

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Irish Community in Youngstown

Personal Experiences

O. H. 543

PATRICK MULROONEY

Interviewed

by

Mary Beth Choppa

on

March 7, 1981

PATRICK H. MULROONEY

Patrick J. Mulrooney was born in County Mayo, Ireland, on February 19, 1923, the son of Patrick and Mary Ellen Reape Mulrooney. He was educated in Ireland's National Schools and is a native Gaelic speaker. He was eighteen years of age when he went to work in England and South Wales during World War II and was present in England during the air raids of the war.

In 1949 he received sponsorship from a relative in Youngstown and came to the United States at the age of 26. He became a citizen in 1955 and has lived in Youngstown since coming to the United States.

He is currently employed at Wean United, where he has worked since 1951. Mr. Mulrooney was married in 1955 and has three children. He is active in parish activities at St. Edward's Church on Youngstown's north side.

Mary Beth Choppa

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INTERVIEWEE: PATRICK MULROONEY

INTERVIEWER: Mary Beth Choppa

SUBJECT: Trip over from Ireland, England and South Wales during World War II, Battle of Britain, Becoming a U. S. Citizen

DATE: March 7, 1981

C: This is an interview with Patrick Mulrooney for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Irish community in Youngstown, by Mary Beth Choppa, on March 7, 1981, at 12:30 p.m.

Can you tell us about your family in Ireland?

M: I'm the oldest of six children. Since I've been here both my father and mother are deceased. I have two sisters married in England, and I have two brothers and one sister in Ireland. I worked my way over in England during the Second World War. I went through England and down through South Wales. I went back from England to Ireland and stayed about a whole year. Immigration to the United States was going pretty good so from there I had written to one of my uncles out here to see if he would sponsor me. You had to have sponsorship. The first uncle I wrote to I got no answer. I waited a period of time, talked to some relatives over there, and they decided I should write to another uncle. To my surprise, I got an answer from my uncle that he would vouch for me and sponsor me. He would be responsible for me until I became a citizen, which was five years.

On May 7, 1949, I left my hometown and headed for that big ship, the Britanic. I arrived in New York on May 14, 1949. I stayed in New York two days, and arrived in Youngstown on May 16, 1949. I've been here since.

C: You mentioned that you worked in England. What kind of work did you do?

M: It was due to the war, wherever they needed you mostly. When I went over there first I worked on the farms. Then

when work got caught up on the farms they would send you into the factories. I worked in a sugar refinery. I also worked in the building trade doing construction work.

C: Was it a program that you were on?

M: They were shorthanded in England for laborers being that their men were drafted. They sent agents over to Ireland to recruit to see if they could get workers to come over and work in various places where most needed. You never knew what you would do. You filled out papers and they gave you an introduction and you were taken into Dublin for a physical examination before you were allowed to travel to England. I traveled in England with passports and everything. You had to carry identification at all times. Once you got off the boat you had better have identification or you would be locked up. With being Irish and in England there was a lot of trouble. After I got to England a couple of friends from my hometown in Ireland started to come out here, one to Youngstown and one to Chicago. They kept in touch with one another and that's when I decided I would come to the United States. My uncle sponsored me and I got here in 1949.

Work was rough. They give you two weeks vacation after you leave Ireland. It takes time to get around and meet the Irish people. I decided it was time to go to work and I got a job at Republic Steel. I worked for seven weeks; I was laid off for about twenty-two weeks. In 1949 there were no programs like you have today so you just kept going from one place to another hoping to get a job. After a couple of weeks I got a job with a contracting outfit in Youngstown, Fithian. I didn't match up to their standards because I was not a concrete finisher. I worked four or five days with this outfit and he let me go. In the meantime, I got a job in Briar Hill working in the open hearths in Briar Hill. It was like a hell hole to me up against those furnaces. Mostly I didn't like working at night time. I figured night was for sleep. I was thrown off-balance. I didn't mind working afternoon and day turn I loved. I worked in Briar Hill for one year. In the meantime I was always trying to get into Wean United; it was United Engineering and Foundry. At that time you couldn't get in unless somebody gave you a boost to get you in. One day there was a little trouble in Briar Hill, labor disputes, so naturally we came home. I went to United Engineering and Foundry and talked to the personnel manager and he asked if I was interested in a job here. I said, "Yes." He said, "Would you take a physical today?" I said, "I'm ready now." I started to work with United Engineering and Foundry on August 16, 1951, and that's where I'm still at.

