

**Donohue, Ellen and Charles Watson. "1998-03-27 Charles Watson and Ellen Donohue."
Interview by Barbara Slavin. 27 March 1998. Accessed March 2023.**

Barbara Slavin (interviewer): We're gonna be interviewing Ellen Donahue and Charles Watson of 289 Brookline Street in Cambridge, just about their old memories of the old neighborhood, of Fort Washington neighborhood. They understand that this is going to go into the archives at Simmons College and will be giving an agreement to that. Great, for beginners can you tell me what street you were raised on?

Ellen Donahue: 4 Grove Avenue.

BS: 4 Grove, and you?

Charles Watson: Same place.

BS: Of course (laughs), where is that in relation to Fort Washington?

ED: Just a block away from it.

CW: It's parallel with Waverly Street, off of Allston Street and [...] Avenue, way down there.

BS: How many brothers and sisters?

ED: I had 8 brothers and 1 sister.

BS: Ok, that answers it for you too. Did you play at Fort Washington?

ED: Yes, we had lots of land around that end of the city, but we never had playgrounds when we were kids. We played at Fort Washington because the hills seemed like mountains to us.

BS: Really?

CW: Surprising enough, it was never known as Fort Washington, the neighborhood, it had another name.

BS: What was that?

CW: The name was Greasy village.

BS: Right, and how did it get that name?

CW: It got that name because there was a John M Reardon rendering plant there, and there was also a micro[...] business that collected, what do you call it, got meat and bones from the market, the Boston markets, all around the markets in Boston and Cambridge. They actually, John Reardon, made a glycerin for [...] Brothers, which was a big soap factory in East Cambridge. And John Reardon, actually, they lived over on Pearl Street.

ED: Oh yes you're right.

CW: On Pearl Street, and the Fitzpatricks lived in Brookline and they provided work for these people, and actually there were a couple of other businesses that provided work for them. They all lived in the neighborhood, there was a chemical company, [...] Factory we called it. They used to make the filler for the shoes, the old leather shoes. And they also made an insulating [...] block, the caulk came from Portugal, and they processed it in the factory. And they had workers that lived in the neighborhood, matter of fact, the owner lived down the corner of Henry Street and Brookline Street during that period, 1910 to 1930.

BS: What other companies were there?

CW: The other companies that we depended on that the people lived nearby, were the Award Baking Company, and the Elliot Address and Machine Company. And the Elliot Address and Machine Company, that was another company where the owner had invented a process of addressing, it was a stencil that he had made. He actually started out addressing things for a bicycle magazine that he was the publisher of. And he found that very difficult, that nobody could address the labels. So he invented the stencil. His name was Sterling Elliot, and he had a son Harmon Elliot who was also an inventor and an approver of the stencil business. He had a big factory on Albany Street, and actually as my sister said, there were lots of vacant lands in and around. There was a vacant land between John Reardon and Sons on Waverly Street, and the Fitzpatrick business. There was also a rendering company, they picked up stuff but they didn't render anything. They transferred over to the Brighton [...] to the Reardon company. And all the people who worked in those places lived in the neighborhood, and they were fortunate enough to have the...

[5 min in]

ED: Don't forget Wilson.

CW: Yes, the Wilson company was next to John Reardon's. And they processed mostly pork products.

ED: Frankfurts.

CW: Yes, they made frankfurts.

ED: Ham.

CW: Ham, of course, the biggest that I observed.

BS: How about bacon? Bacon was the big-

CW: Yeah, bacon. Because in East Cambridge, we had Squires, which was a meat packing company, which was part of the Swift Company, and one of the big four packers in the country at that time. So actually there was a diversity of people who lived in the neighborhood. How I happened to know them, I was the paperboy in the neighborhood. And I, the people that were in those buildings, and somebody in there bought papers. In other words, even in the John Reardon Company, even though it was a greasy factory, there was a man in there who was a chemist. And he made sure the glycerin that they sold the [...] Brothers was good quality. And he himself was all the time working on soap products, mostly an industrial soap that you could wash your hands with. A liquid soap. That's what I remember. I never knew his name, but they had fascinating employees in that company in the 30s.

BS: Did you ever go inside the buildings, at Reardons?

CW: Oh yes, I was inside the building in the office, I saw the inside-

BS: Did you ever see the big cauldrons where they boiled the fat?

CW: Oh yes I did, the big cauldrons were there.

ED: Fire retardants.

CW: I couldn't... I would remember those things, the chemist was in a low building between the Wilson and Company and the Reardon and Company. And the products the Wilson and Company had that they would throw away, they were shipped into Reardons. So to make the fat and the glycerin products, that was their business. Almost all the people that lived in the neighborhood worked in those places. The only other place I remember, and kind of fascinating, a fellow created [...] Terminal, for railroad siding. And brought it all the way down to [...] Street Avenue, railroad siding. And that made more industrial access to people on Albany Street and Sydney Street. They had the candy factories down there at the end of those streets. And there was one other place, that only had two people working. And they created, at that time, it was a mill. They brought all the flour and mixed up a formula for doughnuts. And sold it to, that was on the corner of Erie Street and Albany Street. The flour came in by freight car, and they mixed up the flours and made a doughnut mixture that they sold to doughnut makers all over the Boston area.

[9 min in]

BS: And what was the name of that company?

CW: That I don't know, I never knew the name of that company. There was another place that had a couple of people that work, and that was the Clark Telescope Company.

