Ernest Debassigae was born in 1925 on the West Bay Reserve, Manitoulin Island. He is a World War II veteran, a band councillor and a self-taught historian.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Experiences in the army during and after WW II.
- Travels in the U.S. and Canada.
- Working conditions in U.S.

Tony: ...the afternoon of the 16th. This is the second tape of a conversation with Ernest Debassigae in the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation in West Bay on Manitoulin Island. While we were having lunch, you were telling us a couple of stories about your time in the army. And the first one that you were telling us, about how you stocked up on things in Halifax before you going overseas, do you want to tell us that again?
Ernest: Okay, before we start on this, was there anything in the morning that we left off? That you want to finish?

Christine: Well, we were sort of on the army things. We were still talking about the army.

Tony: We're still there.

Ernest: Oh yeah, this is one of the incidents that is etched in my memory. It's always a very touching thing. When we left Debert, we stocked up on items for the black market. Everybody talks about getting rich on the black market. Cigarettes, candy. And so that canteen must have made money, that canteen in Debert, because we stocked up on orange juice, chocolate bars, gum, stuff that we thought we wouldn't get in England. We could hardly lift our kit bags.

And, oh by the way, another thing I forgot to mention. When we got on the boat, we all got rations. Like so many boxes of rations, breakfast, dinner and supper. They were K rations. I guess they were all made in the States. And we were supposed to not use those until an emergency. Unless we were told. But we all started eating them. All you see is those things floating on the ocean. And what I liked about those rations, each ration had a little wee package of three cigarettes so you could have three cigarettes after each meal. But the supper one had toilet paper with it, a few pieces of toilet paper. (chuckles)

So, we got into Liverpool pretty late in the evening. By the way, this happened to be a long crossing. I don't know why it was so long. I guess it's to get away from... especially the north Atlantic. One day it was very unbearably hot. Maybe we went down south for quite a ways and then up north. And I remember we got in about six in the evening into Liverpool. It was so foggy, you couldn't see the city. You could just see the dock. So, we got on the troop train and I remember coming early in the morning, just day break and we were in some part of London, the factory district of London. You could see through the haze, the bombed out area. And we saw kids coming out, running up the bank to welcome the troop train, little kids. And right away you know they lived in that area in the poor district and everybody was touched, I guess, by these kids. We opened the windows and we started throwing out our stuff and when we landed in Aldershot, we didn't have a damn thing. Everybody's heart just opened up and we threw everything away. Forget the black market.

Tony: Threw all the oranges and...

Ernest: Yeah, all the oranges, chocolate bars, everybody, you know. These kids, we wanted to give these kids a treat. And probably that happened with every troop train. That just shows you how kindhearted the average person is.

Tony: Well, that was going.
Ernest: Yeah.

Tony: That was going, that was on the way over. Now you were telling us another story about when you were leaving and when you were coming back.

Ernest: I didn't think that would be proper on tape.

Christine: (chuckles)

Tony: Well that's all right, we've got it, we'll guard it.

Ernest: Okay. Yeah, coming back, this was in Nijmegen, a repat camp, repatriation camp. And we got on a troop train about noon the next day. But the night before they had stew and it didn't affect me and very few weren't affected. But the majority were affected by... everybody had the runs, diarrhea. And just while we were ready to go, the guys jumped off the train. You could see their heads sticking up over the hay. The hay was just... and the train whistle blew and they got on and it moved a little. It stopped again and everybody rushed to the hay field again. And finally they had to keep moving. Couldn't stop anymore on our way to Belgium. So these fellows couldn't let go inside the car so they just stuck their rear ends out the window. And since the Canadian Army liberated Holland, we were heroes over there. In every little community and every little train station, there were people there to wave good-bye to the Canadians. And all they saw were rear ends flashing by. (laughs)

Tony: Ernie, that's a great story.

Christine: That's a wonderful story.

Ernest: A lot of people don't believe me.

Tony: I wonder if any of those people went back, those soldiers went back, whether the people in Holland would recognize them.

(all laugh)

Tony: It's sort of funny, I know the face.

Ernest: Yeah, that's what I think.

Tony: Grinning from ear to ear.

Ernest: I know the face but I don't get the voice.

(all laugh)

Tony: Why, what were the trains like that they had to go out the windows?

Ernest: There was no, those little continental trains were
like British trains. They were all narrow gauge track, very narrow cars. You just got in, you just opened the door like the old stage coaches. There was no... I saw a few in England where they had a little narrow aisle. They may have had toilets. But I remember just going from, well, going from London to Glasgow and back and they go so fast, you don't... almost you can hold.

Tony: Probably just as well.

Ernest: Yeah, just as well.

Tony: That's a great story. So what happened then, when you came back? What did you do after you got back out of the army?

Ernest: Well, I stayed in, I couldn't make up my mind whether I wanted to stay in the army or not. So, I could just ask for my discharge but I thought I'd just hang around. So they put me on staff, they just switch you onto staff. You know, they need guys to work around the camp, clean up and different things. So just by accident, I got to be a runner - what they call in the army a runner - for the accounts office and the sports office. It was combined. You were what you call today a gopher. So, I'd run over to the headquarters building to get cheques signed. The colonel and the second in command, they would have to have their signature. So I would be there every day almost and oh, the different jobs. Even taught me how to type these big reports, these big long typewriter with one finger. And then they taught me how to - they had to keep track of the mess dues of the sergeants and the officers so he showed me how to do that. Like in the army there is Part Two Orders that show who is taking on strength and struck off strength. So I just entered them in the book. And when they were discharged, they would have to come in the office. When you are discharged, you have a chart. You have to go through check off places where you have to go for your final medical inspection, your blood test and all of this. Then the officers, the mess dues, and they charged them. Some of them would complain. The officer would just go by the entry date in the camp until the day you're discharged and they would have to pay. And when they come in they were issued an officer's mess card and sometimes they'd just drop them off there. Or they could take them. And I collected some of them because some of these people I'd heard about, I kept. Like Bing Koflin (sp?) the cartoonist for the Maple Leaf, the magazine. I kept his card. And several people in there prominent, I got to know them. Some of these NHL players that were sergeants or officers, they come and checked out there so I got to see them in person. It was interesting.

