 Columbus Avenue, the main office of Immigration. And then, Ellis Island then was mostly for detention only and the big business was carried on up at 70 Columbus Avenue.

GUMB: So every time a prisoner had to be, or someone who was being detained, was always accompanied by an officer?

WHELAN: He was accompanied by an Immigration Guard, they called them Security Officers, I believe, later on.

GUMB: Were they in uniform?

WHELAN: They were in uniform. They always wore a uniform. And they accompanied them by car. They had maybe had a dozen cars, cars that used to park at the Barge Office on the new York side, or Slip 7, when they moved around to that vicinity. And they would take them back and forth by car. And they would keep them, you know, in handcuffs, in tow in the vehicle. But on the ferry, you know, we requested they take them off. And then even so, when the Guard took the handcuffs off they made the excuse to go to the bathroom and the next thing you know you had a big window wide open and the river out there was so tempting, and this guy knew he was heading back home, maybe for problems and trouble, maybe detention in his own country. So he decided to try to swim it shore. Some made it. Some we didn't get. And some we had to call the police boat after. And they used to give the police a little time, you know, dive under the boat and dive back for it and make fools out of the cops. They more or less scared them. They fired in the air there to kind of frighten them, you know. And then they collared them and put them back on the

ferry. Not on the ferry but they run them through Ellis Island and the Guard met them coming off the police boat.

GUMB: How did you catch them?

WHELAN: We?

GUMB: Yeah, how would you catch them?

WHELAN: Well, sometimes we would have to, if we couldn't get the police launch. But we had other forty footers, the Coast Guard had little forty footers there because by the time we got the life boat swung out and down into the river, the forty footers would be in the vicinity and pull the guy out of the drink faster than we could drop the boat. Because it was all manual there with letting it down by hand, the boat, you know.

GUMB: Okay. Um, let's see, you were describing how the slip on the New York side kind of moved around a little bit. When you first arrived there, where was the slip exactly?

WHELAN: The original slip was in the old, what they called the Old Barge Office, which is now the Coast Guard building

that you see down there. It was an old barge office, that building was built, those days it was maybe 18 inches thick, maybe 20, 24 inches thick. They didn't build buildings like that today. And that eventually came down and they shifted us from the Old Barge Office and then we were taken around into a, at the end of the city, ferry slips were there, a place called Slip Number 7. That's where we made our runs then, from there on and which, right now is being used by the Coast Guard's ferries, two slips, 7 and to Governor's Island.

GUMB: Okay, so you were talking about the passengers always being, the detainees always being accompanied by an Immigration Security Officer. What sort of uniform did they have on?

WHELAN: They had some sort of a bluish uniform in the beginning when I remember, with the brass buttons and the tie and the hat. And later on they changed the coloring, I think, into a greenish, olive green uniform. They changed their title from Guard to Security Officer. I guess they gave them a little extra in pay with that change of title there. They worked the rotating shifts too, two weeks on

each shift also.

GUMB: Did they carry guns?

WHELAN: No, no, they didn't carry guns. They carried handcuffs, maybe a little club on the side, I believe, and after a while I got information, you know, there was a little shake up amongst the guards, they were holding card games, crap games or maybe buying booze after hours, you know, in the side rooms, and it got to the head man, Mr. Edward Shaughnessey, and Ed Shaughnessey, I knew he was no pushover. He was a toughie. And there was something like five, six, seven men involved in that deal and he had no mercy for them. I know two of them were sent down to the Texas border, the Mexico border, which nobody liked. And five of them, I think, he just out-rightly let go, you know, there might have been other incidents or bad behavior prior to that, I don't know. And I was pretty chummy with Mr. Shaughnessey, I don't know, he always called me his good friend Ronny Whelan, or Grover Whelan or Commissioner Whelan, he always had a little remark for me, but he was a pleasant man. Some of them came to me, even, to try to see if I could speak to Ed Shaughnessey to try to intervene for these fellows, but no way, I wasn't getting involved, it was no concern of mine, that was not my business.