BS: And where was that?

CW: That was at the corner of, the end of Sydney Street and Henry Street. It was on Henry Street at the end of Sydney.

ED: The tooth factory.

CW: Oh yeah the tooth factory, that was on Hamilton Street. But the Clark Telescope people, there were two people who worked in that.

ED: That was the first telescope, too. They taken from school-

CW: Yeah, they were historical because they had something to do with the [...] Telescope Observatory out in California when they closed down. And they used to be the old red brick telescope that stood here, it was a large massive one and it had a steel structure on the top of it. Nobody ever saved it, it just collapsed. The two workers over in there kept polishing the lenses all the time in making telescopes. And they were various sizes for the colleges and universities.

ED: And it really amazed me that Cambridge didn't keep that, because we were taking, you know, the fourth and fifth grade, always down to see the telescope. And they let that, you know, just melt away.

BS: Oh what a shame. You mentioned that the neighborhood was diverse-

CW: Yes.

BS: What kind of nationalities were here?

CW: We had the Irish, which was predominant. And then we had Italians.

ED: Polish.

CW: Polish, and Lithuanians part of them. And we had some Greek, and Portuguese was in there because the Portuguese worked in the factories too. There was Scotch people, couple of families. And then there were a lot of English descent people, on Putnam Avenue. Actually the owners of the businesses, like Lally columns and Fitzpatrick's and Reardons, they owned the properties where their workers lived. And down on Sydney Street, where your parents lived-

BS: Right, where my mother lived.

CW: There was John O'Hara, and he was a sort of contractor. And he collected the [...] that was the refuse from burnt coke, coal. That came from factories. He sold those to a Cambridge building factory, building materials company, that made cinder blocks out of them. Forerunner of

cement blocks. And down in that area, there was another building there before [...] put his buildings up, what we called the medicine factory. I don't even know what kind of pills they made but they certainly stamped out thousands and thousands of pills.

ED: I forgot that -

BS: Where was that?

ED: That was on the corner of -

CW: That was on the corner of Sydney Street and Erie.

ED: That was very [...]

BS: And was it called the medicine -

CW: No, that was the name I called it, the medicine factory.

ED: Some kind of elms [...] that they used to put out for coals.

[13 min in]

BS: Just for the record, where was the Reardon factory?

CW: That was on the end of, that was on Waverly Street, at -

ED: At Fort Washington.

BS: Next to Fort Washington.

ED: Right next to Fort Washington, yup.

CW: Yes at Fort Washington. And on the other side of Fort Washington was this lally column company.

BS: That's where my grandfather worked.

CW: Right right. And lally column, the guy Lally, he invented this lally column, which was nothing but an iron pipe filled with cement. But it could support thousands and thousands of pounds. And it was tested at the Watertown Arsenal, it was tested during that period of time. But I knew it was one of their advertising.

ED: Homes were built with the lally columns.

CW: Oh yeah, every place had the lally columns supporting the...

ED: We still have them in the cellars.

CW: They have them every place, buildings all over. But new forms of steel came out and transplanted, replaced those. So the... well anyway, I can give you that background.

BS: Yes, that's excellent. The other thing I wanted to ask you to remember if you could, the great flu epidemic, how it affected your family?

CW: My sister would know more about that, I only know what my father said about it.

ED: What I know about it, I was only 6 years old because I was born in 1912 and that was 1918. But, my mother always said if you lived three days, you survived. And everyone had the flu, and on our street, there was a little fellow who did die. He was a Johnstone, and my mother had Laurence was - let's see, out of 10 kids he was the 7th or the 8th child in the house. He was born at the height of the influenza on October the 4th of 1918. And my mother could never understand, we all survived the flu. We all got it but we had 2 aunts, in fact we had 3 aunts, that weren't married, that had come from Ireland. They were out here, and the people that they worked for gave the people time off to take care of, especially our own family. And my Aunt Margaret really worked for a [...], and she was the greatest person. Very rich person who lived in Boston, but settled in Brookline after the war. And as I said, Laurence was born and Laurence got drowned in the river when they were building the cottage farm bridge. He was 8 years old, he lived to be 8. The boys always go to the river since we live so close to the river. But they were building the bridge, and somehow they got on a raft and he had never swam, really. He stepped off the raft and fell into the deep water and that was the end. And we all survived it, we all were sick, and as I said my mother said he was born at the height of the influenza in October. He lived and everyone lived.

BS: Speaking of the river, did you ever swim in the river yourself?

ED: Yes, Magazine Beach.

CW: And I swam there. I know all the boys, there were lots of boys who grew up in the neighborhood. More boys than girls. I could calculate on that.

BS: You mean you knew more boys than girls.

CW: Yeah, I knew more boys than girls.

ED: I think the families, the Irish people had more boys. Not like my mother, had 8 sons and 7 of them went to World War II. And they were all scattered all over, and they all came home thank god. And none of them were together.

BS: Did you skate, in the winter? On Magazine Beach?

ED: Yes.

CW: No no -

ED: Well no, not -

CW: No, not on Magazine Beach but you know on Magazine Beach there was, on the edge of the river, there was low level water spots, and the land on Memorial Drive was not developed but they had water spots.

ED: But I bet my mother would say we did walk on the Charles River.

BS: Yes, you walked on the ice.

ED: We walked and crossed on tiddlywinks too, I don't know how we ever survived. Because when we got over to the Boston side of the river, there was a coal place there called -

CW: [...]

