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JOHN BOWEN
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STENOGRAPHER ON BEDLOES ISLAND/STATUE OF LIBERTY
1911-1916

DIXON: Mr. Bowen is going to tell us what he remembers about Liberty Island way back in the 1910 area of time. I think we will begin by asking him old he is now and how old he was then.

BOWEN: At present I am eighty-six years old and that time I was eighteen. I had joined the Bedloes Island at that time. I had got through an examination of my trip for federal government, passed the examination and I was assigned to Bedloes Island, in the Fall of 1911. I worked there from the Fall of 1911 until the middle of July in 1916. At the

time, no civilians were allowed on the island except those in direct government employ. There were four of us. The chief was a man by the name of William J. Noldy, his assistant was Joe Lynch, and the man in charge of supplies and materials was a fellow by the name of George H. Sulvey. I was the stenographer to the chief clerk, and any other work they called on me to do. At that time it was Bedloes Island, not Liberty Island. After maybe six or eight moths the companythe island itself was strictly a military post. It was controlled and managed by the United States Signal Corps of the U.S. Army. At the time I have particularly mentioned, the officer in charge was a Lieutenant Brikenhoff. Anyway, up until that time there had been a little literature on the Statue itself, but Lieutenant Brikenhoff thought he would like to elaborate it a bit, and with that idea in mind, he enlisted my services and we went through the Statue from top to bottom. I remember is was about one hundred and sixty-nine steps we had to take up to the level available, and then there were thirty-nine steps on rungs of the ladder going into the torch, or into the arm of the Statue. At that time it was accessible, but it was not long, I think just before the beginning of the First World War, that it was considered unsafe and no more

visits to the arm. Your friend Leo asked who handled the job that he is doing now. Well, it was all in the hands of the Army, I think it was Company C. There was a road all around the periphery of the Statue. The Army barracks, the mess, and all, were, well, as you face the Statue in the back, to the left, and then there were individual houses along the other side, maybe half a dozen for Army officers lieutenants, captains, and so on. And then alongside of that, and nearer to the front, was the storeroom where all materials that I speak of, and where I worked, was located. It was a building about, I would say, one hundred twenty to one fifty feet long, one story. When you got off the boat you went to the right and went down. The entrance to the store facilities was near the far end. On the far end, say roughly forty feet, there was an entrance hall. Forty feet to the left of that was used for office equipment, stenographers and where the chief clerk I mentioned were all located. To the right were these shelves and storage for whatever materials we had on hand or which was to be supplied to the areas in that Third Naval District, I think we used to call it at that time. We also supplied for Jay, which was Governor's Island. At that time, Ellis Island was very active. Furthermore, the harbor-New York harbor-

was very active with ships, passenger ships, which you don't have today because the airplane is

DIXON: Not as many.

BOWEN: --Eliminated that. Mostly what you got now are oil tankers or something else stuck in the harbor. But anyway, that's the way it was. I understand now you have bigger boats.

DIXON: Much bigger boats.

BOWEN: In those days, the Island, as I say, was strictly military. We personnel, the men I mentioned, were the only ones on the Island outside of visitors, and they were over there for--well I think the first boat was eight in the morning, and I think the last boat home was four-thirty in the afternoon.

DIXON: It was a military post, but tourists visitors could come.

BOWEN: Yes, they would come and visit the Island. The Statue was attended by the Army personnel entirely. We had nothing to do with it. No civilian personnel had anything to do with

it. It was strictly the Army. They took care of the Statue. They cleaned it, handled the torch, which our friend De Leo was interested in. I think they handled it on a basis that they had a company of a half a dozen men every week or so, and they'd rotate them. I don't think there were more than, oh, between fifteen and one hundred men in the company. I think it was Company C, but I can't swear to that. They worked--oh. army men are notorious for their (laughter). They worked if they had to, and in the storehouse, where I say the four men were us, in the supplying and taking care of the equipment or anything that was going out, it was by a detail from the company itself. You see all military men, everything was always handled by them. The only function we did was to send the mail or take care of the records and all that sort of business.