C: What do you remember about the trip over? Where did you

leave from?

M: I left by train from Ballina to Cork and from Cork we got the boat the Britanica and arrived in New York on the 14th.

C: Do you remember the trip over?

M: One thing about the ship, I enjoyed it very much. A lot of people wished they had never gotten aboard. I was fortunate that I never got seasick and never missed a meal. There was all kinds of entertainment, dancing and drinking and whatever you wanted. You had to take a tender, a small boat that takes passengers out. The boat ran anchor in close enough. You went out on this little boat out to this great, big ship. The difficult thing when you get aboard that ship, the first day you are assigned a room on the different decks. You would have to start out before your meal because you were scheduled for breakfast at 8:00 or 9:15. The first day you weren't about to take any chances so you roamed around and watched every move you made. After two days aboard the ship everything falls in line. It's quite an experience providing you don't get seasick. I enjoyed every moment of it.

Arriving in New York, that's where you appreciated when a friend reaches a hand out for you. You don't know anybody and you're traveling with people from different parts of the country. The greatest moment that I do recall was when this friend of mine in New York knew that I was coming out and he was there when the ship docked. He sent one of the officials from the shipping company aboard the ship and this guy called my name out. I went over and told him who I was. He said, "Do you know John Higgins?" I said, "I've heard a lot about him." He said, "Well, he wants to meet you when you get off the ship. He's over here. Do you want to walk over here with me and I'll point him out to you?" I think that was one of the greatest things, when somebody from home reached out. I stayed with Higgins two nights in New York and I decided I had better come to my destination in Youngstown. I pulled into the Pennsylvania Station without a friend to meet me there, but I had all the instructions and I got a taxi and landed on the south side of Youngstown at 525 East Avondale.

C: What was the south side like then at that time?

M: When I was at my aunt's house there was a different group every night asking questions about home. I was getting tired of it. After a couple of weeks everything started to fall in place. After I was working and got established there was no question. The only thing I didn't figure out at night when I visited my cousin's place, Ireland and England had a set time for drinks, and here my cousin would go out late at night.

In England, whatever subject you did in the English language

it was compulsory that you do it in the Gaelic. The teachers over there, you wouldn't get by here with it because they put you through it.

C: What was school like in Ireland?

M: I went to a national school. I wasn't taught by priests or nuns; this was out in the country. I lived out in the country. The closest town was six miles. The means of transportation was the bicycle or velvet lugs. Velvet lugs are a donkey and a cart. Naturally we had a religion class every day. About twice a year a priest came around. You had better be prepared when he came in; you had better have the answers. These teachers gave you a terrible going-over. They really pounded it into you. The hard thing to get used to was learning all the Latin. You knew it for mass to serve masses. We managed to get by. I never did serve mass over there, although I learned the Latin for the simple reason that my own parish church was three miles away and another church was only about a mile. We didn't have to serve mass there so the was that I never served mass up to this day, but I knew the Latin.

C: So the national schools weren't run by Christian nuns?

M: No, but they did teach the religion there. I finished school when I was fourteen. Then I worked on the farm I lived on until I got old enough to travel. Then I decided to go to England where there was more employment. From there I landed in Youngstown.

C: How old were you when you went over to England?

M: About eighteen or nineteen. I was twenty-six when I came here. The only thing about England is that if you are over there two years you automatically become a citizen. You didn't have to apply for citizenship papers. Being Irish we didn't want to join the Royal Forces over there. I'd go home for two or three months. You could stay for eleven months and they couldn't touch you. In 1949 in this country you had to take out temporary citizenship papers. You weren't a citizen but you were in accordance with the law. When I came out for the final citizenship papers this was the big thing to go through. You had to have two people that had known you, but weren't a relative. The day you faced that you were notified when you were supposed to appear. You didn't know what questions you were going to be confronted with. An examiner might come in and ask you about local officials here. It was a relief when he said you passed and within a week or two you got your papers. It was a load off of your shoulders.