ED: Cousin's coal [...], and of course that was about 6 feet up. So how could you get up there, or anyone get down to you without going in the river. Because the coals used to come into this place.

BS: Did you have bicycles when you were kids?

ED: We had one bicycle [laughs], we did. We had one bicycle -

BS: One bicycle, for all of you.

ED: And one sled.

BS: One sled.

ED: And every Christmas you'd get a sled. One sled. But you know they broke, and that's all you'd have. And we'd go over to Fort Washington, because all these hills we thought they were mountains [laughs].

BS: Did you ever hear any stories about Fort Washington, for example was there a story that General Washington's horse was buried there. Did you hear that?

ED: I never heard that.

CW: I heard that, that he was buried underneath the flagpole that was erected there.

ED: I never heard that (laughs). But then again, I wasn't the smartest one in the world.

CW: But the only thing we knew about Fort Washington was that it was given by a family by the name of Dana.

BS: Dana? Yeah.

CW: The Dana family. And it was to be always kept a park, for the people of the neighborhood.

ED: But the Dana Park is already over -

CW: Well yeah they gave a lot of property, the Dana's.

BS: The Dana family.

ED: There was a lot of rich people in this neighborhood, the Morse people gave the money for the school.

BS: The Morse. And where did they live?

ED: On Magazine Street.

[20 min in]

BS: Oh, and who else would you consider to be rich in the neighborhood?

ED: The Reardons. Now Reardons really lived down here first, at Henry Street. Right there at [...]. Fords, were at the corner. The Fords had a building, the corner building there, was Fords. And they always had Lincolns in the window. And you could go down there and sit, you know, and just see these beautiful two cars in the showroom. I was never in the showroom, but it was there.

BS: Now Reardons' house, he would be a rich person for this neighborhood. What would that be like, what was his house like? How big was it?

ED: It was a big house, almost like the yellow house when you come down here. But it had a lot of land around it, the [...] bought Reardon's property down there. And they put up just a building, took it all down. But his land ran all the way down to the railroad tracks. But in those days, in every place said "Keep off the grass." I don't know how we did it, but we kept off the grass. Really, you were afraid of destroying anything. This park was always out here, they never had a bench in it when we were kids. But it was always "keep off the grass," and you just walked on those paths because they had workers around and the workers would chase us kids.

BS: Besides from Fort Washington then, where would you play?

ED: On the street.

CW: Or there was a place called the cornfield -

ED: Yes we had the cornfield.

CW: That belonged to Reardon.

ED: We had the cornfield or we had the pit in front of our house too.

CW: There was no water.

BS: The cornfield was on Reardon's property?

CW: Yes, the cornfield was on Reardon's property. That was between Waverly Street and Bell Court and Allston Street, right near Fort Washington.

BS: Right, and how about Pine grove?

CW: You could play baseball in that.

ED: Another thing, that cornfield, when we were kids Reardon always planted, always had this corn in it. But it was never for the people, it was for their horses.

BS: So they had horses on the property?

ED: They had horses, yes. They had a barn with a lot of horses. Fitzpatrick, that was on Erie Street, that backed up to the corn in Bell Court, because that's where the cornfield was on Bell Court. I don't know what you'd call it other than Bell Court. And Erie Street. They had horses too.

BS: And what did they do with the horses? He wasn't killing the horses to make the soap?

CW: No, they pulled wagons. Actually during that period of time the only one that had automobiles was Ford, and I think his factory at the end of World War I. And of course he wanted all his workers to own a Ford. There was a parking lot for them. But the other businesses, they had teamsters. They pulled wagons, they collected in the city scrap meat and scrap bones. And the bones were ground up and became... chicken feet and duck feet for the duck farms that were down in Wrentham and along there.

ED: And that's why it was called Greasy Village, because there was always the smell.

CW: That was the predominant business that was there. It was subsidiary, they depended on Leaver Brothers all during that time. Leaver Brothers was at its height of business, they had deluxe soap and [...] on the radio when the radio first came in. I was telling my sister, one of my first recollections of an event, was a relative of ours brought in a radio that operated on batteries. And he had all the batteries lined up, he had the Tunney and Dempsey fight, and I was only a small boy at that time but I remember all the men and all my brothers were around ready to hear this fight on the boxing match, on the radio. That was when he brought in all these batteries that you hooked together, it was in the day before the automobile storage battery but they were all hooked together. It must have been 18 volts or better.

[25 min in]

BS: Now you have a regular radio that you plugged into an outlet at that time?

CW: No, not we didn't even have electricity there until through the 30s. I remember we had gas mantles, that was the light. And actually the street lights were gas. There was a guy by the name of Campbell who lived on Sydney Street and he went around, he worked for the Cambridge Gas Company, he went around every morning to put the gas lights out.

ED: Was he the iceman?

CW: Yes he became the iceman. He worked for the Fresh Pond Ice.

ED: See, we didn't have anything. Now all the ones who are born today, they have everything but we got nothing. You know what I mean? But we had a good time.

BS: I love to hear stories about the different men who came through with their carts, for example the iceman. Did he have a chant or anything he'd say when he came through the neighborhood?

ED: Oh sure.

BS: How would you tell him how much ice you needed?

ED: Yup, you'd just, well you put a sign in your window that you needed ice. Because he gave out these signs that had the word 'ice' on it, and you'd put that little sign in your window. And they came around, we had Driscoll, the vegetable man.