DIXON: Do you have any idea how many people came during the visitation? How many people would come on a certain day?

BOWEN: How many at that time?

DIXON: The visitors, yes.

BOWEN: As I say, the boat was a small boat. If it was a real nice Day in the summer, you might get about forty or fifty. But that's all the boat would accommodate. You see, if it got more than that, they had the boat move a little faster, let me put it to you that way.

DIXON: But the boat only ran one trip a day?

BOWEN: No. it started one trip at eight o'clock. It came back that eight o'clock boat at eight thirty, see. Then it went back at nine. In other words, they New York at the Battery on the hour, and they left the Island on the half hour. So they made the trips all during the day.

DIXON: It's about what they do now.

BOWEN: So anyway, that was the way it was. Now the boat itself was a small one, and if the weather was inclement at all, you had to get down in the cabin. You'd pull down awnings or tarpaulins just to keep the rain out. There were no windows or anything like that. It was just a tub; that's what the boat was. (Laughter)

DIXON: So the total visitation for a good day would maybe be forty people.

BOWEN: That's right.

DIXON: Not for a boat.

BOWEN: No, that's only for a boat load now.

DIXON: Oh, that's a boat.

BOWEN: The same for each boat load. That would make maybe three or four hundred a day, maybe more, if it's a good day. And if it on anniversaries, like, say, the Fourth of July or something like that, then you had far more. One thing you had to do contend with them. I was there for four, four and half, five years, and in January, February and March you had very inclement weather. By that I mean fog. Now there were days in there and the fog during those months, when the boat itself wouldn't even go. Or if it did go, it was stuck or marooned on the Island. It might be a little time before you got off. So, as a result, many days in the fog, why one particular day I remember, we were leaving we

took the nine o'clock boat over in the morning, and we come back on the four thirty boat in the afternoon. Now, this particular day the fog was so bad that the boss decided, well, we'd better take the three-thirty boat. We took the three-thirty boat, all right, but the fog was so bad, the pilot just lost his way in the harbor. We finally wound up at Forty-Second Street at seven o'clock in the evening. I don't know, I think we had more near mishaps in that one particular trip than I ever experienced. I mean, we had plenty of them during that on those I imagine now the navigation controls are much better now than they were then. Outside of that, I can't give anymore information. You can ask any questions. I'll try to elucidate a bit.

DIXON: Okay, there's several things. You rode the boat that the tourists came on in the morning and the evening? It wasn't a government boat?

BOWEN: No, it was the same boat. Yes, that's right.

DIXON: Did you have any contact with Ellis? Did you do anything in conjunction?

BOWEN: Ellis Island? No, nothing.

DIXON: You didn't need any of the people there?

BOWEN: No.

DIXON: It was a separate unit completely.

BOWEN: That was a separate unit entirely. I can't think of anything else.

DIXON: When the visitors came to the Island, were there any places for them to eat, or did they simply

BOWEN: Oh, yes. Well, now, wait a minute. In that respect, the Army had a provision there. It was called the Post Exchange or the PX; that's what they called it in the Army. It provided soda pop, maybe a sandwich or a hot dog, souvenirs like little statues of the Statue itself or pennants or buttons or God knows what.

DIXON: Same type of thing now.

BOWEN: Yes. The kids could get peanuts, popcorn and things like that. The particular thing you could get was cigarettes because it had no government stamp on it, see. It was a military post. But they limited it to, as I remember, to one carton per passenger. You couldn't get anymore. Otherwise they'd be loading up because, I think, if I remember rightly, I think a carton of cigarettes in those days Camels was a particular brand and so was Chesterfield I think it was One dollar and twenty cents a carton. That's about four cents a packet--pretty cheap! (Laughter)

DIXON: The facility that was run by the government, it wasn't run by a private concession.

BOWEN: No, no, it was run by the Signal Corps post itself.

