

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Irish Americans

Personal Experience

O H 1887

FATHER JOHN LYONS

Interviewed

by

Regina Welsch

on

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W This is an interview with Father John Lyons for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Regina Welsch, on August 27, 1997, at Father Lyons' home, at 1 15 p m

Father Lyons, we would like you to tell us about your family in Ireland.

L Okay I was born on June 4, 1921

W Where were you born?

L I was born in Ballyhaunis, County Mayo My dad was a farmer and a tax collector I went to a great school in Ballyhaunis

W How many brothers and sisters did you have?

L I had five There were six of us all together in the family, three boys and three girls, four of whom are deceased. I and my sister, Molly, are the only living members of the family

W Did any other members of your family join the religious?

L No, no. I went to Saint Jarlath's High School and College, and from there I went to Saint Patrick's seminary in Carlow County, Carlow. It is the oldest seminary in Ireland There were 32 of us in the ordination class of 1946, June 2 They were scattered all over the globe, and the English-speaking were like Australia Many of them were in America, England, Scotland, and some are in Wales I liked the seminary because it was better than high school and college because you had a goal There was not as much fighting among the kids as there was in high school and college We had a goal, and that was to become priests It was strict, but at the same time, we had a lot of fun We got up at 6:30 every morning, and every now and again we would get to sleep until 7 30 if there was a holiday or a holy day or whatever

My two brothers, Patrick and Richard, are deceased, and my sister, Noreen, who was married, Noreen Webb, and Nellie who was the oldest are deceased also. Now, where would I go from there?

W What about how you decided to come to Youngstown?

L Oh, yeah Okay How did I get to Youngstown? Okay I had a cousin, a priest, God rest him now Father Higgins was his name He was related to Bishop McFadden on the other side of the fence My father and his mother were brother and sister. With McFadden, he was related on the Higgins side of the fence

The diocese was established in 1943 He wrote to me and told me about

the new diocese being established and that he would tell Bishop McFadden of my existence. There were only three more years until I was ordained. So, Bishop McFadden said, "Fine Great We are going to need him." So, papers and all kinds of documents were signed because you could not get any of the minor orders or major orders unless you had a bishop who would be responsible for you. So, that all happened between the director of the seminary and Bishop McFadden. They corresponded quite often. As you might suspect, the telephone was not in as great a use as it is today.

After ordination, I could not get passage to the United States because of the huge waiting list. It was not until 1947 in May, the very beginning of May, that I got on a ship and came to New York.

W Where did you leave Ireland from?

L I left Ireland from the town that they used to sail from in those days, Cobh, in County Cork. It is spelled C-O-B-H. It was my first trip on a huge ship, and I enjoyed it immensely because I met a lot of people, beautiful people. There was another priest with me, Father Kriegen who is now deceased, and he was heading for San Diego, California. We had Mass onboard ship every morning, and there was a lot of entertainment, movies and people dancing. It was just like a massive hall out in the ocean.

W How long did this journey take?

L It took eight days. Eight days. Then I arrived in New York, and there were people who were related to me by proxy, if you want to call it that. I knew their family. They knew mine. Some of my family married into their family. They met me in New York, and I stayed with them at 101 Street for five days. They took me to the train to set me off for Cleveland because I wanted to visit my cousin there before reporting to Youngstown. So, Father Higgins met me at the station, and he had a paper under his arm. He said to me, "You are the luckiest guy in creation. The plane you tried to get on crashed."

W You may have been killed.

L Yeah. So, I spent five days with him, I think it was. Then he and another priest from Cleveland drove me down to Youngstown. I met Bishop McFadden, and he gave me my assignment. My first assignment was to Saint Ann's Church in Briar Hill. Saint Ann's is no longer there, of course. It gave way to a highway. I was in Saint Ann's for seven years. Then, I went to East Liverpool, then to Austintown. My first pastorate was Wellsville, two years, and then McDonald for five years.

In 1966, I was made pastor of Saint Joseph's Church in Austintown. The

bishop gave us fifteen acres of land and told me, "Go to it This is all yours " So, we had Mass in the Wedgewood Cinema for almost two years until the church, school, and rectory were completed In 1968, we had our first mass in the new Saint Joseph's Church Then, we had a regular schedule of masses The parish was growing, and we had to put on more masses from Sunday It was then that I was given an assistant, Father Timothy Kenney, who is now pastor of Saint Catherine's Church in Kent Then I had Father McCarthy for a while as an assistant Father Braun was there as an assistant That was it Oh, excuse me Father Trimbur was also there as an assistant

What I did at the beginning of Saint Joe's parish was I went out practically every day knocking on doors, every door in every area, to see who was Catholic and who was not I picked up a lot of families who were Catholic but were not registered, and I was warmly greeted by those who were not Catholic I blessed their homes So, it gave me a good idea of the people, the topography of the place, and at least it gave the people an opportunity to meet me and to talk to me If some of them had problems, we would sit down and talk greatly for an hour or longer. It could be financial It could be marital It could be child problems But, we did our best to come to some agreement to give them advice, which I thought was suitable at the time

One of my joys was seeing Joseph's school because I went to the school practically every day and went into a classroom to greet the kids and to teach religion I had a ball Of course, I was younger then At playtime, I would go out among the kids and especially the kindergarten and first graders, and people could hardly tell me from them But I had a good time with them I enjoyed them I just loved the life out of them I would go into class and put them on my knee and talk and tickle them They made me laugh We had a good time How long more do I have? Am I coming close to the end?

W We have all the time in the world When you first came to Saint Ann's, was there any bigotry against the Irish?