GUMB: Could you spell Shaughnessey?

WHELAN: S-H-A-U-G-H-N-E-S-S-E-Y. Shaughnessey. Edward J. Shaughnessey. His name was in the paper here, the whole story about him. He spent something like 37, 40 years just alone with Immigration, He was the last official to leave that Island when they closed it up.

GUMB: What sort of uniform did you wear at this time in '41?

WHELAN: Dungarees, a denim shirt, black shoes, and a black sailor looking hat, seafaring hat, Greek fisherman hat they call them today.

GUMB: This was an official uniform that you were supposed to wear?

WHELAN: Yeah, you were supposed to look right, half way a crew member anyway, you know. But what we got on the bridge, they weren't too fussy as far as the uniform, all we had was a little high pressure hat, that's about all, with your suit, blue suit you more or less wore, or a blue jacket if you had some brass buttons you put it on, you threw it in your locker at the end of the day. But they weren't strict on us there, there wa pretty good gang, very good people. It's the type of job you were glad to get to

work, even though you were not in the best shape yourself. You maybe had a little fever, it didn't bother you, you continued on there and you were happy to go there and I'll tell you one thing, you never wanted for chow no matter what shift you worked. The eight to four shift you hit the Immigration, you had your nestle pots you used to but on Delancey Street and you got enough, fifty cents worth of chow, to feed the whole seven member crew. And then come four to twelve, why you took care of the Coast Guard and you got your home fries and pork chops, steaks, coffee, ice cream, pies from the Coast Guard. Them two of us went to the Hospital with out little basket at night and got whole chickens, turkeys, pies from the Hospital gang, no problem. That's why it was such a happy home there, you know. You didn't have to bring lunch with you.

GUMB: You were talking about nestle--

WHELAN: Nestle pots. Special pots, one was nestled into the other, that you can carry your potatoes and gravy and meat in the bottom one, you had your soups in the second, you had your desserts in the top part all covered, and all with one handle. Don't see them around no more. I guess that

was probably all railroad days, even they did that too, maybe.

GUMB: This is the end of side one.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

GUMB: Mr. Whelan, you were talking about what a good job it was .

WHELAN: Oh, it was such a happy job. You were glad to go to work. Everybody was very pleasant there between the hospital employees, immigration employees, Coast Guard employees, ferry boat personnel crew members. I don't know, it seems like if you didn't fit into that group and cooperate you just didn't seem to last at the Island. I don't know why, but everybody was so cooperative. We got rammed with this city ferry one time, I remember that incident well. And I was on the upper deck and I was plugging some holes up with some white lead and wooden plugs there, tapping away, when I heard our ferry blow one whistle and then I looked up and I saw the Staten Island

ferry which was the Mary Merry at the time, and she was heading for us and she answered the one whistle and I assume they got their signals corrected, you know, and they knew what they were doing. And I went along and the next thing, what the heck possessed me to look up, and I see the Mary Merry coming right at us. And I hear all this glass, shearing the whole lower deck, the whole port side of that deck off. We no sooner hit the Island and the Coast Guard sent their carpenters down, the hospital sent their carpenters over, the Immigration had their carpenters over, and right away they took four by fours and shored up the whole upper deck which was leaning, you know, weakened and leaning over, you know. And while we laid there they put the temporary lumber patches on the ferry and we tied up for that day and then that evening they canvased it up there and we, but I think they were WPA, Works Progress Administration carpenters. And they done the repair while we were continually operating back and forth. And in the evening they were allowed to accomplish more of their work, you know, without interfering with the passengers.

GUMB: What year was this?

WHELAN: That was back in around 19--, let me think, 1950.

GUMB: So it really sheared the side?