And a funny thing happened to me there. We stayed under the grandstand at Lansdowne Park where the football field is, those were the barracks. So, the accounts officer, Captain Cameron, he says, "Ernie, why don't you move your bed here, just in the office, one of those little cots. And you'll be by yourself."
The accounts office was there, I just did this on my own, voluntarily. I looked after the arena, the open air rink, me and a friend of mine. And we had all the neighborhood kids playing on there, you know, we had a great time. We'd pick up games at night. And I was a stick boy for the army team and the service league. They had a service league so I enjoyed that, you know. The night of a game, I'd just call a staff car, load up the equipment. Well, we had our equipment down there in a box, but oranges and pop. I'd take a couple of cases of pop for the players, oranges and I'd just call a car, staff car. One of those vans, little wagons, station wagons. And I was allowed to pick up one kid in the neighborhood. So I went with this young Irish kid, Eddie Leahy. He was a paperboy, too. I'd take him along as my helper. And I enjoyed it; I had a lot of fun. I was there a year. And after a while, since there was nobody to wake me up, the colonel almost caught me one time. There was a knock on the door and I said, "Come in," and I just had time to put on my pants. And it was the colonel. No, I didn't even have my pants on. I was standing behind the desk with just my shirt. And you know how these old colonels talk, grrrr, "Tell Captain Cameron that I'm telling everybody, the men don't have to come on parade any more in the morning. They just have to come on parade. We're going to quit this. Just as long as they report to whatever they're doing, no more. They can do whatever they want to do." "All right, sir," I said. God, I was hoping he wouldn't ask me to show him anything because I had nothing on. (chuckles) So I told Captain Cameron when he come in and I told him what happened and he laughed. He told me, "Ernie," he says, "I'll give you a wake up call. I'll phone from the house and wake you up from now on." So every morning until he left. He left before I did. He got a discharge. Very fine man, Captain Cameron.

And I got into trouble there too. I had a pretty good record in the army, I mean like as far as being AWOL or.... Me and my buddy were going to a hockey game, Quebec senior league and we couldn't get tickets. But the sergeant, his wife was sick and he couldn't go, so he let us have his tickets. This guy was from Levack, John Delorme. He was my closest buddy; he is dead now. And so we said first we'll go and have a drink in the canteen, but we got drunk before we even got out of the camp. And we went back to where I stayed and we started playing hockey in there, just fooling around. I guess we knocked down the extinguisher. I guess he sprayed the room with that dirty water in there and we broke the adding machine. I don't know, we just.... I don't know what happened. And I passed out and I guess he left. He told me later that he passed out in the back. And the firepicket came along and picked me up and I woke up in detention. That's the only thing I did really bad in the whole time I was in the army. And the first thing they did was cut my hair. You know, just shaved it off. I'm not sentenced yet, they shouldn't have done that. I had almost a bald head. And this detention guy was Sergeant Birdnicoff, a real mean S.O.B. You know the type that liked that kind of a job. He was screaming and yelling at me and my head was busting and I had to scrub this cement floor, you know, with my
head down. And these buildings where the detention was, that was the Eastern Canadian Agricultural Exposition and these were the stalls where they kept the cows. That's where I woke up you know, these rails. We had to scrub. And they gave us corn flakes, I think there was three spoons for ten men. You know, they didn't give a damn. So I had to stay there over the weekend but they let me out Monday. And gee, I was afraid to walk in. They had cleaned up. So he said, "Close the door. I want to talk to you." And he gave me a real dressing down. He says, "You're going to go up on charge." But the adjutant, he was a tank corps guy, I didn't know him. He heard about this and he wanted to really crucify me, an example. "But," he said, "I spoke up for you. We're going to arrange it that you don't get... that's your first offence, so even the Major... Major Stairs is going to be up in front of you."

Oh, by the way, just before that happened too, I had been promoted to Corporal. And I didn't put the stripes on. I figured I wasn't worth being promoted. So I hadn't put them on yet. Oh, by the way, the reason I had been promoted. I guess the colonel had noticed me kind of sloppy. I was never, even today, I was never a dresser, I never will be. And I was never a parade ground dandy. So, the captain comes says, "The colonel told me about you. He says, 'You better get Ernie to smarten up.' So you know what I'm going to do?" he says. "I'm going to promote you to Corporal right now and maybe that's smarten you up." So he picks up the phone and, oh, not right now. He told me to, yeah, he just had promoted me so I could have gone right away to have them put on. So, when they paraded me, you have to have for your escort, you have to have a man of equal rank to escort you. So when they walked me in, marched me in there, "Oh, by the way, this man's a corporal." So they got two typists in there that were corporals. They had to grab a hat and they marched me in there.

And the guy that was my judge or whatever, was the biggest drunk in the camp. Major Sutcliffe. And he knew me. The reason I knew him because our hockey team used to go on exhibition games. We went to Pembroke, Perth, and different places and he always volunteered his car and so he knew me. So he says, oh he made it very light for me. He says, "Ernie," he says, "since this is your first offence, you are hereby admonished." That's the army term, admonished. So I got out. So that was it. So I come back and Captain Cameron was pretty happy. There happened to be a guy in the camp that worked in the canteen, that had worked on these adding machines where they made them, and he fixed it. So he says the only thing that was bothered was some papers I worked on I had to do over again. (chuckles) "But right now," he says, "you're going to have to put those." So he picks up the phone and calls the quartermaster, "I'm sending over so and so, two brand new uniforms and two sets of stripes. Get him to go to the tailor shop. Have them put on. You've got to have that all on today." So I walked into the canteen that night. Oh, all of my drinking buddies, "I didn't know you were a corporal. Well, we have to wet the stripes." I could hardly walk back to
my.... (chuckles)

But I made it up to Major Sutcliffe after. They closed up the camp. The headquarters of military district number three was Kingston but this Lansdowne Park was, they called it number nine but it was like an auxiliary to this number three. So they phased out the camp. So they were discharging everybody except a few of us. And then we went to Kingston after Lansdowne was officially closed. I was one of the last ones out of Ottawa. So, you know, in the First War there was a scandal about canteen funds. And there wasn't too much left. Some people absconded with all those funds. But now this war they were very strict, the veterans, the Legion. The canteen funds, they went to a benevolent fund. They still use them to this day for emergencies. Maybe a veteran has burned out, this is where they get the money.

So they had a free party for everybody. The sergeants had their own party, I imagine. But the wet canteen, oh free beer. Do you know, the free beer was only for two rounds and we had eighteen thousand dollars in our men's canteen funds. And the officers had a party. They had nine thousand; they blew it all for one thing. They had an orchestra. And I knew the sergeant of the officer's mess because they all reported there so we were like a group. (You know, they even had a Christmas party on our own at Captain Cameron's house.) And he had been a chef on these ocean going liners. He was from England, Sergeant Thoroughgood, a real fine gentleman. And he says, "Ernie, do you want to make some extra money? There is a big party at the officers." "What do I do?" Well, I came in that night. I thought I'd maybe just wash dishes or something. Five dollars which was a lot of money when you were getting fifty dollars a month. So they gave me a white jacket, a white coat. "What do I do?" "Well, you go around the party and all you do is pick up glasses and bring them to the bar. There is a little door, somebody will be there." I said, "No, Sergeant, I don't want to take this. I'll never do that. You know, I'm not gonna be a servant to these people, you know." They had - oh, just like you see in the movies - all these officers, all these ladies in evening gowns you know. Fancy dress and the orchestra, big buffet. With all these French kids, they like that you know, they were picking up glasses. They thought that was big. I was going to leave. "I'll tell you what," he says. "Would you mind washing those glasses?" "No, that's what I'll do." So just off the bar and there must have been about five bartenders, maybe six bartenders for this. This was all free for these people and all night, where the enlisted men only got two rounds. And we only got 5 beer. They should have had that all night for us, but for them it was all free. So, there was a little door on the side. These French kids, they would just knock on the door and I would open it and I would take the tray. And I had two sinks there, one for soapy water and I rinsed them out and just put them out on the bar. And they kept refilling these all ready, that's how busy they were. And I liked drinking then; that's before when my stomach was any
good. I was just starting to enjoy drinking. So some of these were half full and I guess Sergeant Thoroughgood noticed me doing that. He says, "Ernie, you don't have to do that. Just help yourself. Whatever, all these drinks are already poured." You know, rum and coke or this and that. They are already ready. So I started helping myself and after I'd got caught up I'd go in the kitchen and visit the cooks. They were fixing the buffet, putting more stuff on the buffet. I'd come back, I'm getting a nice jag. (chuckles) And I finally found blood in the water. I was going too fast, you know. I cut my....