BS: And what did Driscoll say? Do you remember what they would say to try to get you to buy their vegetables?

CW and ED: Haddock and mackerel, haddock and mackerel.

ED: That I remember them saying on Fridays. They had bells.

CW: He brought vegetables that he bought in the Boston markets, and he had a horse and wagon.

BS: Why did the vegetable man say 'haddock and mackerel?'

CW: Because they were selling haddock and mackerel.

ED: On Fridays, he didn't sell vegetables on Fridays, just the haddock and mackerel.

BS: And what did the rag man say?

ED: 'Any rags, any rags today.'

CW: 'Any rags today.' And he had a wagon too.

ED: What was his name, Tate?

CW: Tate, yeah.

BS: Was there something called a soap grease man, you ever heard of that? You would give him...

ED: Yes, but that was around the war time. But I can remember my mother, they always said that they had to save all the grease. And you got 10 cents for it and maybe a can of grease.

BS: And they gave you soap in return?

CW: It was the [...] who collected the grease.

ED: They gave you a bar of soap, yeah a bar of soap.

BS: Oh I didn't know that.

ED: Or something like Soapine, you know.

BS: How about strawberries in season, the strawberry man?

ED: No, he was the vegetable man. Driscoll, he lived down here on Brookline Street. But he kept his horse and wagon right behind your mother's house there on Bell Court, your mother was on Sydney Street. And because Tom, the O'Hara's had horses. And I think it was O'Hara's that owns your mother's house.

BS: Yes.

ED: And you know that was a big house on Sydney Street. We used to, we lived on 2 floors. And Fitzpatrick, where my father worked, owned those houses, Fitzpatrick. And Reardon owned the houses on Waverly Street for the people that worked at his store, his factory. The Italians, there were about 4 or 5 Italian families in the village, that's all.

BS: Oh really?

ED: Yeah.

BS: How about any Black families?

ED: The Black families were up here. There was one Black family that moved in next door to O'Hara's house on Sydney Street, named Smith's. But they were educated, I think the father worked for the post office, was it?

CW: Yes he did, he was a Spanish-American War veteran.

BS: Oh, I didn't know that.

CW: Mr. Smith.

ED: Yes, Mr. Smith. They were educated you know, they weren't as you say 'dumb as dead.'

CW: They were from the South, actually, the Smith family, they were born here. But the other Negro families that lived here were from the British West Indies. And they lived on the corner of Allston Street and Sydney Street. And they -

ED: They just lived, they just all stayed together in that house, it was a 3 family house.

CW: But they all had boys, I could list all the Smith boys to you right now. And I could list all the Giddon's.

BS: Could you list all the Smith boys? I'm aware of only one, that would be Johnny Boy.

CW: Johnny Boy yeah, but they had Harold, and then they had Paul, and they had Johnny Boy, well actually they had Joe and then Johnny Boy, then they had Aaron. Aaron was my age. And they had one sister, Esther.

ED: No they had more than one sister, didn't they? Julia? Julia was the sister too.

CW: Yes, Julia. But I think the sisters died, they had poor health.

ED: I don't know what happened to the sisters. You know, you never bothered with them, you know what I mean. It isn't like today, like here. You know, really. But they would come over to Fort Washington, and they'd play with you for a while, but there was no arguing there was no difference.

BS: Yeah.

ED: And because you know they were... I don't know, today. Afterwards, or after we'll say, they grew up and everything so there was a space there before I got old. You know, if you went up Erie Street, they were, they had a chip on their shoulder, you just walked past them. But, the ones that lived down there, they all went to school, the Giddon's had a sister that went to Salem the same time my sister Mary was at Salem.

CW: Charlie Giddon became a Secret Service agent.

BS: Who were the Giddons?

CW: They were a Black, colored, family.

BS: Oh they were also Black, ok.

ED: And they lived at the corner of -

CW: At the corner of Allson and Sydney Street. As a matter of fact they owned the house.

ED: Their sister went to Salem. Esther was as old as I was, she died.

CW: They had a sister who became a nurse, the first nurse that went to the Cambridge nursing school at the Cambridge City Hospital. And that was because we had a city counselor at that time (laughs) that got her into it.

ED: Well, she should have got into it anyway.

BS: Right, right.

[32 min in]

CW: She served in the war. But they had a brother Charlie who was a couple of years younger than I was, and he became a Secret Service Agent. He was head of the Secret Service in Puerto Rico.

BS: Wow, excellent.

CW: We had a crippled fellow that lived here next door, and he got elected to state legislature when he was 21 years of age.

BS: And what was his name?

CW: His name was Lee O'Dale. And the year that he got elected I think was 1934, 1935, and he got elected with Tip O'Neill. So actually, eventually, Tip O'Neill always took care of him, he was a very active politician. He was crippled -

ED: Yeah well see -

CW: He was handicapped, he had infantile paralysis when he was a boy.

ED: Well yes because polio was a -

CW: Polio.

ED: Polio was out at around that time.

CW: Yes it was a bad illness at that time, although it never afflicted our neighborhood. But there was a bad scare of it at one time, my mother thought I might have it. I was brought to the hospital, I had muscular rheumatism. I would have great [...] against the doctors, that had misdiagnosed that, but I didn't have it.

BS: Yeah, thank goodness.

CW: But what I wanted to tell you, that Lee O'Dale got Greasy Village memorialized in a book that Jimmy Breslin wrote, "How the Good Guys Won."

