**Janet:** Today is October 13th 1995. I’m here in the Ellis Island Oral History studio with Roy Martin. Who was a commissioned …

**Roy:** Commissioned officer.

**Janet:** A commissioned officer in the Public Health Service, a Sanitary Engineer and had a project that he worked on here at Ellis Island, 1970 and 1971. I want to say that this is unique. We have never interviewed a sanitary engineer. Also at this very late date at Ellis Island who worked at Ellis Island. This is a real pleasure.

Let’s start at the beginning, if you would say your birth date and where you were born.

**Roy:** My birth date, June 17th 1933. I was born here in New York.

**Janet:** Did you grow up in New York? Did you live in New York your entire childhood?

**Roy:** Yes, lived in Flushing, Long Island. Stayed there until 1956 when I joined the US Public Health Service and went down to Washington DC for the first five years of my career in the Public Health Service.

Then the service sent me to school to graduate school and I went to Berkeley for a Masters in Sanitary Engineering and then I came on here to New York to the New York regional office. The regional office by the way was located initially at 42 Broadway which is just a five minute walk up from Battery Park.

The reason I went to live in Staten Island rather than return to Long Island or Queens again, was number one I was tired of subway travel, I had done that on jobs previous. Number two, the convenience from the Staten Island ferry of the office.

Also because we had the Public Health Service Hospital on Staten Island, which served not only medical care for me and my family but also social things as well. It was natural for me to be -Then I mentioned 42 Broadway because quite often we would come down at lunch time to Battery Park with bagged lunch and watch the ships go by and see Ellis Island and Liberty Island right there in front of us, day after day. That was my first connection with Ellis Island.

**Janet:** Did you have any connection with Ellis Island family wise? Did anyone in your family come through Ellis Island?

**Roy:** Not my immediate family, no. However, my wife, Jon, her maiden was Jon Schmidt, her folks came through and their names appear on the wall here.

**Janet:** Where did they come from?

**Roy:** They came from Germany.

**Janet:** Let’s give a little background here, why did you decide to join the Public Health Service? Do you remember why you made that very large decision?

**Roy:** Yeah. It was very logical. It was a time when the Korean War was going on. I knew that I would have to join a service or be inducted. A good buddy of mine went with the Public Health Service after graduation from Manhattan College, graduated in 55.

He was down in Washington. He wrote and said, “Hi, you know why don’t you look into the possibility of getting into the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service?” For the first two years in the Public Health Service, in the Commissioned Corps, where it would serve as your draft time as well as the possibility of career opportunities and I applied.

I went to the Public Health Service Hospital in Staten Island for a physical. Made out some papers, went down to Washington for an interview. I started what I thought it was a two year assignment and it ended up to be a 26 year career.

**Janet:** What did you in the Public Health Service when you first went in?

**Roy:** When I first went in, my salary was paid by the National Park Service because I was involved in some headquarters work on National Park Service matters. I got out as a new recruit in the Public Health Service. I went out with others to park service sites to see what the sanitary facilities looked like and to learn the ropes.

The Public Health Service has been responsible for the sanitary conditions in the National Park Service areas for a good long time, certainly before I got into the Public Health Service. At any rate, we look at things such as the water system, water supply, sewage disposal system, solid waste disposal, garbage disposal, food service and things of sanitary significance.

We had done inspections, annual inspections at least, of park facilities as a routine. With respect to Ellis Island, National Park Service as you know took over Ellis Island I believe in ‘65 according to my notes in my report. The superintendent at Liberty Island, at the Statue of Liberty was the person responsible for the administration here at Ellis Island.

**Janet:** When you came here were there other Public Health Service people stationed here or working here?

**Roy:** No, as a matter of fact, the reason I came here is that the National Park Service got into a special permit with the group. Let me refer to my reports here, I’ll leave copies of these reports with you of my inspections.

To save time let me just read this paragraph to you, I think it lays it out pretty easily. “Ellis Island is the property of the National Park Service and under the direct supervision of Mr. Arthur Sullivan, assistant superintendent Statue of Liberty National Monument. There exists a special use permit granted by Park Service to the National Economic Growth Reconstruction Organization.”

The initials are NEGRO. This of course was a black organization. “Effective September 1st 1992 or August 31st 1975 for occupation of buildings and grounds on the south portion of Ellis Island and temporary use of the immigrant building at the new ferry house. NEGRO is permitted restricted use of this property but not the buildings on the north side of Ellis Island which includes the main immigration building to pursue a rehabilitation program for drug addicts, alcoholics, ex-convicts and chronic welfare recipients.