Tony: Cut your hand.

Ernest: Yeah, so I'd keep cleaning there and keep changing the water. And at the end, they were just clamoring for drinks before closing time, you know. They were just surging in there and I saw these very impeccable men and women getting pretty scruffy looking, too. They were starting to fall all over. I thought it was just like Rudyard Kipling's statement, Rosey O'Grady and the Colonel's lady are sisters under the skin. They looked just as sloppily out there as any. So, oh, Captain Cameron, he'd already been discharged. He saw me behind there. He was laughing and he was waving, you know, he saw me and went white. And then they were just mobbing that bar trying to get more drinks and I got a knock on my door. I thought it was one of these kids bringing more glasses so I opened the door. Here it's Major Sutcliffe, the one that let me off. "Say Ernie, could you serve us through here?" "Sure, all you want, what...(laughs)...what do you want?" I just loaded them up. So that's, I thanked him for...

Tony: Letting you off.

Ernest: Boy, I loaded them up good, "All you want, how much you want?" So at least I payed for the thing. So there are a lot of funny memories there.

Tony: Oh, I'm sure.

Ernest: And I remember too, how fine a man Captain Cameron is. I never went on leave. I figured you only get a few days and you don't enjoy it. I'm going to go home for good any way sometime, so why should I rush around. I just stayed in the camp. So Captain Cameron says, "Well, you fellows, you didn't go home. Sergeant Thoroughgood's family is in England, you are going to have your own Christmas dinner, just you and Ernie." So we had a dinner after Christmas at their, Mr. and Mrs. Cameron's place. And I remember yet. You know, I always felt uncomfortable because I'm not in their class. I always felt I just sit there, you know. Didn't know. Hadn't been around. Couldn't talk much about anything. Just sit there. And they were looking at me. They asked me what I wanted to drink so I just drank some wine, I think. And they always look at you if you're going to go crazy any minute, like the stereotype. But I remember Mrs. Cameron saying, "The turkey is ready." So Captain Cameron says to this Sergeant, he says, "Don't listen
to her, you're the chef. You go and check." So he went and checked the turkey, "No," he says, "wait another half hour." That was okay. That was real nice.

And I went to babysit there once. Their little boy was very well trained. He just told me, this was before Christmas, told me just to throw one shovel full of coal at a certain time, that's it. Everything, they were going to a party. I remember there was a big train set there. He had a brother too; he was Major. Major Cameron. I never met him. He says, "My brother bought this big train set and he comes and plays with it. I think he bought it for himself, it's for his boy," he says. But that just shows you, in spite of what I done there, there was still some trust. You know, he'd give me a couple of dollars which was a fortune to me and the bus tickets to come out on the subway. And his father-in-law was the 2IC, the 2nd In Command, Major Putras. And I remember reading about them. Something happened in the family there years later, down in Cobourg or Belleville. And he told me that he was going into business, a coal business or something then with somebody else. That's the last I ever heard of him. Very, very nice man. I really liked him. (chuckles) He just give me a little lecture. He says, "I think you always do all right," he says, "but try and stay off the booze," he says. "Because you know what,..."

Oh, there was a funny thing happened after that. This Sergeant Birdnikoff that made it so miserable for me, he was way behind in his mess dues, sergeant's mess. So he sent me. He'd go around himself sometimes to go and collect the overdue accounts. So he says, "Ernie, I'm going to give you the privilege of going to Sergeant Birdnikoff to collect and you tell him if he doesn't pay, that I'm going to report him to the colonel." That was the threat. So I went down and knocked on the door and they opened it and he was sitting at the little desk there, little office. And there was a medical officer inspecting a prisoner and I come. "What do you want?" he sees me. I says, "I've got your mess bill here. You're supposed to pay, and if you don't pay Captain Cameron is going to report to the colonel." Oh, boy I'm enjoying this. I had a receipt book, give it to him and he let me out, eh. He says, "For a Captain," and I said, "You better watch it and never end up down there." So that was alright. I was behaved. Yeah, I had a lot of funny experiences.

Christine: So did you come back to the reserve then after?

Ernest: Yeah, and then I came back to the reserve. Oh yeah, when I come back from overseas, too. I didn't come home. A lot of people were scrambling to get home. When I got home, I came with this draft to Ottawa. I remember a big welcome and there were big cards there, your initials, d,a,b,c,d. That's where you went when you broke up. But I didn't know anybody, I'm just standing around. I went to d anyway just incase there was anybody that thought I would be coming. I didn't know what, but I remember a young couple coming over, air force man and
his wife. They told me they had just been newly married and he says I was welcome to come and stay with them. "No," I says. I didn't feel like going there anyway that night. But the next day I asked for a pass to New York City. I figured, well I'm going home for good some time. I've never been in New York. So I gave a phony address, I just made one up. They didn't know. I got a pass. They wouldn't pay my way there. I guess the rules say you have to pay to your place of birth.

So I hitch-hiked. Went to Montreal. I came over to Caughnawaga. I had $100 disembarkation pay and leave. And there was always somebody coming across from Caughnawaga with money, American money, these iron workers. So I went to this little restaurant and I said, "Has anybody come back from New York or Brooklyn?" "Yeah, right across the street. A lady just come back." So I went over and I told her. Oh, no problem. She just opened her purse. Iron worker's wife, I guess. Then she told me the best way how to get across the border. So I walked along the tracks, that's that Chaudiere Basin. I stayed in an old station; they let me sleep there and then I walked on. I remember pushing... one of those guys picked me up,... those hand cars. I pumped for a couple of miles until they stopped. And I remember I was thirsty. It was hot and I got off. I saw a creek and I went and had a drink and I'm tired and I fell asleep. Really had a good sleep. I woke up, there was cows all over me.

Tony: Cows?

