

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Irish Americans

Personal Experience

O H 1890

THOMAS KELLY

Interviewed

by

Regina Welsch

on

August 14, 1997

W This is an interview with Thomas Kelly for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Irish Americans, by Regina Welsch, on August 14, 1997, at Monsignor Kelly's home, at 1 00 p m.

Monsignor Kelly, we would like you to tell us about your family in Ireland.

K Well, my family in Ireland consisted of my dad and mom, and three brothers and a sister

W Where were you born in Ireland?

K. I was born in a town by the name of Kilkerrin, Ballinasloe, County Galway

W Could you spell that for me?

K K-I-L-K-E-R-R-I-N Kilkerrin, County Galway C-O, period, G-A-L-W-A-Y

W Yeah

K Is that on now?

W. Yes, it is

K. No, really?

W Oh yes, it is

K Interesting.

W It is recording everything you are saying.

K I was born into a farm community There were about 400 families in the parish We knew them all, knew them all very well, and that is why an Irishman or a farmer is able to categorize a person's character and personality so quickly, because we knew so many people intimately That has always been a kind of a little thing that people have said about me, that I am a good judge of character, and I do not know why That is the reason, probably.

W And where do you fit in this Kelly family?

K I fit in second last Two brothers, a sister, myself and then a younger brother A little peculiar thing in my family is that my dad married when he was 53 years of age because he had his father and mother living with him, and a sister, in a small place. And then he had his sister who was married, and she and her husband died, leaving four young children So, he had to go three or four miles to take

care of their little farm or come back and take care of his, and he used to travel mostly at night. According to his story, he saw a lot of ghosts over there when he was going back and forth at night time. So then, he met my mother, who was 30 years younger. I was born when he was 61, and my brother was born when he was 64, my younger brother. He lived until after my ordination in 1947. He died in 1948. In those years, you did not even think of going back from here for a funeral.

W Right

K Then, my oldest brother was on the farm yet. They acquired more land and things like that. Now, they are living quite comfortably. His son is the farmer now, and everything is going fine. My sister joined the convent, and she became a mercy sister. She died there two years ago, and she was a tremendously good, and very holy, person. Even the bishop of the diocese came who never met her, never talked to her. He said his sister had so much to say about her from the convent where she was educated that he had to come to her funeral.

I worked on the farm. We took care of other people. I remember always bringing things to the widow woman who was next door. She had no means of support. If anyone died, the neighbors helped out on the farm, and their work was done as well as any other's work. So much so that I think that is part of my personality today, that I like people and I like to help people, because that is the training I got from my father and mother, and that was more or less the living conditions of the people. They helped each other. Not only would you inquire in the evening about how a person was feeling if they were sick, but you would inquire about their horse or their cow because they were so important to them. Very important. And if it died, there would be a collection taken up in the village to buy another horse or another cow because they could not afford to do it themselves.

We worked hard when we were young. We were not always praying. We were certainly always on our knees, weeding potatoes or other crops, or tinning them. All the power was in our hands. It was all hand tools, the fork, spade, shovel, the rake and everything like that. We worked from the early morning to night. No work on Sunday. No work whatsoever on Sunday, unless it was an emergency.

W Did you go into the village to school then?

K We went to the Fransiscan Brothers. It is not quite in the village, but just a little bit outside the village. The village consists of seven stores, and four of them are pubs. It was a crossroad, so you could go through very easily without realizing. So, I went to the Fransiscan Brothers then until I went to high school. We had to go away to high school because there was no local high school at the time. When kids were fourteen or fifteen years of age, they left school and worked on the farm or went off to England. So, I had to go to boarding school, which was

about twenty miles away, Saint Jarlath's College. That is part of my name, too. I went there for five years. It was a combination of college and high school. Then after Saint Jarlath's, I went on to All Hallows in Dublin to the seminary, and I was ordained in 1947 by Bishop Marshall, Salford, England

W When in this time did you decide to become a Roman Catholic priest?

K All along I had a tendency because I was reared to help people. If I did not have a vocation, my father certainly did. [Laughter] But I went to high school for this purpose and never changed my mind, and I am happy I did because it has been a very, very interesting life. You get into the lives of so many people. Times of baptisms, weddings, funerals, sad occasions, joyful occasions, and everything like that. Then people might come for advice or confession.

