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KNOCKING ON AMERICA'S DOOR AT ELLIS ISLAND

When Ellis Island opened as a new immigration point of entry on January 1, 1892, immigration to America had been underway for three hundred years, or, in other words, since the "discovery" of the New World. What singles out Ellis Island is the fact that today about 100 million Americans can trace their ancestry through this processing station.

It is not numbers alone that make Ellis Island so special. Its location within the sight of the Statue of Liberty, which for a lot of immigrants was a moving symbol of freedom in whose name they left their native countries, as well as the New York waterfront evoked hopes of economic prosperity to those who left their homes because of poverty, unemployment, or even starvation.

Out of 12 million immigrants who were processed on Ellis Island during the years of its operation 1892 - 1954, about 2% (240,000) were denied entry to the country and deported. Many more, however, (about 20%), were detained

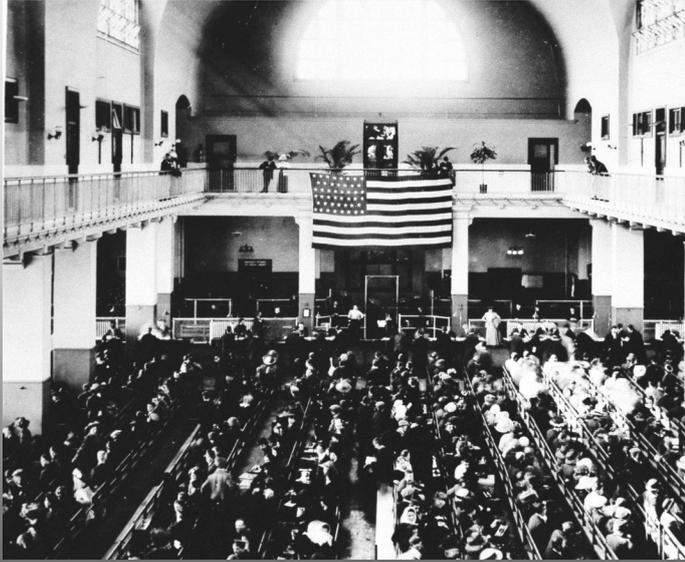
for days or weeks. Detainees lived in dormitories. They slept in high-tiered bunks, ate their meals at incredibly long tables in refectories that could feed 1,000 people at a time. Their children went to makeshift schools. They had hope, but they also experienced misgivings and uncertainty. The anxiety of detainees and unhappiness of the rejected earned Ellis Island a nickname: "Island of Tears."

Even though there were immigration centers in other major cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Miami and New Orleans, Ellis Island held a unique place. However, after its closure in 1954 it was neglected until the 1980s. Fortunately, this important chapter in American history was not lost thanks to a major renovation project, the largest in U.S. history, costing \$160 million, which turned the old Registry Hall into the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Each year 2 million tourists come to see the island on which the future of 12 million people was once decided.



*Ellis Island is pictured with part of the New York City skyline, left, in the background
Photo © AP Images*

EVERYDAY LIFE OF ELLIS ISLAND



Immigrants in the Great Hall on Ellis Island, Photo © AP Images



Main building, Photo © AP Images



Lunch, Photo © AP Images



Immigrants, Photo © AP Images

Work on Ellis Island continued from 9:00 in the morning to 7:00 in the evening seven days a week. Inspectors questioned 400 to 500 immigrants in any single day. But the immigration process did not begin on Ellis Island. It started in ports of embarkation where the so-called ship's manifest logs were filled in for the immigrants. They included immigrants' answers to twenty-nine questions such as name, occupation, and the amount of money they had.

It was in the ship company's interest that all the passengers aboard be granted entry. In case of deportation, the company had to pay for the trip back and later a \$100 fine was imposed on it for each rejected applicant.

Those immigrants who traveled in first or second class on steamships underwent the required immigration procedure during the crossing and once their ship anchored in New York, they simply disembarked, walked through Customs and proceeded to their destinations. Those who could afford a more expensive ticket were not considered likely "to become a public charge" in the new country.

Third class passengers and those who, for the lack of money, traveled on the cheapest class of tickets, in so-called steerage (these were the lowest decks on ships which once housed steering mechanism but were turned into stuffy, packed dormitories with insufficient sanitary facilities when the sailing ships were upgraded to steamships.) as well as others who fell sick or showed signs of a serious illness during the voyage, were all directed to Ellis Island. They had to stay on board until Ellis Island was ready to process a new group of immigrants when harbor ferries carried them to the island.

Dressed in their "Sunday best," immigrants finally disembarked and, carrying their possessions in bundles, trunks, and boxes, walked to the main building. The immigration

procedure lasted about five hours. Immigrants had numbered tags pinned to their clothes with information about the manifest page and line number on which their names appeared. They could leave their luggage in the Baggage Room and then climbed up the steep stairs on their way to the Great Hall. Along the way they were examined by doctors and questioned by inspectors, who admitted or rejected their entry or decided that their cases required further investigation. The sick were sent to the island's hospital. Those who were rejected could write appeals which were considered by the Commissioner.