Ernest: It's a wonder they didn't step on me. Boy, did I get up gentle. They were all standing there drinking. There was nobody around.

Tony: It's a wonder they didn't use you for a window.

Ernest: Yeah. (laughs) And I got up, I kept on going. It was really hot along the tracks. I'm trying to get to Delson, Quebec. A place called Delson. From there you catch the train and it takes you to the border point, Rouses Point. So, I went into a farm house and I asked for a drink of water. Boy, did I drink. Typical French-Canadian, little village. Well, their villages down the tracks and the big crucifix. And I just came in at noon. All the family there, the farmers, their sons, you know, had come in, big. And I had a nice roast pork dinner. And they wanted me to stay around there and they couldn't.... They were broken French, and what little English they knew, they wanted me to stay to eat again. "No," I says, "I have to go." That's one of the reasons I should have learned French. You know, to go through. I got to Delson in the evening and I stayed and drank in the hotel there till the train time and I got across. And as soon as I cleared the customs there, I hitch-hiked to Plattsburgh, New York and then right on to Albany. But from Albany I took the train.

And I got into New York City the day after VJ Day. I was in VJ Day in Albany. The town went crazy. I stayed in Albany for
almost two weeks, almost two weeks. And no matter where I went, my Canadian uniform was my pass to eat or drink. You know, everybody was so patriotic; the war was over. I'd go into a bar, I'd throw a quarter maybe for a glass of beer. The bartender would ring up, he'd just give me two dimes and a nickel back. Or there would be people, you know, people would send a drink down. I couldn't buy anything; I couldn't pay for a meal. And one place I was drinking, there was a fellow invited me to stay with him. Staloman, his name was Staloman. I guess he was part Jewish. And he was a truck driver. He says, "You just stay home," and just up a flight of stairs. And I stayed there and I just slept on the couch. He had a bedroom there. And I met his girl friend who was a French-Canadian girl about... oh, he was middle aged then. I was just a kid then. When I come back I wasn't even 21 yet.

But, I remember going to mass; I was still going to church then. And I remember going to mass and a priest come over and spoke French to me. And I saw the Canada patch, you know. He said he was from Montreal, he was one of the priests there. And coming out of the church, there was an old lady yelled at me and pressed money in my hand. Five dollars. I says, "No, you got to keep this." "Are you sure you're looked after?" "Oh yes, I'm in good, I got a good place." And I stayed around Albany there. I went to a couple of ball games. They couldn't pay, you know, veterans couldn't.... I saw these old Albany Senators when they were in that Class A League and I saw a lot of players that went in the big leagues when they were just starting. I saw Jimmy Ripper Collins and a few of those. They were just on their way up then. And I remember drinking in the hotel, and I forget the name of the old hotel. And there was an old retired policeman that lived there. And he got a liking to me because he was an old retired army, lifetime. And he had just got on the police force, just in the suburbs you know, directing school traffic or... an old Irishman. Typical old Irish cop. And so he introduced me to some of those Senators. They stayed there, you know, the players I had seen. They stayed in the hotel. They dropped by, shook hands with some of them. And he asked me up, he asked me up to his room. He says, "I want to show you some of my stuff and I want you to meet somebody." And he was pretty well shot. And I was feeling good myself. We went up and he showed me his uniforms, you know, all the services chevrons, regular army. And then, God, I hated this. We went to visit a priest on the same floor. He was living there, retired priest, eh. Knocked on the door and he was polite, he shook hands but he kind of gave him hell for coming and waking him up at this hour. "No, I just wanted you to meet this." "Okay, well go to bed, I'm tired," he says. (chuckles) That was his drinking buddy.

Tony: The priest was?

Ernest: This priest, yes. Yeah, I had some funny experiences. Then I got to New York so of all these experiences too, I went to the USO. Oh, when I got into Grand Central Station, you always go up to the USO. They got free coffee, cakes, donuts.
And I'm sitting there, enjoying my coffee, an air force officer come over, Canadian Air Force Officer, pilot officer comes over. Usually didn't mix with commissioned people, but he was real friendly and he was a, what you call a Syrian or, I forget. One of these, a Syrian there or something. And he says, "When did you get in?" "Just now." "Where are you staying?" "Well, I just got to find a place to go. Where I'm going to go is Brooklyn because there is an iron worker community and I know a couple of guys. I got the address of the bars. So if I find a place here then I'll go over maybe tomorrow."

Tony: These were these high steel guys.

Ernest: Yeah, yeah, they got a colony there. So I knew two of them, Leonard Cross and Billy Taylor. I knew where they hang, I got the address in Caughnawaga. So he says, "Come with me," he says. "I'll show you a real good place to stay that's all high class people," he says. "Jewish, rich Jewish people. Central Park, 77th St. on Central Park Ave." So, what a fancy building in a nice area. There was a big, fat, old, very affluent-looking Jewish lady with a lot of rings that was there. And he passed himself off as a sergeant at the... there was a place for officers too, you know. You meet the higher class people, I guess. But no, no wonder. He's Syrian; he wanted to save money. You know, it's $.50 a night there. And you got white sheets. They were army bunks but white sheets and an iron, everything there. And you had breakfast, bacon and eggs, toast and coffee. And in the evening, all you want. Like cakes and stuff, cigarettes, there was a whole bowl. All for $.50 a night. And so we stayed there a couple of nights, then he took me downtown to meet his cousin who works in one of the import offices. Then we went over and he took me to his family in Brooklyn, like, his relations. They were really Mediterranean types. I guess they had a fruit stand someplace there in Brooklyn. (laughs)

Tony: Speaking about your stereotypes.

Ernest: Yeah. (all laugh) I'm getting my story mixed up. Where did I leave after that? Oh, after I went to Brooklyn. I left him in Brooklyn.

Tony: With his fruit stand.

Ernest: Yeah, with his fruit stand. Oh, so I went to these places and I finally found, I found both of these guys, you know.

Tony: Billy Taylor.

Ernest: One was Margie's, is one bar, and one was O'Grady's. Always an Irish, everyplace I went, Irishmen ran an Indian hangout. And oh, this Leonard Cross was kind of a mean guy and I didn't hit it off too good with him. So at least, I visited one night with the Mohawks. But they were having fights with
Puerto Ricans there. You know, they were, just for fun. Just for the hell of it. You know, they were out for one another. So the next night I went back to that same place and I remember, oh, I think I got pretty well soused and I fell asleep in the subway and I rode that thing pretty near all night back and forth to the Bronx and I think right to Coney Island. I went to Coney Island by the way, too. And then, oh yeah, so I went, right on 42nd Ave. and Broadway, Father Duffy's monument. There is a big USO thing. You could get tickets for anything. There was a free Pepsi-Cola centre, you could drink all the Pepsi-Cola you wanted for nothing. You know, you bought a sandwich or something but all the Pepsi-Cola centre. There was even free telephone calls for people too, if you wanted. There was a Bell Telephone thing for servicemen. I went to that famous Metropol, you know the Metropol. You know that song, the Metropol is a big thing. And so I met a sergeant there, American Army. And he says, "Do you want to travel with me? I'm going back this evening to Fort Dix. I'll show you where to go." So...

