**Edward**: This is interview number 18, this is Edward Applebaum and I am speaking with Donald Roberts on Thursday August 15th, 1985.We are beginning this interview at 10.35 in the morning. We are about to interview Mr. Roberts about his immigration experience from Wales in 1925.

Mr. Robert, could you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born and what life was like in your native country of Wales?

**Robert**: Well, I was born in the mining village in Wales, in April of 1913. The world war, First world war was about to erupt but of course I had no knowledge of that at the time except as time went on we become we became very cognizant of some of the things that were happening.

For example food was very short and we as small kids used to rummage in the street for anything we could find like piece of orange skin or anything like that.

The village as most of the other places there in the country had allotted by the government certain amount of ground where people would grow limited amount of vegetables.

So that’s the way we survived and I remember as a young boy going to school to be covered with a lot of sores on the surface of the skin- and my mother would put some kind of ointment on and we thought nothing of it we thought this was part and parcel of growing up and living but of course it was due to malnutrition.

The war took a terrible tone in Britain for the men because there was such a slaughter that even I think exceeded in some way the casualties of the Second World War.

But after the war was over my father who was a captain in the forces decided that he should try to come to America to better the live of the family. He had been employed prior to the war as a small building contractor.

He had caught on that business and at the same time he and another man owned a funeral service which seemed to be a very strange thing but in those days these kinds of things happen.

So my father left home and came to America and left my mother and myself, my younger brother and two younger sisters so that he could sort of pave the way for as to come to America.

We were put on a quota list and our name never seemed to come up, to be allowed to come. My father was in this country for about three, almost four years. He had bought a house in the meanwhile at Staten Island and waiting for us to come but we never could to get through the regular road of the red tape so my father came back and decided that was it.

But after he was back for a while and he saw what the condition were again there, and the [unclear 00:4:07] for my mother who was interested to come too, our name finally came up on the quota list.

And they sold the house, the furniture, packed some things in wooden boxes and all three went to South Hampton which was where the ship left.

The ship was the Aquitania. We left as far as I remember to later part of April and early part of May and we took seven days to arrive in New York.

**Edward**: Do you remember what your feelings were about leaving Wales?

**Robert**: Well, the feelings were mixed, leaving my friends. I was 12 years old at the time.

But coming to a new country excited us as kids. But we had mixed emotions because we are coming to a new country not knowing what was ahead of us but I think the excitement overwhelmed the other thoughts we might have and it wasn’t until we were here a while that we realized what a big break we had made and became very homesick.

**Edward**: What had you heard about the United States before coming over?

**Robert**: Well, the only thing we had heard was economic conditions were much better in this country and opportunities for people to advance themselves more rapidly than you could in Britain.

The opportunities there were very limited. The weather wasn’t all that good. These were the things- but I think particularly the economic aspect of it was what motivated my parents to want to better our lives.

So we came across by my recollection of the trip over on the ship, the ship was very crowded. We had picked up in the [unclear 00:06:23] a lot of people from southern Europe and middle Europe and this was our first contact with what we call foreigners.

And the ship of course was Cunard ship, was British ship and we had no problem there but the ship of course was crowded with people, we had a small cabin for the six of us and we managed pretty good.

We were restricted were we could go naturally because we were not in the first and the second class. We were in the third class passage. And we used to go out in the outer deck of the vessel for air and people of course were lying around any place they could find to stay out in the open air rather then get back to the stiffened conditions inside the ship.

But all in all my recollection of the passage were fine. There is one very interesting aspect that I will always remember, was a horse that was being carried over from Europe which happened to be the famous horse Tony. He was the horse of Tom Mix the movie star.

When we were kids in Wales we could go to the cinema, usually on a Saturday afternoon and watch the cowboy pictures and of course he’d be a hero and the other guy would be a black hat.

I can remember some of us kids, this would be serials and when it come to a certain exciting point it was continued next week, so we couldn’t wait until next week to go back until next week to see what’s going to happen so sometimes we would throw things at the screen [laughter] if we didn’t like the guy who was doing whatever.

Tom Mix was always the hero, he and another fellow- the name was Dustin Farnum, and couple other people that I can’t remember the names of now but these were the heroes. Tom Mix's horse Tony was I guess what trigger would be in later generation.

And they used to bring this horse out on the deck and kind of walk around and get a little exercise because it had been in a big wooden box on the rare deck and some of us kids had our pictures taken on Tony's back, but those pictures are gone I don’t know what happened to them but there in my memory anyway.