I think confession is one of the nicest things about the priesthood. People are burdened sometimes by very, very big things. It might be abortion. It might be murder. It might be anything. As Christ said, "Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven." We give people forgiveness and assure them that Christ has forgiven them. Then, they feel forgiven, and they do not have to go every single day saying to God, "Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me." They are forgiven. They live with a light heart, and they know it is all over. So, that is one of the nice things about being a priest.

W So, you were ordained in 1947?

K I was ordained in Dublin in 1947 for the Youngstown Diocese. Bishop McFadden adopted Father Lyons and myself in 1943 when this diocese was established, and we knew that we were coming here four years before we were ordained.

W What made you decide not to stay in Ireland?

K We did not have need for any more priests in Ireland. It was not interesting enough. Over here is very, very interesting because you have all religions. You have different kinds of people, and I found the people to be very, very nice.

W When you say that Bishop McFadden adopted you, had you known him before this time?

K Oh, no.

W Did they help pay for your education or anything?

K No, they did not.

W No?

K. They did not. We had two friends up in Cleveland, Father Lyons and myself, and they were the ones that were related to Bishop McFadden. They are the ones who went to Bishop McFadden and asked him. It was difficult to get any diocese at that time because it was during the war. In 1943, who knew whether it was going to be a 50 years or a 100 years war?

W. Right

K. So, there were many priests ordained for Australia, England, South Africa, New Zealand, and they could not get to their mission, and that was a concern to the bishops. So, they were not adopting when we were looking. We got out because the war finished in 1945. So, I was ordained in 1947 and had no difficulty in going out. But, Father Lyons was held up for a year because priority was given to the troops and to the return of equipment to America.

W. So, you came here to Youngstown basically not knowing anyone.

K. I came here not knowing anyone in the wide world when I came to this parish here.

W. What was your first assignment in Youngstown?

K. I told the cab driver, "Make sure I do not go to the cathedral." And that is exactly where he brought me. He rode a half an hour, and I got off the train down over the hill.

W. [Laughter] And it took him a half an hour to get there?

K. It took him a half hour. It cost me, I do not know, five dollars or something. Then, I wound up at the cathedral, and the first question the bishop asked me was "Pog mo hone. What is the meaning of that?" I was not answering that one. I thought he may think it was the term for kiss my ring. So, Father Mallone, now Bishop Mallone, he answered the question properly.

W. What was the question?

K. I will not tell you.

W. Oh, you will not tell me. This is Gaelic.

K. It is kiss something.

W. Okay. [Laughter]

K. I will not tell you here publicly.

W Not on record

K No, not on record No, no But anyway, then he told me, I must be very green He said, "Now Tom " He said, "I want you to stay here for the weekend and learn the ropes." And I was there thirteen years later It was a long weekend, and I was very happy because Monsignor Trainor was a tremendous pastor and the priests there, including the present Bishop Mallone, they were all good to me. Then, Monsignor Holdbrook came in as pastor later, and he was equally nice

W I knew him

K It was beautiful to live there. The people of all nationalities, they all have their little gardens of this, that, and the other I used to go down to the Hollow, and they would give me wine. I did not drink even, but they would give me a gallon of that wine I do not know whether you should call it by that name now, that 'Dego' Red You will get into trouble now by saying words like that So, they would give me a gallon The priests liked it In a month or something like that, they would say, "You had better go down the Hollow again " But I like the people The people are really nice Then I went from Saint Columba to Garrittsville for two and a half years, Mother of Sorrows eight years, Saint Brendan's two years, and then Saint Christina's seventeen years

W: As pastor?

K Yes. Saint Christina's I like very much because I was at Saint Columba when it was established The bishop came over and told us that there were people here from Carmensburg for a parish, and they told him if he would give them a parish that he would never have to worry about it again. They would take care of it Down to this day the people at Saint Christina's have taken care of their parish Just ask them That is it. That is all they need

W So, was it an established parish when you went there?

K Oh, yes

W They had the church built and the school and everything?

K They had everything done They did a great job. They built everything in fifteen years They have 33 classrooms They have an auditorium They have a convent They have a rectory and a church that seats 1150 people [It is] one of the nicest churches in the diocese

W It is a very big parish, is it not?

K Yes, 3400 families Much of my career was there They almost waited until I

died to make me monsignor [Laughter]

W: It is still an honor, sir

K: Certainly By the way, Father Welsch, your husband's brother, is my great friend, Father John Welsch

W That is right

K Father John Welsch

W Did you find any bigotry when you came over here? You were warmly accepted in Youngstown and everything?