(End of Side A)

(Side B)

Ernest: I was on the 80th floor when I left there, 77th, you know. They were all on that job, these Caughnawaga guys.

Christine: On the Empire State Building?

Ernest: Yeah, on the Empire State. So, we went all the way down. He says, "Let's go and see where he fell then." Where one of those big trucks had washed the street and you could see right on the curb, you could see almost like, looked liked flesh. I guess he splattered. Usually all the other suicides hit the ledges you know, it's like this. But this one somehow he cleared everything right down. That's over a 1000 feet onto that concrete. So this sergeant was a mouthy guy and there was a cop. I says, "Where did he hit?" "Oh, right about there," he says "on Thoity-thoid." You know them Brooklyn, "thoity-thoid street." This big cop. He says, "My friend here saw him jump." Right away he takes out a note. Oh, this is just, oh, what do you call it. This is nothing, you don't have to be called, it was just...

Tony: For a witness?

Ernest: Yeah, just, and I wrote my name down. Asked me about that, looked at my patch and that was it. We left. That's when I left him right there, this American. So I pick up the paper in the evening and my name is there.

Tony: In the paper?

Ernest: It says that a Canadian soldier on leave, my name is there, yelled a warning to the people. I was up there. Not on the street.
Tony: You yelled a warning to them down below?

Ernest: No, I was on the, I yelled a warning from the street. See, I was up there, not on the... I guess he turned this over to the reporter, the cop maybe, police reporter. So I made my name at least one time on the front page of the New York Times. And I sent that clipping home, but I wish I had it today. Yeah. It had an arrow and marked how he fell. So, I stayed around there for a while and then I come back. Then that's when I came home.

Oh, I didn't come home after I got my discharge either. I, Jackie Robinson, the first black player to ever play in the big leagues, he was playing for Montreal in the International. So this is part of history, sports history. So I got my discharge and I had backtracked. I got my ticket home. I backtracked to Montreal and they were playing in this old Delormier stadium in Lafontaine Park. Not this, that's even before Jarry Park. And I saw Jackie Robinson play a double-hitter against Toronto and he run wild. He got a hit, stole second. I was up there, I could see him coming down exactly below. He stole third and then he took such dangerous leads that the pitcher balked and they waved him in. So he went around. He terrified me, the leads he'd take, you know. So I saw, I'm glad I can always say, that's history, the first black. Did you ever see that movie, the Jackie Robinson Story?

Both: No.

Ernest: That's touching. Very touching. He's dead; he died pretty bitter. But he broke the barrier so I went there just for that. And I'm not sorry either because I can always say that. So then, I came home after all.

Christine: Then you were ready to come home?

Ernest: Then I came home and I just stayed around here, worked. Odd jobs. Worked for Priddle and Ontario Paper, Water and Timber. Very low wages but we were playing baseball; that's what I enjoyed. We had a team in the league. Then I...

Christine: Oh, I was going to ask you how it felt coming back here after all that? After all those adventures?

Ernest: Well, I don't know. I was glad to come back. Glad to get away from all that. Just too many people. Then I played hockey for a few years here, senior hockey. I played, probably that fact, too. I played in the first Indian team to ever have won a championship on the island and we won three years in a row. That was always a great thing. It was such a great feeling to win. We were the first to ever do it. We had a very exceptional player. You know this young Danny Simon that's here? His dad was Detroit property. That's how great he was and he really carried us actually, you know. There has never been anybody like him. And so that was one of my great memories in Wikwemikong because it was a triumph of another
kind over these people here. It was a very great feeling.

Tony: Yes, sure. Probably that sense of achievement that you feel after being put down for so long.

Ernest: Yeah, that's the thing. And those places, those old arenas were just packed. And the abuse they'd heap on us in Little Current, you know. It was pretty vicious. And we didn't have that, as much contact with whites socially as they do now. Now these kids, you know, they go to school together, they go around together, nobody says no... They marry; some intermarry now. I mean, there is no really... they never saw that then. Except our star player. A lot of white girls writing letters to him because he was such a... this Simon was such a great hockey player. And I remember years later, about 21 years later when I come home from Chicago, Wikki (Wikwemikong) won again after 21 years, the first team. So they beat out Gore Bay. And my brother Francis, he played on the line with me. By the way, Francis, my brother has one of those Tom Longboat medals they used to award to Indian athletes. So, and he says, "Let's go down to the dressing room and go and congratulate the boys, you know. We're from the last other team." And I remember Ronny's dad, Wakegijig, he had tears in his eyes and he says, "The last time this happened," he says, "when you two were here," he says. And to show you the difference in attitudes and the way people act. We were so subdued, our gang, you know. We were just happy, you know, we were laughing and there was no drinks there. Just plain happy. Some supporters are there, they're half shot. And then we went to parties after that in the village. But here, these guys were just screaming and yelling and pouring beer and drinking just, you know, they don't contain their emotions anymore like we did. Just the difference. Yeah. And now our team, West Bay, has done it four years in a row now. So, it's just a matter of... it's no big thing anymore.

Tony: No big thing.

Ernest: Yeah, yeah.

Tony: Can we pause for a minute?

Ernest: Yeah.

Tony: All right, this is now February 17 and we're continuing now our conversation with Ernest Debassigae in the Ojibway Cultural Foundation in West Bay on Manitoulin Island. I think when we finished yesterday, Ernest, you had just finished talking about the hockey game that you guys had won, the first team that had won. And there had been some repeated successes fairly recently.

Ernest: Yeah.

Tony: Did you stay around on the island much longer after that?

Ernest: Not too long. I worked over on the north shore when
this uranium boom started. A lot of construction, a lot of work. And just about everybody on the island worked over there. But I finally got a job in Cutler. They had a sulphuric acid plant, Noranda mines, and I worked there for three years. Then after it closed up, I came and spent about a year home and then I drifted over to Chicago. There were quite a few boys in Chicago.

Tony: From here?

Ernest: Yeah, and then I spent almost ten years in Chicago. Then my family broke up, so I came back home for another year and a half and I started drifting. I didn't care. I wanted to do some travelling. I drifted here and there. Back to Chicago, to New Orleans. Hung around there for a few months. Pretty well stranded there, you know. And I worked for a painter, I worked odd jobs. Even worked on the river and don't, don't ever let anybody tell you it's the romantic Mississippi. It's the worst job I ever had. You tie these barges up together. Up to forty, you get these cables, ratchets, and tie them together and the tugs push them up the Mississippi right up to St. Louis. It's grain and whatever, whatever they got. And I worked, I remember working, I worked 13 hours and I cleared $18. New Orleans is full of these labor pools and they'd take most of your money. It's a bad system. I hear they've got them in Canada now and I think it's a bad thing. It's just to exploit people.