The permit clearly authorizes National Park Service to conduct inspections and retain general awareness of activities on Ellis Island. A clause in the permit states that the permittee agrees to comply with all applicable federal state or county laws concerning public health, sanitation, safety and fires and water pollution. To submit reports, public inspections and otherwise comply with procedures and requirements of those governmental bodies.”

**Janet:** In 1970 that was when they were just beginning to do their program out here and you were called in?

**Roy:** I was called in to see if this group would be safe to be here. Whether there would be conditions conducive to healthy living, sanitation. Whether they could prepare food without perhaps getting a communicable disease or what have you. That’s why I was called over.

**Janet:** What was your experience then when you were called over and you came to Ellis Island, what happened?

**Roy:** My first visit I came over with …

**Janet:** I think it would be better if you didn’t read just because it will make it more spontaneous.

**Roy:** Sure, my first visit over here was scary because the person who headed NEGRO, a Dr. Matthews, who was associated with a hospital up in Harlem, he wasn’t there that day. We had made a formal request to come onto the island for our inspection purposes and he wasn’t there.

We were met with a belligerent attitude in that we were told that since he was not there we’d have to get off. There was a little confusion so we left.

**Janet:** How many of you were there?

**Roy:** It was just myself and two or three of the National Park Service people from the Statue of Liberty.

**Janet:** You weren’t received very well, then what? Did you go back soon after?

**Roy:** We went back and Dr. Matthews accompanied us. We had a very strange experience in that we were allowed to only go into places that he wanted to have us go into. For example, we asked about toilet facilities in the morning and he said, “Oh we’ll put that off until the afternoon.” Somebody scurried off.

In the afternoon we were finally directed to a toilet which had obviously just been cleaned up. Of course it wasn’t operable because there was no water on the island. However, this room was, he said that all of their toilet needs were handled in this room. We had--

**Janet:** It was one?

**Roy:** One room, yes. There were several people here at the time. I believe the number was, I don’t know, I think they were 15 at that point in time, men and women.

**Janet:** These were people who were being rehabilitated, the 15?

**Roy:** These were people who were under rehabilitation. One of their jobs was to try to make this island a home for themselves. They were doing some cleaning up but as I said, as far as toilet facilities we passed several areas that were obviously being used for toilet waste, the stench was obvious.

Things were not too sanitary over here. There was no water on the Island. The 24 inch pipe from New Jersey had been broken. They were just bringing water in in five gallon cans for all purposes. There was no way of cooking food, what they were doing was using 55 gallon drums to make fires. They were actually cooking indoors on grills over 55 gallon drums. That was an extreme hazard.

They were not supposed to go over on the north side of the Island. They were obviously going over on the other side of the Island into the old Public Health Service Hospital areas and what have you. Much of that area was dilapidated, windows broken, rain and snow coming in for years, plastic falling off the walls. The bird dung on the floor was over your ankles. It was just a horrendous thing, hazardous, unsanitary.

To make a long story short, as a result of my one day over here with Dr. Matthews and the park service folks. Why I wrote a report recommending that the permit be revoked and I came back. They asked for more time to clean things up and I came back I think six months later and the cleanup had not been that great. I repeated my request.

My reports went forward to the Sanitary Engineer Consultant in Washington DC who dealt directly with the Park Service day to day. I was not doing Park Service work day to day out of the regional office. My usual job was in water supply and other sanitary engineering activities.

He then came down personally, came up rather, from Washington personally to make an inspection. His inspection verified my reports and they did close this down.

I don’t know whether there had been other permits, similar permits granted to any other outfit by the Park Service. Hopefully there weren’t because this place was not habitable at the time we suggested that.

Of course the Park Service at the time had its long arranged plans in place. As far as the buildings that they wanted to fix up, the ones that they want to take down, destroy. They had their 25 year plan on making Ellis Island the place that it is today.

They were hampered in this permit business of, they couldn’t even come on the island themselves, the Park Service except for the fact that there was this need by law of the -By agreement in the permit that an inspection should be made. The Park Service had a tough time getting onto the grounds here at all.

**Janet:** Do you know anything about the circumstance under which that permit was granted?

**Roy:** I think there was an assistant secretary of H-E-W, Health, Education, and Welfare, which was the department that the Public Health Service was in at that time, who granted this permit. He was very close, this is 1970, I think he was very close to the administration at that time and somehow it happened, I don’t know the details.