BS: Really?

CW: Yes.

BS: I didn't know that it was mentioned in that book, I'll have to read it. "How the Good Guys Won," that's great.

CW: There are about 3 stories, Lee O'Dale is actually the main character in that book.

BS: I'm so glad you told me that.

ED: And Lee is still living.

CW: He became administrative assistant to Tip O'Neill when he was Speaker of the House.

BS: The other thing I wanted to ask you about, what was your house like, where the stove and the kitchen and the parlor when you were growing up. What did it look like?

ED: It was a cold water flat, and we had a parlor stove and your kitchen stove. It kept the house warm. We only had 5 rooms, and you had your own entrance because Fitzpatrick built these

houses for the people [...], and they really were nice. And my mother was the second tenant in her apartment of the house, so of course we never moved. Until they grew up, and got down here because of course she would never move from the neighborhood anyway because she had too many boys and they had to be always playing ball. And [...] Field was up there on Putnam Avenue, they were going to up the high school. They couldn't move, couldn't move out of Cambridge.

BS: Could you tell me what Sunday dinner, Sunday supper, was like? What you would, was it a special -

ED: Always, always a big dinner. Always a big dinner on Sundays. My father worked, as I said, he was a teamster and he worked for Fitzpatrick and he always went to the market. And he was the one that always brought home the meat.

BS: Every day?

ED: No, every day because he always went to the, you had to bring whatever, to the ... what's that part of Boston?

CW: The North End.

ED: The North End of Boston, that's where all the meat stores were.

BS: He worked in Cambridge and then went to Boston to get the meat?

ED: With the, yup, he drove 2 horses -

BS: To get the meat?

ED: Well he'd bring it home, you know, in the back of the wagon was all the barrels carrying whatever he [...]. He used to go into these meat stores that had, where they were cutting up all the meat and he always bought the meat from, you know, the ones that he knew and would get the best of meat. And come home with the meat. We had meat, but you know what I hated was I was the third oldest in that house, my sister was the oldest and we had a brother in between, and all the boys were all after me, 7 boys were after me. We had to wait until Pa came home with the meat before we got out. And lots of times, you know, he worked from 7 in the morning until 7 at night. So how could you go anyway? All your friends that were going to the Magazine Beach were all coming home when I was going, and you couldn't go any further than the front stairs.

[37 min in]

BS: You had to wait until your father came home and have a meal with him before you could go out again?

ED: He had to bring the meat home, my father always, and we had to wait. This was my mother, you know, that had this. You had to wait until your father came home to have your supper, we all ate together. She was no short order cook, she was gonna cook and get it all and everyone eats at the same time. You weren't coming in at one time, one at a time or another.

BS: Did neighbors feel free to drop in and have tea and biscuits or whatever during the week? Or on Sundays?

ED: Not really, they were, you know, anyone that ever came into your house we had the coal stove and a kettle of boiling water all the time, it was nothing to make tea. I hated it, because you know, everybody that came in, regardless who they were, they had a cup of tea. Well you don't have a cup of tea unless you, and you know it makes a lot of dishes, for a kid I hated it. And you lived in a cold water flat, you didn't have the hot water that was on the stove. We didn't have, we didn't have even one of those thingamajigs we got when I got married, that you could put the gas under and get the water hot.

BS: Did you have hobos beg for biscuits or tea? Or biscuits, rather. At the back door?

ED: My father was very good for that. But we never, I never saw that. But they used to come, hobos, particularly on Sundays. At the church, and your mother would tell you, we had the children's mass. My mother and father were very strict about going to church, you had to go to the children's mass, and our pastor was strict too that you had to be there. And if you weren't at the children's mass, and you went to another one, you were pulled out and asked why (laughs). So my mother wasn't gonna have that done, so she'd make you go to the right mass. Yeah, I think they always had it because I can - I hated it because I was always washing dishes and you had to wait until the water got hot. It wasn't like the faucet and let it run. Who's that -

BS: I'll turn the tape off, the phone is ringing.

BS: I turned the tape back on again because Charles has re-entered the room. One other thing I wanted to talk about was home remedies, that your mother may have used when you were sick? For example, I looked in a book somewhere and it said some of the home remedies were, now where's my list here -

CW: A product that I remember the most was a product called Castoria.

BS: Castoria, yeah.

ED: Castoria.

BS: Fletcher's Castoria?

ED: Castor oil.

CW: Well, castor oil was something else. That was a fish product, Castoria was a sweeter medicine.

ED: Yes, I know what that was too. But I didn't mind that. My mother always had a family doctor, to tell you the truth.

BS: How about Coleman's mustard? Is that something she would have used?

ED: We always made our own mayonnaise. No I don't -

CW: No she means the plaster on the [...]. I remember them putting that mustard on my chest, that came out of the closet. Keen's mustard, that was the product we had. A ground mustard. They applied that to keep my chest when I had some sort of congestive stuff.

ED: I was a healthy little [...], so it doesn't matter how I remember it. Every time, I don't think I ever was sick.

BS: Anyone who survived the flu was healthy.

ED: My mother would say, I never could of had a headache, I never knew what it was to say you have a headache, because she wouldn't believe that you could have a headache (laughs).

[42 min in]

CW: We didn't take -

ED: We had a [...] at home.

CW: We didn't take much medicine -

ED: Nope.

CW: The amount of money doctors that got from us, they would never get rich from it.