Tony: How do they take your money?

Ernest: Well, take, well, you go there. These companies, they send their requests over to these people. And these people lined up mostly. And they send you out and they take the biggest part of your cheque. You know, they just give you a little bit.

Tony: They take a large percentage of your pay?

Ernest: Yeah, that's it. So, I think that's a bad thing.

Tony: What were you doing in Chicago before you went, when, you say you lived there for three years?

Ernest: You mean after I left the reserve again?

Tony: Well, after you left the reserve you went down there. Were you married when you left there?

Ernest: My family broke up while we were in Chicago, last year.

Tony: But you went down there with them from...?

Ernest: From here, yeah. Most of my, that's why my kids lost their language because although my wife and I spoke Indian in the house, their playmates.... I sent my kids to a Catholic school. Tell you an interesting story about that. I, although I was not a churchgoer hardly anymore, but somehow my mother
was very religious. So, maybe out of her memory, I made sure that my kids went to a Catholic school. My first neighborhood, St. Bonny, St. Boniventures. And I remember, but I liked the discipline. One time, before I went to work, I went over there on the afternoon to pay for some books. I got a notice to pay for books. And right away a woman come and ask me - I was sitting on the fence, on a low fence and she came over and asked me what I was doing. And I said, "I'm waiting for recess. I have to pay for books." See, they had a woman, an old lady, just walking around watching there was no molesters. So that just shows you how well the separate schools operated. And there was a lot of discipline, too.

It cost me money. If I had sent them to a public school which most of the other people did, it wouldn't have cost anything. But this way it cost me and I could barely afford it but I felt better and the kids felt better because they had a uniform. And then we moved out of that neighborhood and we went to, it used to be a German neighborhood and still a lot of Germanic names around that area. And this one was St. Alphonse. It was Redemptorist, the church was Redemptorist Fathers. And that was even stricter. It cost me more because before, the kids could just wear a certain kind of shirt. There, the whole uniform had to be, you had to get it from a certain supplier, too. I remember my little girl, Cecile, her outfit alone cost more than my other two boys that were going there because of the plaid skirts. It cost more I imagine. And they were proud to go there. And what sounded so funny to me, my daughter comes home one time and she says, "Daddy, are we Indians?" I guess they made a big fuss over her, the sisters. She was the first Indian girl to ever go to school there. So they made, they introduced her to the class. And that's the first time she knew she was Indian. Because we lived in a neighborhood, it was mostly a real hodge podge. Syrians, Czechoslovaks, Italians, and everybody was speaking different languages and I guess she thought she was a Polack. (laughs)

So, and another thing, a nice thing happened to my boys, Terry and Wayne. They have a custom in Chicago where the Archbishop or them, takes two boys from each parish and they give them a present of clothes and usually, I guess they find out if they come from a poor family, too. I think that's one of the things. But I think the reason they picked my boys is they were the first Indians. Naturally you're always poor. If you're Indian, you're considered poor. So, they took my boys. They didn't go to school that day and they went to a Sears store, one of the top floors, and they met a lot of celebrities in the city. This Cardinal that died, Cody, he was there. They brought home a baseball autographed by Cody. I think he was Archbishop. I don't think he was Cardinal yet. They had just transferred this man from New Orleans. He made the headlines one time by excommunicating a very big Cajan woman, you know, because of this segregation thing. And so, I'm sorry I haven't got those balls. The kids started playing around outside with them. I'd liked to have kept one. And they came home. They had new suits, shirts, ties, top coats,
shoes, all this. That's a custom, tradition in Chicago. So, that's one benefit I got from sending them there.

Tony: What did you do there?

Ernest: I worked in a candy factory. That's where some of our boys were working. They started there and then they drifted to other jobs. And I just stuck there, I didn't have time to go out and look for something better. I hated the place but I worked in the wrapping section. Partly in the wrapping, shipping too. They were very closely tied. So, you know, in order to - I always wanted to leave that job and find something that payed a little more but I couldn't take time out. Like some people would take time out or their wives would be working. But I just stuck to it. It was miserable. After my family left, we broke up, I tried to stay another year. I almost stayed another year. But one night on my way to work, I made up my mind to quit. So I got a little jag on. So I could tell my boss. I told him off and I quit. I went home. That's one of the happiest moments of my life. You know, I felt like there was a hundred pounds left my shoulders. And I came into the bar, I says, "I thought you gone to work?" "No, I quit." And everybody bought me a drink. (chuckles) So I had to stay around for my profit-sharing to come through. It took about a month. The First National Bank. So I worked with a painting gang. A lot of Indian boys there from West Bay, working there. So I stuck with them until I got my profit-sharing. As soon as I got it, that was shortly before Christmas, then I got it and I came home and I stayed around for a year and a half.

Tony: Why were there so many people from West Bay in Chicago?

Ernest: I've mentioned this several times. Here, like we were the, pardon the expression, we were the red niggers of America. Like this Lemieux, FLQ wrote. He wrote a book called THE WHITE NIGGERS OF AMERICA, the Quebec people. We were the last hired, first fired type of people.

Tony: Around the area here.

Ernest: Around the area, yeah. We had like this boat loading, dirty jobs. And when they start paying high wages, they let us all go, you know. Good conditions, good food, they let us go. So that's one of the reasons that, and gradual exodus to the States because we could cross the border without any problem. And some went to Lansing, quite a few in Michigan, in Lansing. And a lot of the boys, there is still some, cut pulp in Michigan in lumber camps. Now they live in trailers and mostly move. There is still quite a few, especially from Wikki (Wikwemikong) still around Michigan cutting pulp. And I think this is the main reason, economic reasons, you know. You hated it, I hated Chicago. But it was a place to make a living. And you felt there was less prejudice there than say, if you went to Toronto. You know, you felt they were more open. You could buy a drink, too. You know, in the States, that's one attraction.
Christine: You still couldn't get a drink up here?

Ernest: No, not then. I think it was 1953, no, they were already, just in bars I believe. In order to bring liquor in, there were referendums later on. I think right up till today up north they haven't accepted that yet. So, but I've said that. I've ruffled some feelings. I've always said here we've suffered doubly here on Manitoulin. We're predominantly Catholic, the reserves, especially West Bay and Wikki (Wikwemikong) in a strictly Protestant area, you know. And then because of the fact that we're Indians so that's... we've suffered twice, you know. So, I've always said it doesn't matter, it really doesn't matter even if you were educated. It doesn't matter how much you know, it's who you know. What color you are, what church you belong to and especially if you have that certain ring on your finger.

Tony: The masonic ring.