DIXON: There was no Jim Hill or Evelyn Hill--

BOWEN: No, no, nothing like that. Nothing doing. It was strictly military, that's all it was. Strictly military. As I say, though, I don't know how it is laid out now, but when I was there, the space in back of the Statue was really a big, well, a pretty fair big field. They called it the "parade

Ground."

DIXON: It's open now, too.

BOWEN: It is open now?

DIXON: It's an open ground area.

BOWEN: Well, I used to play baseball there every day. We played from, oh we ate at the Army post. That's where I cultivated a partiality for bean soup. (Laughter) You could get that every day. But, I think it would cost us, we'd get our meals for, oh, I guess i was about fifteen cents. We would eat in about ten minutes, and then we'd go out and play baseball for thirty-five minutes. See, we had forty-five minutes for a break, not an hour, but forty-five minutes. Well, that's the way it was. I did that for, oh, about five years, I guess, from the time I mentioned until the middle of July in 1916.

DIXON: How much was the ferry ride? How much did it cost?

BOWEN: I think it was around--it was either, if I'm not mistaken,

twenty-five cents for a round trip r fifty cents, something very small. It didn't amount to very much.

DIXON: Did they have an elevator in the Statue then?

BOWEN: I'm sure not. No, I don't think it was because, as I said, I had to count steps. Don't you remember?

DIXON: Well, the steps up from the pedestal or the steps up to the Statue?

BOWEN: Up into the Statue, all the way.

DIXON: What was your actual official title?

BOWEN: I was the stenographer in the government service. I passed the government examination in, I think, it was the summer of 1911, and I got the appointment in the Fall of 1911. They wanted to know if I'd go to the Statue. I said, "Sure." It suited me fine. Any idea like that suited me fine, so that's where I went.

DIXON: What happened to the booklet when it was done?

BOWEN: Oh yes, they published it. It was published under, I think, as far as I know, it was issued for quite a long while. But, as I say, I left there in 1916. When that was written in 1912, 1913, 1914, I don't know, it was in that period sometime.

DIXON: It was just distributed freely.

BOWEN: That's right, yes.

DIXON: You don't, by chance, have a copy left?

BOWEN: Oh, Lord, no. I never even thought of getting one in the first place. (Laughter)

DIXON: You may have mentioned before. What was the total number of workers on the Island, including the military, the civilians?

BOWEN: Oh, there were only the four that I mentions.

DIXON: Four civilian employees.

BOWEN: Civilians. All the rest were military.

DIXON: About how many military people?

BOWEN: As I said, I counted about between fifty and a hundred, remember. In officers, maybe a half a dozen of them also.

DIXON: So it was just a military kind of supply post.

BOWEN: That's what it was. Just a supply depot, that's all it was. Signal Corps General Supply Depot is exactly what it was called.

DIXON: Do you remember anything striking about the harbor at that time? The fog you mentioned.

BOWEN: As I told you, the harbor was far more active then, but the type of shipping was different from what it is today. In those days, you had the liners coming in from Europe, you had your other boats going to El Sal then being taken to the Battery also the same as people from you call it Liberty Island; in those days it was called Bedloe's

Island. When they changed the name I don't know.

DIXON: Did you see any famous ships, like remember any famous ships like the Normandy?

BOWEN: Oh, sure, all of them. The Normandy and the Lusitania, the Elizabeths and the Queens and all that sort of thing, mostly the Cunard Line. The Cunard Line was very active in those days. And the Isle de France. Do you know the French ship? Sure they were all there, paraded up and down the harbor, in and out. (Laughter)

DIXON: Did anyone take photographs? Were photographs part of the Army function or were they

BOWEN: Well, a lot of the people that came, the visitors, they took pictures. There was no prohibition on that. They could take all the pictures of the Statue that they wanted to. There was no military port or anything else. It was strictly the Island, and they were taking care of it. There was no military build-up at all.

DIXON: How about the Island itself? You mentioned the supply

building was in the rear?