ED: We had a doctor named Cunningham, that was on the avenue. And when he came, all he gave was castor oil and put it in orange juice. I must have been about 25 when I could stomach orange juice. All I could see was that greasy stuff in it. You know, they'd put it in the orange juice, castor oil.

BS: How about Fels Naptha?

ED: That was a soap.

BS: Oh ok.

CW: Actually, my mother made her own soap to wash clothing. And it was like the GI soap, if you ever knew what that was. [...] soap or Kirkman soap. A hard bar of soap. Brown soap.

ED: Made with potash.

CW: My mother made her own soap of those, that I remember. And she also made her own mayonnaise, which was the best, and we have that Keen's mustard in the pantry. And she had mazola oil, corn oil. She made her own, she made a better mayonnaise than Hellman's produced.

BS: I'm sure. And what sort of, on Sunday, would you have a roast? Or what sort of food would you have for Sunday dinner?

CW: We had a roast, whichever was, we had whatever the best of meats. We had roast duck, and when we had roast duck, there was 4 ducks, roasted in the oven. And we had lamb, leg of lamb. My father, of course, knew all the best butchers in the market. And we always had the best frankfurts, which were hot dogs. Which were made by Henchermaker Company, Henchermaker lived in Cambridge. And sold them at the market in Boston, and he made those frankfurts which turned out to be, as I tell my sister, the Fenway Frank. And the ballpark frank, the recipe for them. My father knew all the people in the market. He knew Sidney Rabb, who established the Stop & Shop company, when he was just a young salesman in the meat store.

ED: And we were brought into that fancy market in that restaurant that was in -

CW: Durgin-Park.

ED: Durgin-Park (laughs), we didn't know, we just thought it was another restaurant. Of course I wasn't really taken that much, but the boys were. But when you were, you know, maybe 8, I was taken in town. And of course if you had, you'd have to ride on the horse and team. But Tom and Pete and all them, were you -

CW: I ate in Durgin-Park before it became famous.

ED: That's right. We all ate in that place before it became famous. We just thought it was just another restaurant, just another place to get a cup of tea.

[45 min in]

BS: Did you ever take any trips outside of Boston or Cambridge in the summertime?

ED: Not when you were little, you didn't.

CW: Yes, I did. With my mother and father we went to Provincetown.

ED: Oh yes, I went to Provincetown.

CW: It was on a boat.

ED: I didn't think, I didn't think that was a big -

CW: That was a big trip.

ED: And we went to Nantasket.

BS: Nantasket.

CW: Yeah the boat ran to Nantasket. And there was also a boat that went down to New York, my brothers, it ran through the Cape Cod canal on eastern [...].

BS: Right.

CW: That ran from Boston to New York. But I didn't take that trip.

ED: And my uncle John, that didn't have any kids, he took me a couple of times. And my Aunt Mary, that was his wife, took me to Revere.

BS: Revere, that's excellent. How about the movies around here, did you go to the movie theaters?

ED: Oh we watched the movies, yeah we always went.

BS: What theaters did you go to?

ED: Central Square. And Durrell. Durrell Hall.

CW: And there was an old amphitheater that was right opposite where the police station is now.

BS: And do you remember the movies that you saw?

CW: The only movies that I remember I saw, the only recollection -

ED: Charlie Chaplin.

CW: The first talking picture that I saw was Wings. And my sister Mary brought me into the metropolitan to see that. That was a navigation picture, I can even tell you the people's names that were in it.

BS: Yeah?

CW: Buddy Rogers and Richard Arland. I don't know the year, but that's one of the recollections I have. But I went to that movie, it was a talking picture.

BS: And what theater was that at?

CW: That was at the Metropolitan, which is now the Wang Center. It was a big palatial theater at that time, too. I don't know who the owners, Mullen and Polanski were the movie owners of theaters all over greater Boston. They were called the M&P theaters. The Central Square theater was one of them. The thing that I, up to Durrell Hall was in the YMCA. We used to have a piano player come in. He used to come in and put his music on the piano. And he would play the overture to [...]. He would bang away at it, and then the lights would go out and the motion picture would start, it was a silent picture. He would play the music, up and down the scales of this music.

BS: What style of movies do you remember the most?

CW: The silent movies that I remember the most was -

ED: Jackie Cooper.

CW: Was a guy named Tim McCoy, Cowboy Pictures. Buck Jones, those were the ones. But I couldn't place the names of the pictures.

BS: Oh, that's ok.

CW: Well actually the recollection, the earliest recollection, was that incident about the prize fight. Tunney and Dempsey.

BS: Right, on the radio.

CW: That's the earliest recollection. The other recollection, was I was selling papers and I had a tooth pulled out by a dentist. That was Saturday, and I had to deliver the papers for one of my brothers who had another job in another store. So there was a big cruise liner burning off as we parked in New Jersey, called the Morro Castle. That ran from New York to Havana. And it was coming back from Havana, and to me it was like the Titanic disaster. There were a lot of people on it, and the ship was on fire. The Boston papers had a big extra edition. I could tell you all about extra editions.

BS: I was gonna ask you about newspapers, what newspapers were there in this neighborhood at this time?

CW: In the morning we had The Post and The Globe and -

ED: The Traveler.

CW: No, The Traveler was an afternoon paper. The Herald was in the morning. In the afternoon we had The Traveler and the Hearst Papers. The Boston American.

ED: The advertiser.