Doctors, and especially eye doctors, were feared most since the main reason for rejections were contagious diseases and other health problems. In the 19th century a serious eye illness, trachoma, which led to blindness and death, was common in Europe. If they discovered symptoms of that infection through turning the eyelid inside out with fingers or a button hook, the eye-doctors would mark the immigrant's clothes with the letters "CT" in blue chalk. That was an almost certain sign of rejection. Some immigrants secretly wiped off the marks or turned their clothes inside out.

In the peak years hundreds of thousands of immigrants arrived. In the record year - 1907 - their number exceeded one million. Most immigrants came from Italy, Russia, Hungary, Austria, Austria-Hungary (1892-1904), Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Greece, Norway, the Ottoman Empire, Scotland, the West Indies, Poland, Portugal, and France. In the 1920s, with the introduction of the Quota Laws and the National Origins Act, fewer and fewer immigrants came. In 1953 there were just 230 detained immigrants on Ellis Island. Given falling numbers it was decided to close the immigration offices, which happened on November 19, 1954.

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ELLIS ISLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO FILM



Bob Hope (right), Photo © AP Images



Cary Grant Photo © AP Images



Rudolph Valentino Photo © AP Images

Fame awaited many immigrants behind the doors of Ellis Island. Careers as musicians, politicians, singers, composers, sportsmen, etc. awaited talented immigrants in their new country. The world of movies would not be what it is without Rudolph Valentino, Bob Hope, or Cary Grant, all of whom immigrated to the United States.

A great star of silent movies, Rudolph Valentino, was born in Italy in 1895. He went to America at the age of 18 and was processed on Ellis Island. Cary Grant was two years younger when he arrived in the United States from England with a troupe of comedians and acrobats in 1920. Bob Hope moved from England with his family when he was only four years old.

Though great and glamorous careers awaited all of them, they all began from scratch, personifying the myth of the American dream. Valentino started with odd jobs like a landscape gardener, a dishwasher and waiter, and a taxi driver, before he began working as a nightclub dancer and tango partner at dance halls and cabarets, which finally paved his way to the movie business. By 1920, when Cary Grant arrived in the U.S., Valentino had appeared in 17 films and was about to take up a role that earned him fame and saved Metro Pictures Corporation from bankruptcy: *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

Cary Grant first worked as a barker and still walker. He got his first real role in the Golden Dawn theatre in 1927. His characteristic style of elegance, wit and sophistication did not go unnoticed and he was given leading roles with such famed actresses of the time as Marlene Dietrich (in *Blond*), Mae West (in *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel*),

Irene Dune (in *The Awful Truth*), Rosalind Russell (in *His Girl Friday*), and Katherine Hepburn (in *Holiday*).

Bob Hope sold newspapers, worked as a delivery boy, soda jerk, shoe salesman, and even as a boxer, before he took dancing lessons and discovered he could entertain audiences. Equipped with a big cigar and bowler hat as his props, he toured the country with his comedy act in the early 1930s climbing his way to the top in vaudeville and then he was cast in leading roles in Broadway productions: *Say When*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, and *Red, Hot and Blue*.

Sudden death from peritonitis and a perforated ulcer cut short Rudolph Valentino's career in 1926 when he was just 31. A cult of personality formed around him after his premature death and he is still considered one of the most powerful actors of the silent movies.

Bob Hope lived to be a hundred and all the way through his long career he maintained a prominent position as a comedian and entertainer. He was a radio and TV personality and had monthly comedy "specials" for NBC. He appeared in numerous films and made countless appearances for America's military members. In recognition of his commitment, he was made "Honorary Veteran" by an act of Congress. Hope is mentioned in *The Guinness Book of Records* as "the most honored entertainer in the world" with more than 2,000 awards and honors.

Cary Grant was faithful to the image he created in his early career though his work with Alfred Hitchcock added a tinge of mystery and ambiguity to it. Grant was one of few actors of the time powerful enough to choose their own roles, directors, and co-stars.

ACTIVITY PAGE

■ Exercise 1 Comprehension

On the basis of articles on p.2 and p.3 decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F).

1. Inspectors on Ellis Island worked 10 hours per day Monday through Friday.
2. Immigrants who were rejected had their tickets back home paid for.
3. Immigration procedures for first and second class passengers were carried out aboard the ships.
4. Inspectors feared that poor and sick immigrants might become a financial burden for the country.
5. Eye doctors were feared most because their examination was painful.
6. The number of immigrants on Ellis Island was never higher than a million a year.
7. The most immigrants on Ellis Island were Poles.
8. Rudolph Valentino was born before Cary Grant but after Bob Hope.
9. Bob Hope immigrated to the United States at the youngest age of the three actors.
10. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* improved the financial situation of Metro studios.
11. Hope's TV series were not as successful as his radio programs.
12. Grant chose his directors and the roles he played in.

■ Exercise 2

- A. Work with another student. Act out a conversation between an immigration officer and a tourist who is coming to the country for a two-week stay.
- B. Work in a group of 4-5 students. Discuss the reasons why people decide to immigrate to another country. What should they consider before making the decision?

■ Glossary

(in the order of appearance)

process - (here) deal with using an official procedure

evoke - bring to mind

refectory - a room used for meals

makeshift - serving as temporary

contagious - spreading from one person to another

barker - person who stands in front of a theater and calls out to passersby

(from *The New Oxford American Dictionary*)

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