Ernest: The masonic ring, that counts a lot. When I worked in Cartwright, a guy come in to step in, have a better job over you and I usually noticed he had that on. But last summer, I met a Mohawk. He used to be chief of Tyendinaga in Belleville, he visits my brother once in a while and he, and there was a salesman in there from the island, an autoparts salesman. A very fine man. And he noticed that, he had that ring and this Indian had it. And down in among the Mohawks, they have very strong masonic lodges and this Mel Hill from Tyendinaga said they have the finest initiation team in southern Ontario. The masonic lodge. So, they have always been with the, pretty well mixed in with the establishment, the Mohawks. Because they've had more intimate contact with whites, I guess, from way back. And being Protestant too, you know. We've been all right maybe in Quebec but I don't know of any Knights of Columbus Indians either.

(all laugh)

Ernest: I think one of my cousins in Chicago told me he belonged to the Knights of Columbus. But, in a way, it was for the better because when you don't go anyplace, your world is so very narrow. We went away and our people, their eyes were opened up. You know, they got a wider view of things. And I think another thing that we benefitted, our cuisine is a lot more sophisticated and varied today. Because, where we just lived on macaroni soup and, you know, just meat and potatoes here, people started eating pizzas and all this Mexican food and all this. And we gradually all come back. Almost all of us have come back here. There is still a few out, back in Chicago. And we've brought all these things back. You can go to our little stores here and you'll see all these. We may eat more varied fare than the white community because of our contacts with outside people. And I think you'll find our people quite interesting because they've been around an awful lot, right across Canada, all across the States. We'll get
together, some of us, we've been all over. At least we're not dull when we get together. You know, just talking about last year's crops and having to bring in wood and all this small talk that people that never go anywhere indulge in. You know, so it has its good points.

Christine: Did you tend to live close to one another in places like Chicago or to work at the same places?

Ernest: Yeah, in a way, we kind of - we were in a general, all in one general area. And we got together quite often. I spoke Indian all the time. Like over the weekend, I'd visit and go to a bar where all my hangout, and you'd visit one another. So, I remember just, I remember the FBI coming to my place. One of our boys had registered for the draft or, I don't know how he got mixed up in this. So I guess they all know where you... I don't know how they found me or who sent them to my place and this was in the morning. I was steady 4 to 12 all the years. I was on their 4 to 12 shift. So, two guys knocked on the door and showed me they're FBI. I wondered what was going on. He says, "Do you know Leroy Courvier?" "Yes." "Could you tell us where he is? You know, he is a draft dodger, for not reporting." "Yes, I know where his dad lives." "Could you show us?" So we started talking Indian. Well, I told my wife, "Well, I'm going to go with these people." And I asked them, "Can my little girl come?" "Sure." So, we went, as we were going to the car. And they said, "That language, what was that?" "Well, we're Indians." You know, those FBI agents thought there was no more Indian spoken.

Tony: Is that right.

Ernest: These are FBI people. And this was kind of an old car and that area, the way it was fixed, it was bent over and we went over there and I stayed in the car. Just showed them where the house was. And they were so paranoid you know, they were, "Do you need me or this and that you know, do you need me?" You know, they think Indians are all violent people. Here these FBI agents terrified of going in. "Should I go with you?" Yeah, so I don't know. He wasn't there. That's just an example of the paranoia of the people. That the stereotype. Because you killed Custer, every Indian is violent.

Tony: What happened to this lad who was accused of being a draft dodger? Did they ever...?

Ernest: I don't know. I met him after a while but I never, I don't think they, maybe ever got him, or just didn't bother with him. He was killed later on. Maybe murdered. He fell down some steps and I heard they found him but he may have been killed. I know about two out of our boys that were killed down there. You know, there is no proof. And these police they just want to, well, it costs a lot of money to do investigating. Just say he died of natural causes even if he's been beat up. Yeah.
Christine: Who was doing the beating up, do you think?

Ernest: I don't know. You never know.

Tony: So where'd you go after Chicago? You came back here for a while?

Ernest: Yeah, I came back here for a while and I just thought I'd...

Tony: When was that? What year are we talking about now?

Ernest: Well, this is the time I went to San Francisco. You know, by way of New Orleans. You know, I thought when I went back, I come up here and stayed for a year and a half and then I....

Tony: You took the direct route, eh?

Ernest: Yeah, I had a bartender, my old bartender. I met, I ran into my old bartender.

Tony: How do you mean your old bartender?

Ernest: There was an Irish bartender. I used to swab the bar for him. He used to let me have the...

Tony: Whereabouts?

Ernest: In Chicago. So he used to give me the keys Saturday. He trusted me enough and I cleaned up there and that. And this time when I went back, he says, "I'm going to New Orleans." Since he sold his bar, that was his main thing, bartending, he'd work in these resorts. He'd work up in the summertime, he'd come back and these resorts were in Minnesota, bartending. Then in the wintertime he'd go south and work these rich clubs, you know, country clubs. They make pretty good money. So they said, "Do you want a ride to New Orleans?" "Sure," and that's how we got down there. Just said good-bye to them there and that was it. And I drifted around there. I didn't like it. But I was at two tragic, I witnessed two tragic incidents while I was there. This incident, they had one black fellow that had everybody, had the whole city tied up for a couple of days there on top of the Howard Johnson Motel. They used a helicopter and gunship to kill him. Do you remember that?

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Ernest: I remember sitting in the restaurant and the door was open. And I'm watching it on television. Nobody could go downtown to work because he was firing, he killed about three people. I think they were all cops. The one, he killed a second and then they tried to rush him but he got him. And I was watching this on TV and you could hear the machine guns going from the gunship. And you could look out the door and
see the same thing. You know, the television.

And then there was a fire, this was really tragic. There was a fire and mostly women, some jumped from the top and got killed

on the street. Some tried to jump on the adjoining building. I think they were badly hurt. I know one aftermath of this, there was some jewelry stolen by security people, security. I guess they figured well, during the fire we'll steal. But they were caught. That's the security. I noticed there was no such thing as an Indian Centre down there. No Indians at all in New Orleans. I guess there used to be, maybe farther south. But, and then I thought I'd get moving. I have a cousin in Phoenix but the phone number that I had been given, I guess he'd moved. He's still there so I just stayed in Phoenix for a day, well just for the whole day and I caught the later bus. I went to a couple of Indian hangouts and I asked about him but I guess he didn't go to these places. Then I hopped on the bus and went all the way to L.A. And I got there with just very little money. And that just hits skid row. That's where I always went. You know, I hung around skid row. I stayed in a mission near the bus station and I sold my blood. I got used to selling blood after a while.

Tony: Did you do that often?

Ernest: I did that when I was broke. Some people who will booze things or steal things but this way, well.... I sold my blood sixty-six times. That's plasma. In New Orleans, I broke my rib, cracked ribs. I guess I got drunk and I don't know what happened. One fellow told me, this was in a bar restaurant, and I had an argument with a couple of guys and they had a fight and I fell on that, they got a lot of these railings there, fancy railings. And I fell on top of that and I was really in pain. So I couldn't do anything, so I sold blood three times a week, once here, there, the plasma. So, that kept me alive until I straightened out and then I started hitting these day things. Whole blood you're only allowed to sell every two months and I did that. And I did the same thing twice in L.A. And the thing is, there is jobs. You could find jobs but the problem is you have to have money to have a room in order to stay but I didn't have any of that, you know. I didn't know where to start. I went to these, you know, where they hire for the farms.