L No, no, I did not find any As a matter of fact, Saint Ann's was an Irish and Italian parish, and they got along very well They really did You had the little here and there, but not what people would expect I think it was probably the best integrated parish of two nationalities that I have ever been in

W That is an odd combination

L Yeah, it is But they were great They got along famously I did not find any problem at all You would an odd person, but it was minimal Okay Keep shooting questions now

W Has your family been over here to visit you?

L Yes My sister and my niece were over here for my 25th anniversary My nephew and his wife were here for my 50th anniversary last year It was great to have them We had a good time This year Monsignor Kelly and I are having a tour which begins in September, the eighteenth to the twenty-second. Then Monsignor Kelly and I are going to stay over When the tour is over, we are going to stay in Ireland until about the sixth of October Then we will be back in time for some of the Notre Dame games

W [Laughter] Do you still have family in Ireland?

L Yes I have my sister, Molly, who is in her early eighties

W Was she your housekeeper here for a while?

L Yes She is now in a retirement home over in Ireland not far from Ballyhaunis

W. Is Ballyhaunis where your niece owned a hotel?

L Yes

W We went there for lunch, remember?

L Oh, that is right You went with us Yes, yes

W After we had gone to the shrine.

L Yeah, yeah That is right That was Carmel, Carmel Vahey Yes, we had a meal in the Central Hotel Then we went to Knock, and we had Mass and had a short pilgrimage there. I think the people enjoyed that I think they did

W. I did

L So, that is mostly what we will be doing on this trip, too There was an interesting thing [that] happened when I was a young kid about Knock We, as young kids, maybe thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, we would walk to Knock and stay up all night until Mass in the morning. In those days, the only time you could have Midnight Mass was at Christmas But, thank God, things have changed So, we waited until the 7 00 Mass or whatever it was, and then we started to walk home

About a quarter of a mile from the shrine of Knock on our way home, I got this sudden idea Now I was with one of my brothers and two sisters and then some neighbor kids I got the idea, "Let us go in and see Aunt Mary Ann " She was my mother's sister, and the house was practically right on the road So, we

went in to see Aunt Mary Ann and her husband, Jim Connell, and we had breakfast, a good one Oh man, was it good We were starved Out of curiosity, I said to Uncle Jim, "Uncle Jim, how is your mother?" She was now in her nineties "Oh great, great," he said She was one of the fifteen who were witnesses to the apparition of Knock -- she was a young girl in 1879

W Wow!

L So I said, "Would it be okay to meet her?" He said, "Sure " So, he brought me up to her bedroom, and here is this adorable old lady Oh my, was she Oh, she was adorable The picture of a saint. Honest to John, she looked so saintly and so holy, and she recognized me. "You are Jack Lyons' son, are you not?" I says, "Oh yeah " "Were there many in Knock last night?" I says, "Oh, yes The place was crowded " I says, "Mrs Connell, I know you are tired and you forget Could you tell me a little about the apparition and what you saw?" "Well," she says, "I will Johnny." But she says, "I forget a lot now "

She says, "The most unforgettable event in my whole life I will never forget it There were fifteen I made up the fifteenth We were all young We were somewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth. Some were in the fifteenth and sixteenth, and there were a few who were in the eight, nine, and ten This particular night, this is in 1879, I think it was, there was a huge light in the end of the church, the gable of the church " Now, this was before they had electricity They kind of got scared They thought first of all the church might be on fire, and they walked slowly to it It was raining, which is nothing new in Ireland. Here they see a woman, a man, and a lamb They recognized her as being the Blessed Mother from pictures they had seen, and the man they recognized as Joseph They did not know what to make of the lamb, but evidently Jesus, the Lamb of God.

So, she told me of this, and her face was all lighted up You would think that she was looking at it again. Then she said to me, and I could see that she was getting a little tired, she says, "You know Johnny, I cannot wait to meet her again " And that was about the end of the experience

W What a beautiful story.

L Yeah, yeah So, I have been around somewhat [Laughter]

W I guess Well, they now have is quite a shrine built at Knock now

L Oh yeah It is a beautiful place. They have, independently of the church, fifty confessionals there The big day of the pilgrimage, of course, is the fifteenth of August, and they will have confession going on practically all night There will be thousands upon thousands there, and some people will walk as far as sixty to

eighty miles both ways to make their pilgrimage

W To make their pilgrimage

L Some of them do it fasting

W Wow! I was very impressed with the place Very impressed

L Yeah All they take will be water until they receive communion, and then they will have their breakfast in Knock.

W Well, my husband and I went on that trip to Ireland with you and Father Kelly about four years ago How many of those trips have you taken?

L This is going to be our fourth tour I think you were on the second or third

W Second, I think

L Yeah, yeah Yes, there was one in between This is going to be our fourth tour It is all filled with 47, counting Monsignor Kelly and myself There is 45

W We had quite a large group because we had two tour buses on the group we went

L That is right That is why we decided never again It was too cumbersome

W The having two buses?

L Yeah The people did not get to know one another

W Yes The people on bus A did not know the people on bus B Right

L So, we decided never again. But people were calling up and dogging us "Oh, get another bus We will fill it" So, that is what we did. It was not a wise thing We learned We learned Knock is one of my great loves

I would say also that this Mrs. Connell, God bless her, one of the witnesses to the apparition, she impressed me so much that I think that it might have been a short time after that that the thoughts of the priesthood entered my mind It was amazing. Okay Is that about it?

W Do you have anything else you want to add? No?

L I cannot think of anything to be honest with you Since I had the stroke, my

memory is pretty shot At names I am no good at all

W Well, we want to thank you very much for your time today, and we appreciate this interview.

End of Interview