BOWEN: No, no, if you face the Statue getting off the boat, if it's the same when you come off, and went off to the right, your storehouse the long end--was only a couple hundred feet on the right-hand side and slightly behind the Statue. Your Statue was here, and the plant began here. Then all the officers' houses were in here. Then you have your mess hall and your barracks and all that coming right around here.

DIXON: So it's right around the whole circle.

BOWEN: Make a semi-circle, yes, with the open space in the center.

DIXON: In the rear. But the boat that you landed, landed in the front of the Statue.

BOWEN: That's right.

DIXON: Now they dock on the rear on the side.

BOWEN: Oh, yes?

DIXON: You used the old work dock, apparently, because the boast docked there was, boat now they dock at the other side. That's why I was wondering where they--

BOWEN: It was right directly facing the Statue. When you got off the boat, you faced the Statue right there. The pier was right there.

DIXON: And visitors entered the Statue, but entered in the front?

BOWEN : Yes, they could enter the Statue right in the front, yes.

DIXON: So that was changed. Today now it's in the rear.

BOWEN: Oh, is that so?

DIXON: You mentioned too, before we started taping, that--when was the last time you were on Liberty Island?

BOWEN: July 14, 1916. (Laughter)

DIXON: It's been a long time. It's changed. You should come back

to visit and see all the differences. Just from Battery Park you take a ferry to the And Ellis Island is open again, too.

BOWEN: What?

DIXON: Ellis Island is open.

BOWEN: Oh, yes, I understand that it's been reopened again, yes. Well, I don't know of any more I can give you.

DIXON: Well, I was going to ask, do you remember any special events, any special visitors, any famous people?

BOWEN: No, in those days you didn't have any, really. It seems to me, looking back, it didn't have any prominence so that it was not an attraction to people that it has today, strange as it may seem. That's the feeling I got. In the first place, it was a military post, and people weren't very much interested. Well, if they had a jazz band or something over there, they'd probably have more visitors. (Laughter)

DIXON: They did that? They had a band there sometimes?

BOWEN: No, they didn't, that's the point. I say if they did have, they might have gotten more visitors. But they didn't. It was strictly going to the Statue, go up, take a look around and come home. That's all it was. With the military there, you were restricted. You didn't--there wasn't anything you could do.

DIXON: It was just a military post that happened to have a statue sticking up in the middle of it.

BOWEN: That's all. It was strictly in the hands of the government at that time. There were no side attractions of any kind or anything. Once you've seen the Statue, why, you didn't come back.

DIXON: How was the maintenance of the Island? Were there trees?

BOWEN: Well, no, no, there were no trees. Well, there might have been a few shrubs on the borderline, but not in the center. As I say, that was all.

DIXON: But no landscaping?

BOWEN: No, no. We had a regular baseball field there. You didn't have any landscaping at all.

DIXON: Was the Island well maintained? I mean was there a gardener?

BOWEN: Oh, it was the cleanest. Oh, the Army personnel, the--

DIXON: Privates?

BOWEN: Privates, yes, the buck privates, they'd collect all the garbage. They'd put it on a barge that would take it off. Whether it was a couple of times a week or something like that, I don't know.

DIXON: I guess since there were military residences, there were children and families that lived on the Island?

BOWEN: The officers, yes. The officers had their families there. As I say, there were half a dozen houses for the officers' quarters, as they were called. he would have his wife and children, if he had any, and so on. Only the enlisted men

had no families there.

DIXON: The family groupings, now, how did their life function? How did the children go to school and the shopping? Did they have a boat?

BOWEN: No, they went over on the boat the same as anybody else.

DIXON: Oh, they used the commercial tourist boat.

BOWEN: Yes. It was the only means of transportation you had, ` just the tourist boat. That's all.

DIXON: And if the weather was bad, you stayed on the Island.

BOWEN: That's correct. And if the weather was bad on the other side, you stayed home and you didn't go to the Island either. The reverse was true. Sometimes I'd have a day off because you couldn't get over there.