So we arrived in New York-

**Edward**: Is there anything else you can say about the trip over? Did you keep your food down? What were the spirits of your family?

**Robert**: Yes, the voyage wasn’t rough. There wasn’t any problem in that area. There were certain restriction we had, like I remember my father had to make arrangements with the baster wood for us to be able to take one or two glasses along the way.

It had to be regimented that way, you know, he didn’t have any for some of the others in the small cabin we were in but that was okay, no problem there and from- we had been living under ostic conditions in Wales but we weren’t used to any luxuries, so it didn’t bother us that way.

**Edward**: And what was your impression of seeing people from other countries?

**Robert**: Well, I was bewildered and I was afraid of them and I tried to stay away from them as much as I could because they were entirely different types of people. Some of them were dressed very shabbily and spoke certain languages that didn’t mean anything to us.

They were different breed of people you might say so we didn’t associate with them we just had any contact with English speaking people. So, we arrived in New York harbor and we had of course a medical examination right there on the ship.

**Edward**: Could you tell me what you remember if anything about coming into the harbor itself, what time of the year was it?

**Robert**: It was in early May and the ships at that time used to stop at quarantine which was in the outer harbor before you came into the into the narrows, and all the ships used to stop there and used to put up the quarantine flag, the yellow flag until the ship was cleared to come in into the inner harbor.

I am familiar with that because later on, I was in the American match marine, so I know something about that but that didn’t mean anything to me at the time.

So there was an awful lot of confusion there, people all lined up and getting a very sketchy examination, but there was something about that examination required as to be transported to Ellis Island.

My mother was taken away and isolated in a hospital area because she was suspected of having tuberculosis. My father and us four kids were kept in a separate area along with all the other people who were there for various reasons who were being allowed to come in to the country without some kind of a problem.

So, we, my father and us kids were given, what I would consider now VIP treatment, because we were put into a very small little room and we lived in that room. It was just few bunks in there. We weren’t in with all the other people who were meddling around. It was just like a zoo there.

What I remember about it is the place smelled of disinfectant like the hospitals and there was a man that came around every morning and every afternoon at 10 O’clock in the morning and 3O’clock in the afternoon, with a stainless steel coat, sort of like a good humor coat and the man was dressed in white and he had warm milk for the kids, and they would blow a whistle or ring a bell and all the kids would line up, and he had small little paper cups and he had a dipper and every kid got a little milk, warm milk.

So, that was one thing that sticks in my mind. Another thing is that we were- in order to have some kind of system I suppose everything had to be done by the numbers. They would blow a whistle or signify in some other ways sometimes it would be a gun, when it was time for meals.

We would then walk down this seem to me endless carriages with white tile on the sides and round and around and finally we would come into a big hall and this big hall had long wooden tables and benches.

The waiters would come out and put the food on the table and that was really something. I can remember especially the breakfast, because that shock as up every day we were there.

The breakfast was invariably eggs, and the eggs were cooked in big wired baskets and they would bring these wired baskets and sat them on the table.

And before they’d be on the table, these people, these southern European and whatever, we thought they were savages because they acted like that, they be grabbing these eggs and breaking them open up egg yolk will be running up their faces and we were brought up to wait until everybody was ready to eat and so on and we just couldn’t adjust to that situation.

It was a bizarre thing and I really was shocked and even when I think of it now I say 'my goodness" it gives me the shivers sometimes when I think of- and they would take bread almost from under your nose, and snatch the stuff away from you, it was a very, very bad experience.

Not that we went hungry, we ate somewhere along the line but that was some of the substance of what our table etiquette was and what we had to put up with. Then every day, they had an assembly of people, we were all matched into a big hall and there they would announce those who are being realized into the country and those who are going to be still detained and those who were going to be deported. And you could imagine that went on there, the screaming and the hauling.

Oh, it was something.

**Edward**: Who would make these announcements?

**Robert**: Well, the officials were up on the platform and these people would all be segregated then by category if they were going into the country or whatever.

**Edward**: Do you remember which room it was in?

**Robert**: Oh, it was a great big hall-

**Edward**: It was a great hall?

**Robert**: Yeah, it was a big room, very big room, great big place, looked like the railway station almost.

During the day we were waiting there, we would be let out in the morning and the afternoon for an hour or so to get some exercise in the yard.

The yard had a high fence about 15 feet high of wire fence and once in a while we could look across the way and we could see my mother at the window of the hospital. Oh I guess it was about five or six storeys high or something I guess the building there.