WHELAN: Took the whole port side from bow to stern right off. I never forgot that. I went into the wheel house to the skipper who was Captain Raymon Piage, you know. I said, "What happened, Captain? Sounded like a lot of glass shattering." He said, "Well," he sat there doing his crossword puzzle out of the Tribune, and he says to me, "Go down, Ron, see what the hell went on down there." And I come up to him and I said, "Boy, it's an awful mess of spaghetti. The whole deck is sheared off there." And he said, "I think it's time for chow." So unconcerned. I didn't believe it, you know. We went up and got the chow. That was the end of the tripping for the day, I think, there, until they got shored everything up.

GUMB: Whose fault was it?

WHELAN: Well, they both absolved their own responsibility 50-50. So the City covered half of the damage and the government paid the other half. That was a tough thing because each one blew on whistle. The Staten Island complied with the one whistle, so each of them should have then maintained their course, they should have knew they

were gonna pass port to port. So it was each one's fault, I would say. And that's what the Coast Guard come up with after their interview of it. That was the manly way to do it, I thought, too, you know.

GUMB: So in the period, going back to '41 to '43 period, were you living on Ellis Island?

WHELAN: No, no, there was no residence on that Island at all. Until after World War II, I think Mr. Shaughnessey and his assistant Mr. Foreman, moved over to the corner house on the hospital side of the Island close to, behind, facing the Statue of Liberty. And they had a two family home, the lower floor Mr. Ed Shaughnessey and his wife lived in and the top floor was Mr. Foreman. And they remained in that house until the Island was abandoned.

GUMB: So none of the crew members--

WHELAN: None of the crew members ever lived on that Island. Nobody ever lived on that Island outside of the resident doctor that was there or I don't believe there was any, unless the aliens, that's the only ones that resided there.

But as far as the employees, nobody ever lived on the Island. They had two week rotating shifts and you rotated every two weeks for various watches. Eight to four, four to twelve, twelve to eight.

GUMB: Alright. So in '43 you went overseas.

WHELAN: Yeah, I sailed as able seaman on a troop ship.

GUMB: Until when?

WHELAN: Until March of 19--, no, I'd say December, 1943. And at that time in December the 4th, I think, 1943, we got hit, not us, but we were in the convoy that was attacked by several German planes and submarines came and we lost one of out big troop ships called the Santrolina, she was carrying 1,100 Canadian nurses at that time and it was a nighttime rescue. They hit us one hour after sunset and we lost a Dutch troop ship, we lost a few destroyers, and I observed, I think, several planes as they hit the water there bursting into flames. And we had the Canadian escort convoyed us into the mediterranean that evening. And not one nurse was lost through that nighttime rescue. The

rescue ship was the old Monterey. The old Hawaiian steam ship passenger line. Then after that I applied, went up to Officer's School in New London, Connecticut, went up there for about three and a half months. We studied, we had our weekend liberty every Saturday noon and had to be back Sunday evening before midnight.

GUMB: Then you went out to the Pacific.

WHELAN: No, then I came back out, I sailed hospital ships in the Atlantic for the Army and then after so many trips with the hospital ship between New York and Weymouth, England, then we discharged in the Carolinas in Charleston and I would take leave between different trips there across the Atlantic. Then I wanted to sign up, I wanted to go into the Pacific, so I went with Alcoa Steamship Company. The three of us mates, Mr. Adams, Baker, and myself, that was the second mate, I was third mate, I was junior officer aboard the ship at the time. The three of us signed up with Alcoa Steamship. Baker went chief mate, Adams second mate, and I went third mate. And we went into the Pacific, maybe about six months in between San Francisco, Hawaii, (?), and while in Saipan we observed these big bombers going over. At that time they dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, the Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the atom bomb. That was about the end of the war, that put the end to it there, and we came back then to San Francisco, we took what they called the milk-

train run back across country and we took about four days to get back to New York and then I signed up and went back down and re-applied for my job at Ellis Island again and I had to go back down on deck pushing the broom again and work my way up. That was the seniority system that you had.

GUMB: So, out of curiosity, why did you go back to Ellis Island?