C: When did you become a citizen, do you remember?

M: About 1955. I was married before I became a citizen.

C: Why did you decide to come to the United States?

M: I was getting tired of going back and forth to England. I figured I would go to the United States and better myself. I always hear about the opportunities in the United States.

In 1949, if I'd have had the money I would have gone back. My uncle was good to me, but when you were under an obligation you wanted to fulfill it.

C: What was your uncle's name?

M: Pat Reape.

C: Getting back to a typical day when you got out of school in Ireland, what was that like?

M: The policemen over there would check for absenteeism. You could get yourself in a lot of trouble. Policemen came to the house and there had better be a reasonable excuse why you didn't attend school. If you had money there was an opportunity to go on to other schools. It's like leaving here and going on to another college; you had better be well-prepared. A lot of friends of mine went on to other things. I went on to the farm.

C: What kind of work did you do on the farm?

M: About every type of work. All of the cultivating and everything with crops. It was a year-round job. Work was slow in the winter. You could relax since you had it easy.

C: Would you be able to compare what a farm was like in Ireland to a farm in the United States?

M: Over there they didn't have equipment. It was manual labor because there were very few machines. When I came out here and saw the equipment that they had on the farms, it seemed like a picnic. You had tractors and all the cultivators. Over there it was spade and shovel, and a pick. Today from what I've heard they are better equipped in all ways. This generation today wouldn't do manual labor because they had the equipment to do it. We had no choice at that time. You worked long, strenuous hours over there. The work was hard; the pay was small.

When I worked in Briar Hill I had to work three turns. That got me because I was just getting used to one turn and I had to switch to another. When I went to United Engineering and Foundry I was lucky, I got on day turn. There was an opening on daylight and this foreman asked me if I would be interested

in taking a particular job, a permanent job. I said I didn't know anything about a burning machine to burn the steel. He told me I could learn and that he would give me the time to learn. I went on a burning machine and after a week or two I ended up working 4:00 to 12:00 for years and years. That used to be six days a week. It wasn't too bad at that point because I was single. After I got married I had to change. I worked a year until I built enough seniority to get on day turn. For the last eighteen years I've been working steady day turn.

C: When you first came to Republic were you still living on the south side with your uncle?

M: Yes.

C: How about when you worked at Briar Hill?

M: I was still living with my uncle. I don't know the exact date when I moved from the south side. He didn't have that much space. He had a small home on the south side. I knew that I couldn't stay there. I lived on Alameda, Lincoln Avenue. Like I said, I probably would have gone back in the beginning if I'd have had the money. Thank God today that I'm in Youngstown, Ohio.

C: You met your wife in Youngstown?

M: At St. Ann's. We were victimized at St. Ann's Church. It ended up there were going to be quite a few bachelors and they met their sweethearts out at St. Ann's. I don't know whether St. Ann's was helpful or not, but there were a few contracts signed as a result.

Speaking of St. Ann's, Monsignor Dunn was out there. To go to that square dance on a Sunday night was like a family affair. They were the nicest group of people that I've been among. There was something about that group; they were beautiful.

C: Where was St. Ann's?

M: On Federal Street.

C: When you moved to Alameda were you still working at Republic?

M: No. I was with Wean. I lived on Lincoln Avenue when I first met my wife. The reason I left Lincoln was because my cousin was going to Ireland, so I moved on to Alameda. That was my last destination.

C: What was it like working at Briar Hill?

M: I started in the month of July. When I got to work I went in the morning and the guy told me to go home and come back at midnight. Not being accustomed to this heat working in the steel mill I didn't think I was going to see daylight. I was going to the drinking fountain drinking the coldest water I could get. That's one of the worst things you can do. I was glad when I got out of Briar Hill and went to United Engineering. In England I did have the option to work around steel mills, not in the open hearths, but in different things. I also worked in a sugar refinery. I got to the place and I hated sugar. God forbid if you ever got a sugar rash; it was awful.

C: What kind of job was that?