And she would wave to as kids and my father and of course we would see everything going on in the harbor. That’s how the, the days went by.

**Edward**: You could see the Statue of Liberty?

**Robert**: Yeah, of course, yes, simply because you know it’s very close to-

**Edward**: Right.

**Robert**: So, the days went by and ultimately my mother was released and she had no tuberculosis but she had always suffered from bronchitis and she had that as long as I can remember. And my mother died at 89, not too many years ago, and that is not what killed her but anyway that was the reason for her being-

**Edward**: Other than looking across the water towards her you didn’t see her for the entire two weeks?

**Robert**: No, no, once in a great while, we'd all look up outside the window and see and I guess she must have known when we would be allowed and because of the time schedule it wasn’t a hap hazard thing.

And we would see her waving at the window a long distance away, we couldn’t see her close. So my father took care of us kids and when the day came that we were allowed to come into the country that was a real kind of day.

**Edward**: Did you realize there was a possibility you would be sent back?

**Robert**: Of course, of course, my father had prepared as for that. That must have been a very traumatic thing for people who were actually sent back because if they had cut off the tires like we had, my father had sold all the furniture, sold the house there was nothing to go back to. Almost to start over again.

But of course, with all the people that were trying to come into the country there were people with criminal records and what not, and have to sort of wait from the [Unclear 00:21:26] I guess, the best they could.

So there were many people sent back, I don’t know how many but there were quite a few because I know every day there was this commotion going on.

**Edward**: Did you or your brothers and sisters make any friends when you were on the island for those two weeks?

**Robert**: No, no, no, we kept to ourselves and we were very glad to have this little hole to stay in and not get involved with these other people because we didn’t fit.

**Edward**: There weren’t other English speaking people at the time on the island?

**Robert**: There must have been but not that I was aware of. By far the predominant numbers of people were from central Europe or southern Europe, dressed in very strange clothes and whatever manners they had didn’t suddenly jive with what we were accustomed to.

**Edward**: Were there any social services that you can remember?

**Robert**: No, I don’t remember any such things. The only amenity that I can remember is having the milk man come around with his warm milk and he had a stainless steel coat

When people were allowed to come into the country, they were designated to go through a certain area, you were sort of channeled in a certain ways, and there was no way of sneaking out or breaking into anything it was orderly in some arrangement.

So we all went down through this wired in area and got on the ferry boat, and the ferry boat went back and forth from there to the Battery and we just walked off just like the birds out of the cage.

**Edward**: If I could back you up for one second, do you remember the announcement being made that it was ok for your family to leave?

**Robert**: No, I don’t suppose even people remember that because we- it didn’t come as a surprise like for five minutes you had to leave, because, you had to have time to collect your belongings and so on, I would had to imagine it was for the following day or something like that, but I have no recollection about that. But we had an advantage, several advantages entering the country.

First of all we had no language barrier, secondly, my father having lived in- worked in the yard and lived on Staten Island for three or four years, he was familiar with the area.

So we went up to 23rd street, to the hotel called Cornish Arms hotel. It was still there many years later it might still be there. It’s on 23rd street, I think between 7th and 8th avenue or somewhere in that area.

So, the Cornish Arms was a place for the British people obviously and so, I being the oldest had to ride hard on the other kids when my father and mother had to go look for a place to live.

And they went by ferry across to Jersey City, got on the train, the first stop was Rutherford. They got off Rutherford right across the street was a real estate agent, they walked in there, he took them for a ride down the street and they bought the house.

This didn’t happen just overnight I think we were there about a week or something I guess at the hotel. We came over to Rutherford, the real estate man took us in his car to the empty house without a sneak of furniture in the house and there were we were.

We arrived in the afternoon I remember very clearly, it was in I guess the end of May early part of June and a couple of the neighbor ladies came in and offered as some tea or something like that.

And my parents had to go right out to the hardware store, buy some cups and saucers. We started on off right from scratch. We slept on the floor that night.

Now here we were strangers in a strange land. We were dressed like British kids with short pants, rosy cheeks, and we must have stood out like a sore thumb because it didn’t take very long a few weeks before kids would start ganging up on as and try to beat as up because we were the out casts.

When I look back now and I think of people who were real foreigner, they didn’t know the language. They had to contend with that, on top of other discrimination.