DIXON: That still occurs sometimes when the weather's bad.

BOWEN: Well, some of the, had some really scary experiences at one

time or another. But you got used to it, I guess.

DIXON: The boat that served the Island, do you remember the name of the boat?

BOWEN: No, I can't remember. I don't even remember the name. I don't even remember the captain's name or anything else. I just remember the boat that O got on. I think there were two of them, one to go over and one to come back, and that was it. If the traffic got unusually heavy, maybe they'd make extra trips or something. But they did that very seldom. They were more or less routine.

DIXON: Did you like working on Liberty Island?

BOWEN: I certainly did. I certainly did.

DIXON: It was a pleasant place to work?

BOWEN: Sure, it was a fine place to work. When you consider what your offices are today and the wide open spaces you had there, they say you could play baseball all the time if you wanted to. I did, I played a lot of it. But, I don't

know. Looking back on it, there's really more to be said about it as far as I'm concerned. I liked it.

DIXON: When you played baseball, did you usually play the same teams?

BOWEN: No, no. The Army men would come and we'd make teams up among ourselves like that. That's all there was. There was no--we played no teams or anything like that. All the baseball was among the personnel itself. The government didn't want any civilians on the place to begin with. We probably wouldn't be there, except we had to work, that's all.

DIXON: So when the tourists actually visited the Statue, the Army would give them their booklets and see them up and out?

BOWEN: Everything was by the Army. Everything was by the Army.

DIXON: Well, let's see. There was one other, a couple of other things I might just ask about the Island to see if you remember. Was the seawall around the Island?

BOWEN: What?

DIXON: Was there a seawall around the Island?

BOWEN: Oh, no, no seawall. In fact, if I remember where the officer's quarters were, if I remember rightly, they just had a sort of grass plot that went down to the edge. I don't think there was any, as I remember it, I don't remember any seawall there at all.

DIXON: Did they do any filling on the Island when you were there?

BOWEN: Any what?

DIXON: Fill in any little spaces or change it in any way?

BOWEN: No, they didn't do any of this. When they came in, I think when they went out, it was just the same as when they came in.

DIXON: They didn't do any building?

BOWEN: They didn't do any building or anything like that. They

did clean up the Statue and the surrounding area. Of course, they did that. But outside of that, I don't remember them ever doing anything.

DIXON: How about things like cleaning the Statue. When you say it, do you mean physically externally cleaning it?

BOWEN: No, very seldom did they externally do it. But internally, I think they went over it at least once a week.

DIXON: You mean cleaning throughout the inside?

BOWEN: That's right. That's right. Sort of the housewife duty, more or less. (Laughter)

DIXON: How about the lighting? Did the lighting change?

BOWEN: No. They had the lighting of the torch. Then, of course, where the windows are to give the crown affect, there were lights in that. But I remember down below there were lights to guide them inside, a type of flood light you might say. But outside of that, there wasn't any.

DIXON: But they didn't change that?

BOWEN: No, they didn't change that at all.

DIXON: Didn't build anything, didn't change--

BOWEN: No.

DIXON: Around the Island were there sidewalks or just grass?

BOWEN: There was walks and sidewalks and then there was the main road that was inside, around the parade ground, you might call it, but inside all the houses. The houses all faced on the road.

DIXON: There were vehicles on the Island?

BOWEN: No vehicles, but the road was there. They had a road all right because they had containers to take the garbage and all that. It was a road, well, as I remember it was paved all right. But you had no occasion for an automobile because it was too small. You didn't have any use for a car.

DIXON: That's why I was wondering. I thought maybe--

BOWEN: You could walk across the parade ground and be across in two minutes.

DIXON: It's the same size now.

BOWEN: Sure, it's the same thing now.

DIXON: Well, that's what I was basically trying to find out, if they added any or filled in.

BOWEN: Someday, just for curiosity, I'll have to go over and take a look at it.