K Well, I was warmly accepted by the Catholic people, you know They were from every nation of the world But, there was a little of the blue-blood atmosphere when I came over first. Catholics could not be on the Board of Education or be principals of schools or a lot of important jobs like that There was some at the time, but that quickly died out

W Well, most of your work, though, would have been in the Catholic community

K It would It would, because there was not as much mixing like ecumenism in those days as there is now

W Right

K It is very nice nowadays I have to say that all people respected you I did not find any discrimination in any way, shape, or form

W Did you find much different in the life in America than the life in Ireland?

K Do you know, not so much at Saint Columba

W They still are very family oriented

K Oh, very family oriented and very religious. People really urged their children towards education and not to have to do the tough work that they felt that they were doing They would be the people to keep up their homes, and they all had gardens They were hustlers.

W Has your family ever been over here to visit you?

K Oh, yes Oh, yes Several of them have been over for my twenty-fifth and over for my fortieth and over for my fiftieth

W We met one of your brothers when we were in Ireland with you in Dublin

K Yeah That is right

W Him and his wife.

K He has been over here five or six times In fact, he was over here for about two or three years working

W In Youngstown?

K Yeah He worked on the mill. He worked in Chicago

W Good, they went back

K Yeah.

W And you have no desire to go back to Ireland to live after you are retired?

K No.

W You have so many friends here.

K I have so many friends here and so many people I have associated with all my life Around Kilkerrin they do not play too much golf [Laughter] That is another factor in the situation Many of my friends are deceased now and scattered I have more friends in America from my village in Kilkerrin than I have over there One reason why I came to Youngstown [is], it was half way between New York and Chicago I had family in both areas, in both cities That was nice.

W So you felt that would be a good location

K Yes, I felt that would be a good location. I took advantage of that over the years, too I go for two or three days to Chicago, a couple of days down to New York It was nice, like this is a family We are all neighbors Some of them went to school with me I have a classmate, and there were only thirteen of us in the grade school class, Patrick Rafferty is still up in Cleveland He was a classmate of mine.

W Do you see him?

K Oh, yes He was here a week or two ago for my fiftieth Oh, yes I do not know what else I can say I have been associated with the Irish organizations in town, the A.O.H. and the Gaelic Club I have had mass for Saint Patrick's Day for a number of years [I was] Irishman of the Year twice

- W. Maybe you will make it again before you go to your great reward
- K. They had better hurry up [Laughter] No, I do not expect that. They have been good to me
- W. I appreciate this interview, and we thank you very much [Tape stopped] Father Kelly, we were just off the tape We were discussing your trip to America, and I thought it sounded interesting So, I would like you to tell us about your airplane ride over
- K. I was one of the first to come by airplane. Father Lyons, two months before, came by boat. I came by airplane It took me 27 hours, and they went from place to place according to the tail winds I left Ireland on a nice day We went down to the Aesores When I got off the plane, I thought I was breathing the exhaust because the air was so hot [I] never felt that kind of hot air before. It took us seven hours or so to get there Then, it took us nine hours to get to Newfoundland, and there was snow there Then, it took us another nine hours or something to get into New York, and it was Indian summer All in all, it took 27 hours
- W. That is amazing.
- K. Yeah, that is amazing
- W. Now you can go like a bat of an eyelash practically.
- K. Well, you can go over to Ireland in five hours and a half and return by six hours and a half because of tail winds That was an adventure Then, I spent two weeks in New York, and I had a great time down there because there were more Irish from my parish in New York, more people from my parish, than there were at home in Ireland There were big families, ten or twelve. Ten of them went into America, and two of them remained home - a son to inherit the home, a daughter to marry a neighboring boy That was about the way it was [Laughter]
- W. So, you stayed two weeks in New York Then, you went to Youngstown and started working.
- K. I did stay two weeks in New York, and then I came home by train, a sleeper or something
- W. From New York to Youngstown?
- K. That was a rough journey I could not sleep - too excited
- W. Yeah.

K Stopping at every station However, I got to Youngstown I got to Youngstown on the third of November It was also All Souls' Day postponed because it fell on Sunday and was celebrated on Monday.

W And you got here on a Monday after a long cab drive from the train station to the Saint Calumba Cathedral, just over the hill

K Yeah, a long cab drive is right \$5.00 worth for 100 yards

W Very interesting Thank you

End of Interview