Many a times we used to run home and make it home before this gang of kids would catch us. My father- amongst other things when he was a young man was a boxer and he- I have records in the house now of him running a boxing team for people in the army. And cadets who are coming into the armed forces-

**Edward**: This was in the British army?

**Robert**: In the British army. From this little area where we lived in Wales his outfit went to the championship of Wales, championship of Britain and I have the cuttings in the house somewhere and they just lost out and they came in second out of this whole team competition. So my father was handy with his fist.

He bought my brother and I a set of boxing gloves and said “we going to go to the back yard and I am going to teach you how to defend yourself because you are not going to be running home every day”.

So my brother and I used to go at it and I think we ruffed ourselves more than any other kids- while to make a long story short, after a while we got sorted out and we gave as much as we got and after a while we were left alone.

But to compound that, the first year we were here, this place was alive with mosquitoes before the meadows were built up, you better believe the place was alive with mosquitoes. And we, all of broke out in blisters because of the- first of all we had bad screens in the house, remember at night swan we used to have mosquitoes. [Laughter]

But anyway, for one whole season we had to contend with all of this bites but that was the coming, this family coming to America.

**Edward**: This is the end of tape one side one.

[Pause]

**Edward**: This is the start of tape one side two. The house in Rutherford that you were living in where was it?

**Robert**: Well it still stands. It’s on the main street Park Avenue here and my parents lived there until they died. The house belonged to one of my sons now. It’s nice to see it kept in the family. He doesn’t live there but he rents it out. He happens to live in the city.

**Edward**: You mentioned that the other boys in the neighborhood were giving you and your brother a hard time,

**Robert**: Right.

**Edward**: Were you the only immigrant family in the neighborhood?

**Robert**: Oh yes, we were really the only- this town used to be a very close knit town and it was sort of a blue town. People didn’t talk, took a long time for us to get in to any extent but that character has changed now.

**Edward**: And what did your family do for an income now that you had moved to the United States?

**Robert**: Well, I told you my father was a building contractor in Wales and he had been in apprenticed when he was a young boy, to an uncle of his who was a big time contractor.

And so, he had learned the business from the ground up, and ultimately went into the business himself. Amongst one of the things that he did, he was an ornamental plaster [inaudible 00:31:42] one of this people that that did the fancy ornamentation of buildings in wealthy estates and so on which was a very specialized field.

So, my father was in that line when he was here, but he couldn’t- he found he couldn’t upgrade by himself. So he had to work for larger firms and had become a union member. He was restricted in some ways what he could and couldn’t do.

Now we weren’t here very long before the great depression set in and my father of course being in the building line found himself out of work as, as many millions of other people. We saved money and were very frugal with the money so for a while we were able to carry on with the savings that they had.

But there came a day when there was no money and my father was too proud to ask for any relief, he refused to do that. I remember one night when I was supposed to be in bed, my father and mother talking, what’s going to happen the next day ,there was no money and very little food in the house.

And I went to school the next day with a really aching stomach because I was so worried but a wonderful thing happened. my mother had a brother who was a single man, he had come to the United States many years before, and he was an engineer with 20mule team Borax Company in Death Valley in California and she had written to him evidently for the loan of some money.

When I came home for lunch that day, a check had come for a hundred dollars which was a tremendous thing.

My father, he couldn’t meet the mortgage payments, so a lot of the houses were being foreclosed right and left and we were scared to death, I know I was but my parents tried to keep it away from as kids, that we were going to be out on the street.

My father, when he faced that situation, was really desperate. I don’t know what he would have done if in fact this had happened but he went to the head of the building and loan, and asked if he could make a deal where he would just pay the interest and in exchange for that he would do repairs on these houses that they were foreclosing.

So that arrangement was made. I remember it was $25 a month that they had to come up with to pay the interest. So the house was kept.

And then my father was able, if he finally condescended in a way. Although he had no other option but to get on to what they call 'the WPA' the works projects administration.

This was something that President Roosevelt had started it was a sort of a make work deal with the people did whatever I think it was $30 a month or something like that.

So my father used to go down on the meadows town he was with some other men and dig and drain the ditches and they'd take a couple of potatoes with them and make a fire and cook the potatoes and that’s what they ate.

So this [laughter] episode in a person’s life forced an indelible mark and to talk to people of your generation you might understand to a certain point but nobody can really appreciate unless you have been through the fire.

**Edward**: I am sure you are right in saying that.

**Robert**: So, then as things started to ease up a bit my father was able to- my father even before that, I think so much- [pause] I think so much of my father.