CW: That was called the advertiser. The Traveler, The Traveler didn't sell many papers in this whole neighborhood. I think we had about 4 customers, and we were one of our own customers. I could tell her where we sold the other ones, we sold one Traveler to that medicine factory, the guy in the basement. His name was McSolly. We sold him a Traveler. One of the other Travelers was a guy by the name of Buckley, over on Magazine Street in a property that was owned by Charlie Hurley. He was a prominent politician, and was later governor of the Commonwealth.

ED: Oh you asked a question about how many rich people. That lower end of Chestnut Street was all rich people. From Brookline Street to Sydney. We had the assessor up on the Fallons, by

city hall. And we had Doctor Mullins the dentist. And the Kelly family, I don't know what they did but they owned their own property. There were a lot of rich people around here. And the [...] who owned that big yellow house, if you came over the bridge that would be the first house you'd see, it would be on your right. They were wealthy. All that lower end of -

CW: Magazine Street.

ED: Magazine Street, but I mean even Henry Street that lower end. They were all school teachers, you know people of -

BS: It was a real nice mix.

ED: Yes, it was really nice. And the Bolton's who lived next door down here, they owned a place before Ford got in there. It was a stoneyard -

CW: A stoneyard. A lacrosse stoneyard or something.

ED: They had a lot of people who worked there, because you know they made the monuments for the graves and stuff. But that was gone by when I was, you know, when I could remember anything. But the Bolton's always lived next door to my mother. But my father remembered when the Bolton's owned this place. But as I said there were a lot of rich people around. And up on Magazine Street, the people that went to the church, my god, they had servants that worked for them, who lived on Magazine Street.

BS: So they had money.

ED: They had money, because they were paid. And of course, well your mother must have known real well too because she sang in the choir at the church.

Kelliher, Helen. "1998-04-15 Helen Kelliher." Interview by Barbara Slavin. 15 April 1998. Accessed March 2023.

Barbara Slavin (interviewer): Interviewing Helen Kelliher about her memories of the Fort Washington neighborhood in Cambridge Mass. She understands that this is going to go into the archives at Simmons College and will be signing a release to that acknowledgement at the end of the interview. I wanted to ask you, for beginners, what street or streets were you raised on?

Helen Kelliher: Sidney Street at 196.

BS: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

HK: I had one brother and three sisters.

BS: And what year were you born?

HK: 1912. The time of the Titanic.

BS: One of the purposes of this project was to ask you about your memories of the Fort Washington neighborhood, did you ever play at Fort Washington?

HK: Oh yes I think we played there every day, all our friends would get together and we enjoyed climbing on the cannons, and tumbling down the hill to the bunkers.

BS: How big were the cannons?

HK: Oh they were huge.

BS: Were there hills there, was it hilly?

HK: Oh yes, and it was a wonderful place to play, and some of us babysat children and took them over there. That was the place to go.

BS: Whose children would you babysit?

HK: Catherine's older sister, she babysat Davis O'Mara our cousin, and you know it was fun. We were all friends and played together.

BS: Did you play any games? Any formal games?

Hk: No I think we just chased each other around, we did play hide and seek.

BS: There was a game mentioned to me by somebody called "hoist the green sail."

HK: Oh yes "hoist the green sail," everybody went and hid somewhere and when they found you they yelled "hoist the green sail," we used to say "oyster green sail" I never knew what it meant for a long time (laughs).

BS: So it was supposed to be "hoist the green sail," but you said "oyster green sail?"

HK: And most of these children all went to the same school which was on Morse Street in Cambridge, we went to the same church, Blessed Sacrament, we were all one big happy family.

BS: Getting back to Fort Washington, did you ever hear any stories of what was buried at Fort Washington?

HK: We always thought George Washington's horse was buried there under the flagpole, we always thought that. And there was a policeman, Tom Burke, and we used to be there every time he rang his box and sometimes he would lift us up and have us pull the lever down, and we thought that was wonderful. Pull the lever for the police box, he made his rounds at Fort Washington so that was a big thing to be able to do that.

[4 min in]

BS: Do you remember any flag ceremonies?

HK: No we never had anything like that, a flag was up but there were no ceremonies.

BS: Did they take it down at night or put it up in the morning?

HK: No I don't think so.

BS: Did you ever call the neighborhood "Greasy Village?"

HK: Oh yes, there was a rendering factory there where they made the grease and they had the animals they killed I suppose and the grease from them.

BS: What were they rendering, or making?

HK: Soap.

BS: Would that be Reardons?

HK: Yes, Reardons.

BS: Did you know the Reardons?

HK: No I didn't.

BS: One of the interesting subjects of that neighborhood was the peddlers that came around. I wonder if you could tell me about the different kinds of peddlers and the carts and what they sold and what they said?

HK: So fish, and they sold vegetables and a baker that came everyday, and we had all kinds of people like that. And also the beggars I suppose you called them, they were homeless people I supposed, and they knew when to come when my mother made her biscuits on Saturdays, they'd all come and she'd give them a cup of coffee and a biscuit. And one day one of them complained

he said “don't put so much butter in them because it melted in my pocket,” and they were in rags anyway (laughs).

BS: How would he approach the house?

HK: He'd come to the back door, and sit on the stairs and he would have the hot biscuits and the coffee and then he'd go, he wouldn't bother anyone.

BS: Did you hear about them putting chalk marks on the house to indicate that the house had already been hit by... no?

HK: Oh no.