Robert Finch, whose name is still in the paper with his party’s activities, was the person who appears in my report. I had to report not only to my people in the Public Health Service. I had to report to the regional director for H-E-W in the New York regional office, my survey results because there were political connections.

**Janet:** Is there anything else that you remember about those? Was it just two times that you came out here and observed and then made your report?

**Roy:** Two different days.

**Janet:** Two different days?

**Roy:** Yes.

**Janet:** Is there anything else you remember about the place, the people you met, the conditions, anything else that you haven’t already mentioned?

**Roy:** Ellis Island was just there, until I made that inspection, I’d pass it every day coming across on the Staten Island ferry twice a day. I knew a little bit about it. I think after that inspection I got more interested in Ellis Island. I looked into a bit of the history of the island.

You mentioned that you have interviewed a couple of psychiatrists, public health service doctors who worked here. I’d like to hear their interviews.

It was interesting to me to see the extent of the Public Health Service Hospital that existed here. I guess some of the buildings are still standing, I don’t know what’s going to be done with those, but they were in pretty bad shape when I saw them.

**Janet:** You’re the first person connected with the Public Health Service that hasn’t been a patient provider that we have interviewed that I know of. Also, I think we should mention the report that the regional director wrote when he did his visit, is also going to be in the file with your name on it.

**Roy:** Ron Spidy was the man’s name who did the actual follow up environmental health survey of Ellis Island. He concluded very directly that the permit should be revoked. That Ellis Island does not meet any of the sanitary criteria that we expected it to meet.

**Janet:** He endorsed your report?

**Roy:** Yes he did.

**Janet:** Did you ever hear anything about the clearing out of this organization from the island or how that went? Did you ever-?

**Roy:** No. I did see Dr. Matthews name in the paper a couple of times after that. I know that his license to practice was revoked at some point in time. That he had some interests that were not exactly professional and I’ll leave it at that.

**Janet:** After you did this, were you then consulting on different projects related to -Where the Public Health Service was called in to make those kinds of reports on situations? Is that what you continued doing after that?

**Roy:** As far as the Park Service facilities is concerned, I had the opportunity to do inspections of sanitary facilities in several of the parks.

I’ve been down to Philadelphia and I had gone through the parks there, some interesting times there. The regional office that at that time up to 1970 or there abouts, the regional office included New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware. I did inspections in park sites in those states.

Then we had a regional boundary change and we retained New York and New Jersey, but then picked up Puerto Rico in the Virgin Islands. By that time I was into a program where we did not, I didn’t have the opportunity to do many Park Service inspections. I was doing other things.

**Janet:** When you look back on your career in the Public Health Service and particularly this one small assignment that you had at Ellis Island. How do you think about it now in retrospect?

**Roy:** I had a wonderful career in the Public Health Service. I had the opportunity for travel. At one point, I mentioned this Park Service work. At another point in time I was doing the radiological health surveys at all of the Public Health Service hospitals and outpatient clinics throughout the country.

Looking at the dental machines, the isotope use and what have you to make sure that both the employees and patients were properly were not getting-- That gave me the opportunity to get to San Francisco and Seattle, to Carville, Louisiana, where we had the and still have the leprosarium and all over the country.

For a while I was doing work on ship sanitation. This gave me the opportunity to travel overseas because I had two ships [inaudible 00:26:46] two ships in Italy. Then another trip I took to do the sanitary design review of the Kiwi 2. As a matter of fact, a few months ago I was a passenger aboard the Kiwi 2 and that was fun.

**Janet:** You mentioned your wife. Why don’t you mention your wife’s name and maiden name and your children’s names?

**Roy:** Joan Schmidt Martin is my wife now and I was husband. I have four children, Steven, John, Barbara and Karen. They’re scattered all over the country with their own families.

**Janet:** We just have a minute left. Is there anything else you can think of that we haven’t covered that pertains to Ellis Island or?

**Roy:** No, I don’t think so. I just want to say [inaudible 00:27:54] hadn’t enjoyed this opportunity, if it hadn’t been for [inaudible 00:27:59] Hanson being interviewed here I wouldn’t have had this opportunity myself. Thank you very much.

**Janet:** Thank you. I think it was a serendipitous interview all the way around. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service on October 13th 1995.

I’ve been speaking with Roy Martin who was a commissioned officer in the Public Health Service, a Sanitary Engineer in 1970 and 1971. He visited Ellis Island and made a report on the project, the acronym for which was NEGRO. Signing off.