WHELAN: I had started a family. My, I had a young daughter that was born while I was in Pearl Harbor, 1946, February 9th she was born. And I wanted to get home to the family. I could have kept sailing and made probably double the amount of money I was making with the government, but that wasn't to my liking. I wanted to be home with my wife and child at that time.

GUMB: So how was the boat different, how was Ellis Island different?

WHELAN: It was the same. Same old ferry, same old gang. Some ex-shipmates of mine that I sailed with, going to sea in the war, and they all said, "Mister Mate, what are you doing here in dungarees pushing a broom?" "So, I'm in sanitation again, that's all, I'll work up." But it took quite a while to get an opening then. And I got the opening maybe a year before they

closed Ellis Island. I was pushing a broom there for about from '46 up until 1953. then I got appointed to the Captain's job in 1953 and 1954 approximately, maybe about ten months, twelve months later, that was the end of

the Island, the end of the job.

GUMB: So you were a deck hand from '46 to'53.

WHELAN: Deck hand. Right. Quartermaster, got a little fancier title, yeah they did create a quartermaster title because there was some bill came along, some law, what they call Whit Amendment, Emil Whit from Mississippi said you couldn't jump more than two grades in the federal government. There was a lot of politicians favoring people who were getting high jumps, you know, so they put a law in, they called the Whit Amendment, that you couldn't be promoted more than two grades. So for me to get the promotion from deck hand to Captain was a three and a half grade jump. So by legally, I could not have that job. And so the only way they created the quartermaster title was so that you can jump from deck hand to quartermaster, a two grade jump, and then from quartermaster to captain was a one and a half grade jump. And you're all within the law with these different steps. So they did create a quartermaster title and then I was promoted to quartermaster. Then the first opening for captain and they moved me up the line.

GUMB: Was, were there any duties different about quartermaster?

WHELAN: Yeah, definite. Definite. You were in the wheel house assisting the Captain. Come foggy weather you observed the compass and you listened for sound of any kind of whistles or bells or echos or buoys or anything, passing other vessels or one thing or another. You kept a sharp lookout there. And the same, on deck there you kept a lookout. You forgot the broom in every coffee and you stood out on the bow look out, deckhands below, they assisted the captain of anything they saw down low, or heard, and they called out to the captain in the wheelhouse. We made our crossings back and forth. We didn't have radar on the ferry at the time. All we had was the compass and the clock. That's what you went by.

GUMB: How long was the run?

WHELAN: Approximately 15 minutes. You would leave a deckhand behind at Ellis Island there, on the hospital side you had a big monstrosity of a bell there, and he would stand there with the rope and the hammer would hit the bell as you were approaching. He'd give it three strokes, and then on the starboard end you had a siren there that guided you into the, between the two stone walls you had the bell to

the left, the siren to the right, and tucked into your ferry slip there.

GUMB: Oh, on Ellis Island.

WHELAN: On Ellis Island. And back in New York you had a certain horn and a siren up around the Battery and you had different horn signals from Governor's Island from Castle William. And that's what you went by is your compass. More or less you had east by south of a floodtide going to New York, east by north of an ebbtide allowing for the current there to carry you into the vicinity of your slip.

GUMB: What was your speed?

WHELAN: Speed wasn't that great there, it was maybe about, well, you done your run in 15 minutes, a mile and a half in fifteen minutes, maybe about between 12, 13 knots. Twelve knots probably.

GUMB: Do you remember the longest trip?

WHELAN: The longest trip?

GUMB: Yeah, when something went wrong?

WHELAN: Oh yeah. When we were heading to sea one of the captains was going out the Narrows and he got his bearings wrong and the compass was off, one thing or another, I think the deckhand had a knife or some sort of magnetic attraction that threw the compass off. (He laughs.) The Captain thought he was heading for Manhattan, I think he was heading down the Lower Bay. Then we had another incident leaving Ellis Island. I don't know what ever happened there with that incident there, but we made a complete U-turn there almost and wound up on the rocks on the northern part of Ellis Island. High and dry.