He would go to New York and walk up and down the streets looking for some evidence of some work going on in the building like cement or whatever, and try to walk in to get a little job and he walk the streets systematically one street after the other day after day after, day, and come home, nothing, nothing, nothing.

That is a tremendous weight to put on somebody you know. I didn’t realize at the time as much as I do now but I thank him so much for having the courage to make the break that he did and to give us the opportunity to better our lives here in this country.

**Edward**: Let me just ask one or two other questions, when you had first landed in New York and you said you just came up in the 23rd street , and you stayed at that hotel, what were impressions of Manhattan when you landed here that first day or during that period[inaudible 00: 38:16]?

**Robert**: Well, we were bewildered of course, we were already acclimatized to some of the things we would see having seen coast guards what not of the Woolworth building which was the highest building I guess in the world at the time.

So we knew what to expect and we could see the skyline from Ellis Island but we were told- I was told by my father to sort of keep charge of the other kids and we never went out of the hotel that I can remember we never wandered the streets that’s for sure.

**Edward**: Did you look out the window?

**Robert**: Yes of course we did that, but that, it didn’t make an impression on me. I was bewildered enough and ready to, you know, expecting some of these things that I would see.

But the excitement of the unknown I think in a way counteracts any fear or apprehension that would have of the situation. I don’t recollect being afraid.

**Edward**: And also, for those two weeks that you were on Ellis Island, is there anything else you can tell us about that? You said that you would go out each afternoon and play.

**Robert**: In the mornings and the afternoon everyone was let out. It couldn’t have been all at one time because there were too many people involved and we were allowed out for, I would imagine for half an hour or an hour then we would have to go in and another group would go out. It was a relatively small area.

**Edward**: These was children and adults?

**Robert**: Yes, oh yes. Everyone was let out and we get the fresh air.

**Edward**: You are involved with something now concerning Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty? Would you tell us about it?

**Robert**: Few years ago, my wife and I took one of our grandchildren over to the Statue of Liberty. I was very surprised to see some of the things that- for example they had a, I guess a museum there. And when he walked to there, there was a depiction of the history of immigrants into the country and it was broken down into various nationalities, Germans and what not with life size figures in some instances of people in their national dress and so on.

So, being Welsh, I was interested to see something about the Welsh coming into this country because there is a very strong history of Welsh people arriving early into America and the very substantial contributions they have made to the growth of the country.

I could innumerate many, many things that outstanding Welsh people have done, and people who were not so outstanding. People were recruited in Wales to come over and work in coal mines here and settled in Pennsylvania and so on.

Established some towns in with Welsh names that are still there today. People were recruited from the north of Wales to work on the slave quarries and the marble quarries up in Vermont in New Hampshire and so on.

Many of the leaders of the- world’s independence for Welsh people. The man who financed the revolution was a Welsh man. But I saw nothing about this at all. I thought if the government was going to refurbish this exhibit, that there should be some recognition of the contribution of the Welsh people to the building of the country.

So, I got in contact with influential people of Welsh origin and as a result of that, there is an ongoing program now to have some recognition made when the new facility is opened.

We also had another time when we went to visit Ellis Island and I was very, very sad to see the state that it’s in. It had been wrecked by vandals, there were some squatters in there for some periods of time and they all contributed to desecrating the place if that’s the correct word for such a place.

We went on a tour, conducted tour through the place, my wife and I and one of the people from the national, I don’t know, one of these events girls took as through and the stories that she was telling this group was something [laughter] well it was concocted by somebody with a vivid imagination I think for that much... without much element of truth [unclear00:45:10].

So, somewhere along the line she invited anybody who might have been in Ellis Island to come over and speak. There was a man there who had come in as a baby and he knew nothing. And I spoke to them. I recited some of the things I have told you just before.

And after that I was mobbed by people wanting this and that and the other thing and for me to write articles but when we were ready to get back to the boat somebody from the national government- what is the organization that conducts the tours- you know this public park or national park people or something?

**Edward**: National Park Service.

**Robert**: Yeah, ok these are the people. Got a hold of me and said we would like you very much to come to the statue of liberty and record what you remember. I said I would be glad to do that, I gave them my telephone number so, I never heard from them.

So I left it at that until I was contacted by you folks some months ago and it seemed like a happy circumstance because am glad if I can contribute in some small way to compilation of the history of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

So I am going to be really interested now, next year when hopefully the Statue is going to be rededicated to see what has been done in the way of recording for future generations the contribution of Welsh people to the country.

**Edward**: Thank you very much.

This is the end of the interview, it’s the end of side two of tape one.