M: The sugar came in and it had to be refined. It was sugar cane and it had to be refined. That stuff came out hot. You had to wear a special outfit around you. You worked for eight hours. If the machine got clogged up you got a break. In England you were watched closely. You were searched every time you went in and out that gate. With war years, with sugar being scarce and the rationing they were afraid you might have a friend downtown. They checked you every time you went out to see if you were carrying sugar with you.

South Wales is a beautiful country, but hilly. When you had a bicycle there you walked quite a bit too with your bicycle because you couldn't peddle those hills. They didn't have the different gears on bikes then.

My first trip to England I went in under the program and took the physical in Dublin. They examined you there and if you had any ailments they wouldn't declare you fit to go to England. If you completed the physical you got aboard ship in the morning. The ship sailed from Dun Leare, Dublin and landed in South Wales. You went into Hollyhead. They supplied you with travel tickets. Not familiar with England I went to London. I should have gotten on halfway on that trip, but I passed it up and went into London. There was screaming noises and there was an air raid when the Germans were over. It was a penetrating sound. They went after the steel mills and the factories.

You were supposed to go into the air raid shelters. One night I was working in the sugar refinery and the sirens were blowing. Instead of us guys going into the air raid shelter we went into the canteen. Our superintendent came in and said, "You fellows believe in a full stomach." I said, "If we're going on the last trip we might as well have a full stomach."

The food situation was bad. They would allow people from

Ireland to send bacon over. Bacon in England was great. You got rationing stamps in England. You got about one egg a month or two at the most. One thing we were blessed with on the farm was good food. There were all types of meat and everything like that. When you went to England it didn't make any difference who you were. Clothing coupons, being that you weren't a citizen of England you got ten. You bought a pair of shoes that cost nine, and you had one left. You had to go to the black market.

Another experience I had was I went to a place in England called Luton town. We found out there were a lot of clothing sales there. We were making good money during the war. We went shopping into Luton town which is outside of London. Not being familiar with the town, we missed the bus. Luckily we had identification with us. So the first thing we did was go to the police because they are supposed to harbor you for the night, let you sit in the police station providing you don't have a record. We went in there and the patrolist said the best place to be was the air raid shelters. They gave us blankets and we sat next to the wall with water dripping. We thanked God when we woke up and saw daylight and found someplace open. You didn't get a good meal there; you got an appetizer. This was the best though.

My greatest experience one night is when I was with a group of friends and got a can of corned beef. It was a ten pound can. We wouldn't be allowed that for two months, the five of us. It was the black market though and I didn't mind paying a little extra. On the way home we got a big sack of bread and ten pounds of corned beef. This was going to be like a banquet. Naturally we were getting a little thirsty and wanted a drink. We went into a tavern. We could be picked up for the quantity of meat we had because we were in violation of the law. We would go to jail and the guy that sold it to us. We put it in a little shack on the outside of this tavern. We figured we would get a couple of drinks and go home and have a good meal. To our surprise when we went out the bag was gone. We wouldn't complain because we were in violation of the law. We went back into the place and went home with a full tank that night because we were sad because the big meal we were looking to was gone. The next morning we got up and went to church. In England on Sunday the pubs don't open. The tavern that we were in that night, the guy saw us and called us in. He told us we didn't get a drink till noon, but he told us to at least come in. He said, "You fellows seem awful downhearted, is there something wrong?" "No," I said, "we had a rough night." He said, "No, there's something bothering you." I told him there was nothing. He said, "Fellows, let's get to the point. You left a bag last night, but from here on in be more careful. When you get a bag, you give it to me and I'll put it under the key until you're ready to go home." Everybody brightened up. After coming back from church here we had our ten pounds of

corned beef. There are a lot of good people in England.

Churchgoing people, the Catholics there, you had to admire them. They were truly dedicated. Under the different programs, they maintained transportation for you to see that you got to church. You were under the jurisdiction of the government and they made sure you got transportation to church and back. In Wales it was the same thing.

I never drove an automobile in England. The bicycle was the sole transportation in England. Depending on where the work area was, if you were in close range they supplied you with a bicycle, dinner bucket, and all that menagerie. You were responsible for that bicycle. If you had a long distance to go to work they had these trucks that were covered like Army trucks that took you back and forth to work. You had to leave at a certain time in the morning and at night. Depending on the number of people there they had a big canteen and dining room. To most people that food wasn't good, but we were used to it. You had to survive the best way you could. I didn't appreciate the food I had in Ireland until I was over in England and saw what it was like. You have to be in it yourself to realize it or appreciate it in that way.