GUMB: Ended up high and dry?

WHELAN: Uh-huh.

GUMB: How did you get off?

WHELAN: Waited for the tide to lift us. And I happened to be quartermaster, I don't want to put this on tape. Can you cut this out? No, no, it's blaming somebody and--the Captain didn't observe the compass

whatsoever. I seen it. I was watching him. I seen he's looking out and I didn't see, I see he wasn't observing the compass and I'd seen we were heading east and the next thing we were going east by north and northeast and then north and then back into northwest and, "Captain," I said, "I think we're going the wrong way. I think we're going back to the Island." And he said he wanted to take the short cut. He wanted to go along the Jersey shore and then make a departure from the New Jersey ferry terminal over at Manhattan that way. To me that didn't make much logic, didn't make no sense. And the next thing I heard the crunching and the grinding. And the guards, everybody on the Island says, "What the hell are you doing here, this is not your slip, you're in the wrong place." But we hit the rocks and we did peak up on the bow, you know. And he was backing off and I told him leave it as is, you know, it didn't seem right. But I had experiences with this stuff before, I felt I was knowledgeable about it, that I could advise him. And I just let it lay there, went down and got a cup of coffee. He was a little shook up. But he never came back to the job after that. He took a heart condition within that week. I went to visit him at his home, in the hospital, and he was still running the ferry boat from the sickbed. "We'll get there, Ron," one thing or another. I said, "Yeah, we'll do it Jimmy." But the man was a nervous wreck. He should have never taken the job. He would have been living a long time after that. But he would rush on to the job the last minute, run to the bathroom, cigarettes in his mouth, upstairs, didn't give himself no time. And you don't lead a life running, rushing like

that, you know. Take your leisure time. And he was too tensed up, you know. I felt sorry for that man but he was appointed to the job and I would never knock another captain or another crew member, no way.

GUMB: So it was possible for the ferry to go to New Jersey?

WHELAN: Well, if you wanted it, you know, some people maybe had their own different approach of running in the fog. He maybe liked the sound of the signals up off the Jersey shore, going to New York. He maybe felt that he had a better departure angle from going up to the Jersey ferry terminal. They had sent out signals also. Maybe he figured he could pick up some other signals around the Battery, not around on the upper end of the Battery, around Pier 1. Maybe he liked their signals, and then probably he was going to come down the Battery seawall into the Slip 7 that way.

GUMB: Oh, oh, so he wasn't landing in New Jersey.

WHELAN: No, no, he wasn't landing, you know, like here's the North River and instead of going direct across from Ellis Island to the Battery he felt he would like to go up the

North River and then cut over towards Manhattan that way and come on down to the Battery into Slip 7. But that was his theory of running in the fog, but my approach was always to run a direct straight line. Make allowance for the current there one way or the other, floodtide, ebbtide. And there was not too many incidents there with the ferry as far as running in fog, never got into a mixup. Well, come fog them days not too many people were around anyway. And I remember one incident on a Saturday morning in the fog. I'm going over and it's as quiet and calm as all can be and all of a sudden I didn't hear this whistle until it was almost, felt like it was right on top of me, one of the Queen ships, Queen Mary coming up the berth of New York. The moment I heard that thing, bingo, hard right, get away, I don't wait, I had no picture of him but he sounded too close to me, you know. I made a rapid departure from that sound.

GUMB: So the ferry never went anywhere else but Ellis Island and the Battery?

WHELAN: That's it, that was it. Then after the War, you come on, you had, they had some top German scientists, as I

said, with this atomic bomb, secrets that were running, Germany had the top scientists for that atomic bomb. They almost had it ready, operable, until we came in on it, you know. And we knocked it out. Then came the War brides after World War II, you know, they came out and some of the English brides, maybe had too many husbands here, they's send them back home, you know. If they came on maybe they had two husbands, three, four husbands, their papers weren't in order, they brought them over to the Island, detained them, next thing you know some of them are released and some of them were sent back home. Shady character, they were not in the right profession according to this government.

