

NPS-149

THOMAS ALLAN

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INTERVIEWER: JEAN KOLVA

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SCOTLAND, 1927

AGE 7

KOLVA: . . . 1984, and my name is Jean Kolva. I'm here at Ellis Island with Mr. Tom Allan. And Mr. Allan came to the United States in 1927, and he had an experience at Ellis Island, and we're going to be talking about that today. Mr. Allan, where and when were you born?

ALLAN: I was born in Tillic Coultury, Scotland on September 27, 1918. And shortly thereafter, uh, or, well, I'm getting ahead of my story. My, I had a brother two years younger than I, and shortly after that we had another brother, and my mother and he died in childbirth, and my father, heartbroken, migrated to America where he had a brother that were already here. And he left us in care of our old nanny or

grandmother, as they called them in those days, and three aunts. And he, uh, settled in Oxford, Nebraska, remarried, became a U.S. citizen, and sent for us. And at that time our ages were, I was nine, and my brother they called Wee Willie, he was seven, and they put a tag around our neck, and put us on the boat, and sent us over alone, and it was in January of 1927. Came over on the, uh, HMS Cameronia, which is the a Star Line ship. And it was the worst storm in the Atlantic they'd had in years, they said. In fact, it was so bad we had to go out of course and put into Halifax, Nova Scotia for emergency repairs. And I remember our trunk that came with us was all seasoaked with water. But the, it was an eventful journey in one major respect other than the storm, and that was my brother come down with the chicken pox, and we were quarantined on the ship. And I, to no avail, was trying to tell them that I already had chicken pox and there was no need for me to be quarantined, but being of young age, my argument didn't stand water. Because of that, we were sent to Ellis Island and quarantined. Because our father had become naturalized, I mean, if there had been no chicken pox, we would have come in New York City and met with him. I remember they took

us off the ship and brought us in a small boat, and today it bring, brought back memories as slept as we came back in the Great Hall. And we were taken immediately to a, over to be a quarantine ward that you had here. In 1927 the heyday or the big influx of immigration was over, so as I remember, in a child's mind, there was a great number of people, there was nothing compared with previous years. I do remember vividly, and with our visit this morning it kind of got to me because the one ward we went through with the debris still there, waiting to be renovated. And my brother being ill, he was content to be in one bed. And there were, as I recall, looking at it, there were twelve beds down each side, and we were the only two in there. So I passed my time jumping from one bed to the other. And naturally I was a very angry young Scots lad. This is not the America that I was led to believe it was going to be, and here I was literally a prisoner. The biggest insult was a big nurse dumped me in a bathtub and gave me a bath. And I remember in Scottish schools you would get a lashing for being one minute late. But the worst punishment you could have was go sit with the girls. And, of course, as I say, as we grew older, that changed a

lot. But, anyway, they, uh, I remember one day, where they, as I say, there were only two of us in the ward.

One was incapacitated, and I escaped from that ward, and I remember it created quite a hue and cry and it seemed like everybody in America was trying to chase me down, and how far I got I don't remember, but it was in one of the other buildings, and they got me cornered in a corner, and a big guard grabbed me, and he was carrying me over his shoulder, and I was screaming bloody murder, and I was screaming for the big cowboy movie heroes in those days that I had seen in Scotland in the movies were Hugh Gibson and Tom Hicks, and they always galloped to the rescue. But on this occasion I was very angry because Hugh Gibson and Tom Hicks never came, and I was unceremoniously dumped back in that ward. And, as I remember, we were here for, we had been in quarantine for two days on the ship, and I think we were in quarantine here another seven or eight days. And our father who was on the dock to meet us, because we were in quarantine, could not see us. So it was rather a dismal experience for two young lads. And I remember I was so angry at America I kept singing, "Hail Britannia, Britannia rules the waves." And I wanted to go back to Bonnie

Scotland. And, but then there was a great feeling when we were finally out of quarantine and our father met us. And I remember the Great Hall, and that must have been where we were reunited with him, and I left.

And this is, well, I'm sixty-five now, so nine years old, that's about half a century ago, and to come back, to come back in the rain today kind of added to a touch of the melancholy, and it kind of gets to you.