DIXON: By all means do, and come by and say hello.

BOWEN: Where are you people located on the Island? In the Statue?

DIXON: There was an addition made to the base of the Statue. They started building in the sixties, and it was finished in the seventies. So we actually work in the base, in the

addition to the base.

BOWEN: Oh, I see.

DIXON: The houses and all the military stuff was torn down. Now there is simply a concession building, an administration building and four or five residences for NPS people, National Park Service personnel.

BOWEN: Oh, I see.

DIXON: Its function now is a tourist site. So it's changed. It's no longer military.

BOWEN: That Signal Corps Supply Depot was entirely wiped out, then? That's no longer there at all?

DIXON: When you left, why did you leave?

BOWEN: Well, that's another story. I don't know whether you would want that or not. You remember 1916, General Pershing had his Expeditionary Force into Mexico to try to capture Pancho Villa to punish him for how will I say--his raid on

Nogales, Arizona. An order came from Washington to my boss to send himself, the boss, or somebody down to open a supply depot in Fort Bliss, which was located outside El Paso. The boss, Mr. Noldy, he was in his sixties and he had a family. He couldn't go, he wouldn't go. Mr. Lynch was too old and Sulvey turned it down. So they asked me if I would consider it. I was twenty-two then, and I said, "Well, I don't mind if I get paid for it." So they recommended me, and sure enough I got an order of transfer to El Paso. That was in, roughly, July 10, 1916. On July 14, I was on a train bound for New Orleans and then El Paso. Well there was a big storm in the Gulf, and instead of getting into New Orleans or Friday night, I got there Saturday night. They had me stay over twenty-four hours. So I finally got to El Paso on Sunday night. I left, I think, New York, around Wednesday morning in the middle of that week, and I got there Sunday night. I got there around, I think it was July 17, I'm not sure. But I was in charge of that depot from July 16 to about January 3. I supplied General Pershing with all his Signal Corps equipment while he was on that Expeditionary Force. This is like telephone poles, the wireless. I had motorcycles to come out of your eyes, truck, white loaded trucks.

Those white Mack trucks were very prominent at that time. Motorcycles, I think if I had one, I had two hundred. And trucks, there would be forty or fifty trucks. I had a big area up in the back where we could store all this stuff. I had a lot of field glasses and everything that the army would need, ammunition and things of that sort. I was at the Signal Corps General Supply Depot in El Paso. The officer in charge of that depot was a Captain Walter E. Prosser. If I remember rightly, it was at that same station that I met Lieutenant Eisenhower. He had been married the year before in 1915, I think it was. If I remember, I'm pretty sure I met him there, but I can't swear to that. It's just an idea in the back of my head. I met Pershing, of course. I knew him pretty well. But I came back to New York in January. My father wouldn't let me stay any longer. I've often wondered what would have happened to me if I had stayed because Pershing's Expeditionary Force was the first one that was sent to Europe when we declared war in April of 1917, April 6 or 7. His unit was to go to Europe and land in Brest, was it?

DIXON: I'm not sure.

BOWEN: I think, I'm not sure, sometime in the summer of 1917. But anyway, if I'd been in charge of that depot, I'd like to bet a dollar that I'd have been sent to Europe with that Expeditionary Force to handle the same thing in there that I was handling down in Mexico, or in Texas. So anyway, that's it.

DIXON: Well, that's interesting. I think unless you have something else that you cane think of that would be relevant, you've answered my questions.

BOWEN: I haven't any other. You'd have to ask me because I think I've covered everything that I can think of. As I say, it's true I was there, say, four and half, five years. But you must remember, Mr. Dixon, every day was a repetition of the same. It's just a routine day in and out. There are very few occasions where you'd have any cause to remember something outstanding or out of the ordinary.

DIXON: It's useful for us, though, to have just a history of Ellis Island, I mean Liberty Island, from someone who was working there. So thank you very much.

BOWEN: You're entirely welcome.

(End of Interview)