GUMB: What was the story about Lucky Luciano?

WHELAN: He was there also. That was after World War II. Tom Dewey, I think, was your District Attorney in Manhattan at the time, in the Borough of Manhattan. And he was prosecuting this here Charles "Lucky" Luciano and he finally, he was convicted and he was ordered deported. So they detained him at Ellis Island and they brought him with a few security chiefs and officials to make sure he got

back aboard the ship, and flew him out of the country one way or another, I don't know. But he was an undesirable. He was into all the rackets going.

GUMB: During this period what do you remember about Ellis Island itself? Did you ever go into the--

WHELAN: I roamed through the Island. Sometimes between trips there we went through the different passageways. Went through the different facilities at the hospital there, we maybe had sometimes got injured or cut, we had to go for emergency treatment at the hospital ourselves. And you heard stories over the years. That Island was originally three acres, then they enlarged it. Ships coming back with the ballast from foreign countries they unloaded the barges put over there and they filled in the land. They were dredging in the New York Harbor and it was all dumped there, they expanded the Island, I think to the present day, they say something like 27 and a half acres. And she was, originally Immigration was in the Battery Park, Castle over there, it was transferred to Ellis Island in 1892, that was the official opening of Ellis Island, and they had a fire in the old wooden structure where the hospital site

is, that was all wooden structure, and seven years after they opened up the Island, the Immigration Center, she caught fire and nobody, they abandoned the Island and no one was injured. They came back and they built a fireproof place with all the brick structures that you see now, and then Immigration was moved to the upper end of the Island. The lower end was changed, converted to a hospital because aliens were sick and they had to have the facilities to treat them on the Island there. And--

GUMB: So do you remember going into the Great Hall on Ellis Island?

WHELAN: Oh, I saw that Great Hall, there's where we used to go and get our chow at the Coast Guard. We went through there, I think they fed a thousand people there, I understood at one time. And then upstairs was the different, the rooms and dormitories there, and I don't have too much recollection of the interior of the Island. But the grounds they had their own gardener at the hospital, the hospital had their own gardener, Immigration had their own gardener, each one was outdoing the other and boy the greenery was so beautiful, you know, the

flowers come springtime, the tulips in this time, the other flowers, they made it really sharp looking.

GUMB: Okay, so you said in 1953 you became a Captain. And was that any big adjustment, becoming Captain?

WHELAN: No, I had the responsibility, the experience going to sea in World War II, troop ships, convoys, and I was on the bridge, junior officer, second, third officer, and second mate.

GUMB: Okay. So, this is kind of a negative question, but as Captain do you ever remember making a mistake that you really regret now or that at the time you regretted?

WHELAN: I don't remember making any mistakes too great. I had no accidents. I had no trouble with the boat. I'll tell you, I hated to lose that job, that was some happy home there alright. And I heard of an incident, one man from the powerhouse, he went home, hung himself in the backyard from his tree. He loved that job too, but I don't know why he done such a thing, you know, there's plenty of other jobs knocking around. But he, he probably was there more years than me, you know, it got into his blood system or stream. I don't know.

GUMB: So when did you get the word that the Island was going to close?

WHELAN: Well, it was coming on gradually there. They were clearing a lot of the immigrants from Europe before they came here their papers were more or less in order. There was no need for the detention facility at Ellis Island. Everything could have been handled from Columbus Avenue. That was a busy place there at one time, way before my time.

GUMB: Right after the War do you remember any concentration camp victims going through, going on the ferry?

WHELAN: No, no. I never seen any. I never even heard of concentration camp, that all came out years later that was divulged. And that came on with the Nuremburg trials with the German criminal, what they called them, and they prosecuted them. And after they got into it more and more they came into the detention camp, but I never seen anything. I know there was some top prominent Jewish people was there, and through Ellis Island, who they were I don't know. But I know they came through that Island also for some information, what it was I don't know. We didn't have much

contact with the Immigration business, our ferry, our job was transportation, getting them back and forth safely in one good order.