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Ernest: And the only thing open at that time was the lemon and this Mexican told me, he says, "If you haven't done that, I wouldn't want to hire you because it's a bad job. You know, you have to wear gloves and it's sharp. It's all right for somebody that's done it before." But at least he was honest. But I guess if it was certain, if it was some other time... I got in the wrong time. I would have probably worked with the Mexicans in the fields. So I hung around there. I stayed in
the mission. And I met a real, a guy that really knew that area, skid row. He was a retired army. He lived in Santa Barbara but for some reason he picked up his cheque there just so he could come to L.A. Stosh, a Polish guy. And we stayed in that mission and we'd go from place to place. He knew where there were cheap coffee and he knew so many bums he'd always get enough for the two of us, enough for coffee. You get a nickel coffee here or stale doughnuts for a nickel. We'd go to MacArthur Park, you know, a lot of people hang around MacArthur Park. There was a song, who put it out? MacArthur Park. One of these..

Tony: I remember that but I couldn't tell you who wrote it.

Ernest: Yeah, it's old people playing shuffle board. A lot of characters. I remember there was a guy set up shop every day. Well dressed, neck tie and everything and he put up a sign and all he did was test your blood pressure, $.50. All dressed up like a doctor. And people come along, old people, want to find that out. All kinds of funny characters, you know. This guy was a character and I guess he thought I was a character too, maybe. So I wanted to get out of there. So I just hit the highway, I got to get out of there, I was going to Canada, British Columbia. Never seen British Columbia. Maybe it would be better getting back to Canada. I'm getting sick of the States. So, I hitch-hiked. I got as far as Santa Barbara, no St. Louis - let's see, I forget these little towns I was in. And I just slept outside. There was a little mission there but I was able to eat and then I kept going and I got a ride to Santa Barbara. And that's a rich man's town you know. University town and rich men. They don't want bums. They are very careful that there's no bums there. There is kind of a little jungle where the train goes by and everything was too fast, we couldn't jump. So there was a Peyote Indian. We got shook down. The police come around, they shook us down.

Tony: Where were you?

Ernest: Near the... right where the train goes by in Santa Barbara.

Tony: A little hovel there or something?

Ernest: There is not, it's very neat around there, just like a shed. And oh, like a porch and that's where we'd sit, some trees around there. They just came to see what we were doing, what we were going. And they shook us down to see if we were carrying anything. They were very polite though, those cops.

So this Peyote says, "If you want to get out, I've tried to hitch-hike here. Nobody pick you up." So I went to... oh, this Peyote says, "You go to welfare." Boy that's a nice place there, too. And they give us coffee and I was with another young guy. He says, "I'll travel with you." "Okay," well, I went along with him because he's supposed to know California. Okay. And...
Tony: This an Indian guy?

Ernest: No, this is a white kid. And I didn't know, he told me that he was, he had run away from one of these minimum security camps, you know. So, they called me. They didn't call him, they called me. One of them motioned me and we went outside, there was a space between these two buildings and he says, "I imagine you're just trying to get out of town, eh? I used to get a lot of them." "Yeah, that's what I want. I can't get out. Hitch-hiked. We'd like to go someplace where we could catch a freightline to get up north." So they fixed us two tickets.

Tony: Who was this?

Ernest: This guy that worked in the welfare. And not a penny extra. Just what the bus fare from there to St. Louis or Division Point. That's where they changed crews. The train has got to stop. And I was hoping that he would give us something, some money to eat. No, just get out, you know. Just, that's a clean town. A very pretty town. Right on the ocean. There is a beautiful mission up there. I would like to see but I got bad memories. I never want to see that place again. So we got there and we caught a freight, a gondola, a hell of a ride under those tunnels. You know, pretty smoky and dirty. Then we hit Santa Claire and from there hitch-hiked into San Francisco. And my usual thing, blood. He followed me. He said that was the first time he sold plasma.

And just to show you how corrupt this business is, this blood business is a dirty business. I've heard the island of Haiti lives entirely on blood exports to the United States. Jack Anderson had that in his column. And what the people don't realize that get blood, most of those people are blacks. And poor Mexicans and poor Indians and poor white people. And say you get five dollars for that plasma. And maybe they sell it for a pretty hefty price to the people that need it. And what people do. You fill in a card. They just ask you questions. Have you ever had hepatitis? Well, you know damn well you're desperate, everybody lies. If they had syphilis or hepatitis, you lied. And everybody lies so people get contaminated blood I guess all the time. So, and what shocked me there, the nurse says to the doctor, "The blood count machine doesn't work.

What will I do? What will we do?" "Oh, just take the average." See, that's to test your blood count. They didn't give a damn. And I know there's....

Tony: Because you could have been anemic, (inaudible).

Ernest: And all these nurses up there seemed to be all Philippino nurses, little wee nurses. I noticed that all over. They are going heavily for nursing, those Philippinos. And I went to a place where they got a bed and that's another, the very worst part of town. And these, most of the people that run these cheap, run-down hotels are from India. And I saw
write-ups of them in California paper later on. They are a clan. All their names end in Patel and their business, they are very greedy business-type people. Every one of them is Patel. And when I was in the hospital an insurance man told me they had an awful lot of fires by them, too. And I can't eat, I don't like curry. Don't ever feed me a dish with curry because the whole place smells like curry and you smell like curry. And when I got in there, I am so tired, they don't even give you a key. And that trash, the human trash in there just... you could tell, you know. Dope and just crazy, some nuts you know. So I wanted to sleep. No key. So what I did to ensure I had a good sleep, I lined up everything, my bed and a dresser. There is no way they could, they would have to move the wall out. Then I had a good sleep. I got out of there and I went to a travellers' aid...

(End of Side B)

(End of Interview)

INDEX

INDEX TERM                  IH NUMBER      DOC NAME      DISC #      PAGE #

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES
 -Catholic                   IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       19,20

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES
 -attitudes toward          IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       21,22

DISCRIMINATION
 -against Indians           IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       21

EDUCATION
 -attitudes toward          IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       19,20

SPORTS
 -hockey                     IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       16,17

WORK
 -for wages                  IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       18,20

WORK
 -unemployment               IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       25,26,27

WORLD WAR II
 -army life                  IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       5-10

WORLD WAR II
 -overseas experiences      IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       2-4

WORLD WAR II
 -treatment of returning veterans IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       11-14

PROPER NAME INDEX

PROPER NAME       IH NUMBER      DOC NAME      DISC #      PAGE #

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  IH-OM.03A      DEBASSIGAE 2   78       18-23