I think there's one thing about this place. You know, being infants, you don't remember your birth, but when you come back here you have a chance to remember your re-birth, in a new land and a new life, and I think it kind of chokes you up a little, and I know it did me today. And I thought it was rather unique that here we were the first group coming over this morning, and outside of two young lovely ladies from Minneapolis who were here because their grandfather had come from Sweden and they had remembered him talking about it. The only other group was a, what were there, a hundred children from a youth camp in upper New York that had come down, and that kind of made it coincidental that I was coming back with children again, as a child in my mind and an old man in reality, not so old man in reality. And I,

there's a touch of sadness in seeing that the, you know, the deterioration of this place, and knowing the importance of this place in American history. I mean, there's, it emphasizes the great need for this restoration, and what a great museum to immigration this would be. Because let's face it, every American, unless he was a Sioux or a Blackfoot or an Indian, were immigrants in this great land of ours. And it's been a great experience. And, Jean, I want to thank you in all your help today in guiding me around. You were a lot kinder and you look a lot prettier than those four bearing guards who took me screaming and hollering back to that ward over fifty years ago.

KOLVA: (she laughs) Well, thank you very much. I'm glad to have met you, and hopefully the restoration will renew the Ellis Island back to compensate your first memories of the place. I'd just like to, if you'd like, to try to remember what happened here when you were a lad, and just go into a little bit of detail in terms of description of the buildings, or how did you know that it was an immigration guard who had captured you? Was he wearing a uniform, or, what, can you go into a little bit more detail about that?

ALLAN: Well, I, uh, when we arrived, I mean, we were just scared kids. And, you know, it's funny, everybody but you is a foreigner. I remember it seemed like everybody was talking a different language, you know, the Town of Babble. And the guards, as I recall, they were wearing hats or some kind of uniform. They were probably the only un-bewildered people here, and so you knew, I mean, that they were guards, and they let you know they were guards. And we, incidentally, just as a little sideline, I am just returning back from a trip to my homeland, bonnie Scotland, a vacation trip, and having as a youth come back in a big storm in the Atlantic, and this time we came back to America on the Concorde in three hours and twenty minutes. And, I mean, the dramatic comparison is beyond. And why there was a touch of bittersweet on this vacation. One of the last of my aunts, eighty years old, she was one of the three that took us down on the boat in Glasgow. And I remember kneeling, hugging us, with tears in her eyes, and saying, "Laddies, you're going to a wild country where there's nothing but painted savages and naked women." And naturally that was her impression from seeing cowboy and Indian movies in Scotland. And they said since there were going to be

nothing but painted savages and naked women, we had to promise we wouldn't look. And I remember in Ellis Island that would be our first touch in America, we were the most wide-eyed and disappointed kids you ever saw. But the, you know, the exterior of the building is just as I remember. I mean, the red brick, the big, foreboding towers. I remember vividly the ferry slip there, although it's now in ruins. And the, I don't know, there's a sense of feeling, and it's coming back. But again there is that sadness that's, "Oh, let's do something about this," because it was so important in our history, let's repair this.

KOLVA: How was your hospital room decorated? Did that have any . . .

ALLAN: It wasn't decorated. There was plain white beds, and those tile, white tile floors. I don't remember any pictures or anything on it. As I recall, it was green walls. Would that be right? And, well, you can hardly tell now.

KOLVA: I know. (she laughs) All the plaster's falling off.

ALLAN: And, I mean, it was very stark. It probably had to be

in those days. And, uh, I imagine that they were very kind to us. But being scared in a strange land, we were terrified.

KOLVA: Did your father come to visit you at all during your stay here at Ellis? Were you allowed visitors?

ALLAN: We were not. Because we were in quarantine, he could not see us, and this added to the, you know, being young, "Why? Why can't we see our father?" I remember just before we left the boat to be brought over here, it had to be a smaller boat, not a ferry, because we were in quarantine, him standing on the dock waving at us, but that's as close as he could come to us, or they would allow him to come to us. And we could not understand that at that time. So my first impressions of Ellis Island were indeed the Island of Tears, and not happy ones, but there's happiness today coming back and knowing this began a new life.

KOLVA: Well, that's wonderful. I can't think of anything else that I'd like to ask you, so I guess I'll just say thank you very much.

ALLAN: It's been a pleasure.

KOLVA: All right.