GUMB: Okay, so as far as the Island closing, was it much before 1954 that you got word, that it became clear that it was going to close?

WHELAN: I'd say about a year before the closure that they knew it was almost coming up definite. And maybe two years prior to that even the Coast Guard had moved back onto the Island with a port security facility patrol. To show more or less, to help out probably Immigration with a need for the Island, you know, and they were covering some of the budget with their own funds. But it just didn't buy water for the big wigs. That was it. They said no need of it anymore.

GUMB: So what was the last run like?

WHELAN: The last run the newspaper people were there and Arnie Peterson, he wasn't fascinated with being known as the alien to leave the Island, the last detainee. And we had some old rags that the deckhand left in the corner of the upper deck there and they grabbed some newspaper and wrapped up the rags in it and shoved it under his arms as belongings, you

know. And waved onto the Island there as this here picture is showing you. And but he, he was off a Norwegian ship and he got hung up in some brooklyn gin mill, you know, maybe too much long weekend. The ship sailed on him, which almost happened to me a few times when I was sailing, but he was happy to get home to his family and kids again. And nothing phased him, that didn't mean nothing, you know. I don't know, they gave him a cup of coffee from the lower deck anyway. But he was glad, they gave him thirty days to get another ship and get back home. Ed Shaughnessey was aboard that trip too, there, and they were starting to bring some of the files off the Island by hand truck to transport up to 70 Columbus Avenue. And Ed Shaughnessey says, "Well, that's all I can say. Close of business, finished, that's it."

GUMB: So Arnie Peterson was the last person to go from Ellis Island to New York.

WHELAN: He was the last detainee from Ellis Island.

GUMB: Okay, and then what happened to the boat?

WHELAN: Well, the boat was tied up in the slip over at Ellis Island and then the General Service Administration took over the maintenance of the Island, that is, the care of the Island. And they at one time had put three guards

around the clock there to see that no people would come aboard and start tearing down things, then they couldn't handle the whole Island by themselves so they gave them a couple of Doberman Pinchers there to patrol with them at night. And eventually that was all abandoned. Then the people probably would come in through the dark of the night there, steal the brass and copper, whatever they thought of any value. Or any mementos. The Christening bottle I guess was on the upper deck of the Ellis Island, somebody probably took that, it was in a nice display case there.

GUMB: What was it?

WHELAN: The Christening bottle. When they Christened the ferry in 1904, that old champagne bottle wrapped up in the straw was broken, then they put it under glass there. That was a nice little memento. They probably took the ship's wheels and they probably took the searchlights, the life boats. They stripped the ferry down. And who knows, one of them came aboard and maybe opened the sea valve and the vessel just sank and drifted from the slip and she's, you can see the stack in the upper deck above the water there now if you ever go around in that area. Here's the picture

of it here, what she looks like today.

GUMB: So no one made any attempt to take any of these mementos, like the--

WHELAN: I didn't want, no, I thought they were all government artifacts, no I wouldn't touch nothing that didn't belong to me. But it was a shame they abandoned the Island as they did. They thought they were going to make it a hospital, they were going to make it a narcotics center, they were going to sell the Island, a private outfit, Zeckendorf was going to build big hotels and convention centers. They were going to have a big marina there, and that fell through. I think it was falling apart through neglect over the years and then President Johnson, I think, appropriated six million dollars to try to save and restore it a little and they had to come up with bigger appropriations because it just went all beyond this repair. An over-growth of shrubbery and greenery was growing through the windows, the windows were all cracked, the copper domes on the Turkish moorish structure on the end of the Island was all falling apart. But I see a lot of scaffolding over there now, they are working out of there. That's 1992 will be the hundredth anniversary of her. This Statue of Liberty is 100th anniversary right now.

GUMB: This is the end of the interview with Mr. Ronald Whelan.