C: Could you describe an air raid shelter?

M: They would dig in the city underground. It had to be reinforced with steel and concrete. Bunk beds were made for it too. They are pretty cold places. If you were a civilian you didn't get a blanket or what you were supposed to.

C: Were you ever in an air raid when a bomb had hit?

M: No. The first place we lived was near a place where they trained young pilots. You couldn't sleep for weeks. The sounds of those planes coming and going all night long were just like if you had a big clock ticking; you got used to it eventually. You could see towns on a nice night where there would be trouble because you could see the flares and everything going. They blew sirens in every village in town when there was a raid. The most place the air raids were were the steel mills and the docks.

C: Do you remember anything about the labor movements in the United States, like the unions in Republic and Briar Hill?

M: I will say at this point that you have to have union representation. There's no question about that. If you're in a certain age bracket and they want to get rid of you, they get rid of you. You had to have union protection. There are times that unions don't always follow the guidelines. You have to have union representation, but you don't always

agree with them one hundred percent. You still have to have them to protect your rights, I have to say this being a steelworker. I have admiration for all other unions to the point.

Another thing I found out is the way you can approach a boss in this country or a boss in England or a teacher in England, sir; you better come up with words over there or things don't work out. You can use a different language with people in top positions here. You don't do that over there. A teacher over there is someone very important. Over here a teacher is just another person like you and I. This is the difference in countries.

C: You noticed the difference in the way the English and Welsh, and Irish spoke. How can you compare the way Americans speak?

M: There is no problem in following American pronunciation. To understand the average educated American is no problem.

C: What are your feelings about the way Youngstown changed?

M: At this present day, the way Youngstown has changed I can't see it myself. The money that is spent in the city of Youngstown to make it a better place downtown, they have driven people out. The money that is spent building all these fancy things downtown, I can't see it. It was a waste of money.

C: Would you have preferred to see it go to housing?

M: Yes.

C: Is there anything else you would like to add about the customs that you had in Ireland?

M: When I came here square dancing was something new to me. Here is an Irish blessing for you:

May there always be work to do,
May your purse always hold a coin or two,
May the sun always shine on your windowpane,
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain,
May the hand of a friend always be near you,
May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.

Coming to the United States you have to apply for a passport. It takes quite a while to get a passport and then you're interviewed in Dublin by the American Council. Before you make entry into this country there are several questions asked of you. This is where you make your final decision-- If the United States gets involved in war would you be willing to fight for the United States or not? That is where you

make your big decision and you take the Oath of Allegiance. Then you go home and wait until you are notified. They set up your time when you are supposed to travel and that. You swear an allegiance and when you are here you cannot go back. This was before you left Ireland. You weren't under any pressure. There wasn't a gun in your back. That's all down on paper and signed, you can never go back and say, "I didn't do that."

C: Were you saying that you had to prove that you didn't belong to the IRA, Irish Republican Army?

M: Yes. There was the Irish Republican Army, but not to the extent it is today. In all your countries over there Communism has taken a firm stand, and also in Ireland. On July 12 in Ireland there was always a little splash-up. That was the Irishman's Day. They found weapons on both sides of the fence that were supplied from Russians. That is what is keeping the fire burning. At one time they were good, but the extent that they've gone to and the massacre of innocent people has kept them down. What's going on today should not be. That is not going to solve the problem. You have read and seen Bernadette Devlin. She has recovered and was in bad shape. She has vowed she is going to go out and work harder. What are going to be the consequences nobody knows. The poor, innocent bystanders are the ones who pay the price. Your life is in jeopardy over there; you're not safe. You don't know is somebody will come to your door and you will get gunned down. There is a fearful look in children because they're brought up with this. You don't trust anybody because you don't know who you are dealing with. It's a sad situation.

There was an archbishop who didn't go along with funds that were taken up in this country to send as aid over there. The money was falling into the hands of the wrong people. You give money and you don't know how it's going to be used.

END OF INTERVIEW