BS: Were they considered to be dangerous characters, or harmless?

HK: Oh no, harmless. They probably came across the tracks or someplace and came by.

BS: I wanted to ask you a little more about the peddlers, can you remember what the rag man would have said as he came through town?

HK: Oh yes, “boil them in the...” he had a song “boil them in the something else,” in those days they were washed at the boiler on the top of the stove, that's how they sterilize their clothes.

BS: So the boiler was a big pot they'd have on top of the stove for boiling clothes, not for boiling food. Was that the rag man who'd say “boil them?”

HK: There was the rag man too but there were all kinds of peddlers.

[8 min in]

BS: What would the fish peddlers say?

HK: Oh all kinds of fish and they'd dress it right there on the back of the [...] so you wouldn't have to go to the store.

BS: Could you tell me about the ice man?

HK: The ice man would come and you know we all had no refrigeration just ice, we'd all be running after him wanting a piece of ice, he would chip a piece off for us.

BS: How did he know you needed ice?

HK: Well we had a card we'd put in the window, the same way when we got oil burners we had a card to put in the window that we needed oil. We had the coal delivered.

BS: How was the coal delivered?

HK: It was put in by a chute, a big metal chute in the basement window and the coal slid right down into the cellar.

BS: What was the coal used for in the house?

HK: The kitchen stove, and a stove in the living room that was only used on weekends.

BS: Why was that?

HK: Well, because you couldn't afford it. So on weekends you'd light the pot bellied stove in the living room.

BS: You mean you couldn't afford the extra coal in the living room?

HK: Yeah.

BS: Could you tell me something about what was involved in your mothers so-called "banking the stove," what was involved in that?

HK: She used to bank it every night, she'd sift the cinders out in a barrel in the yard, and she'd bring it in and bank the fire.

BS: What does it mean to "bank the fire" in a stove, do you know what she did?

HK: It keeps it going all night, you know and you're not burning your coal. It's the coke you'd called in the cinders and the pieces of coal that hadn't been burnt before.

BS: So it's a way of keeping it going without burning the more valuable coal. That's interesting. I didn't know that. I think that you didn't have electricity at that time, is that right?

HK: Probably, yes.

BS: You had gas? How did the gas come into the house? For gas lamps?

HK: We had a gas meter, you'd put a quarter into it when the gas went low. I don't know how long that would last, not too long.

[11 min in]

BS: Could you tell me about wash day?

HK: Wash day was an all day affair, everybody helped. My mother always made a beef stew that day, which I thought was the hardest thing because you had to keep all the vegetables. But that's what we did and you'd have to hang everything out in the freezing winter, the clothes would be hanging up stiff as a board. We had certain days to use the lines because we had people on the other side and they washed too, so we could only have one day of the lines. And everything was washed in the same water (laughs) and at the end of the day when the wash was done you wouldn't waste the water you'd wash the kids in the water. And I'm telling you, my mother worked hard.

BS: When you say you had to take turns with the line, who owned the line?

HK: Oh, the people on the next side of us owned the house, so there were two floors on each side. It was like a duplex.

BS: And you couldn't just put up your own line?

HK: No, you had to use the one line, you know you had your day to use it.

BS: So everyone had their own wash day, I didn't know that.

HK: Yes, and the sud tubs, they were called sud tubs the big galvanized tubs, you'd have a bench in the kitchen and you'd have two of them. One for rinsing and one was for washing, you'd have a scrubbing board, you know.

BS: What was the first tub for? You said one was for something and one was for washing.

HK: Rinsing. And then if things were soiled you'd put them in the boiler on the stove.

BS: Did all the children get involved with wash day, or was it just your mother?

HK: Oh yes we all had to help, we all had other chores to do and each one had something to do. We'd hang them up, the clothes would be as stiff as the table, so cold.

[14 min in]

BS: Could you tell me about the ritual of the children getting bathed themselves, when did that happen?

HK: Oh, we had a bath once a week, and a hair wash and we went into the galvanized tin, the same tin. Our knees would be up in our mouths

BS: So they put you in a big pot?

HK: Yeah, and we'd put it on the floor and we had our bath and everyone would get in the same water too but we'd get the kettle and heat it up after each one. But when you think of it now.

BS: Do you remember how many rooms your house had?

HK: Only four.

BS: Four rooms, and where was the bathroom?

HK: Down the cellar, it was terrible. I hated it. I was scared to go down, my mother had to come down with me.

BS: Was it your own bathroom?

HK: But my mother loved to sit down there in the dampness (laughs) and the cats would be running, you didn't know how they got in, there was a broken window or something. But later on we had a bathroom in the hall, and you had to back into it it was so small (laughs) but we had fun and company in that house and plenty to eat.

BS: Can you tell me what evenings were like at home, for example how free did people feel to just drop in and visit you?

HK: Oh yes they were very friendly, it's not polite today. Anyone could drop in and the tea was on the table before you sat down. We had a lot of company, and we always had, even though we only had four rooms, we always had someone staying with us like my aunt Bridgie.

BS: And why was she staying with you?

HK: Well if she was between jobs, you know, and she'd stay.

BS: And for the record, you know I know this but what did Aunt Bridgie do for a living?

HK: She was a cook, for some very famous people too.

BS: What famous people?

HK: Governor Fuller, General Patton, and the Codvins, she worked for them, the Aires.

BS: The Aires, she married General Patton.

HK: Yes.

BS: Could you tell me when you went to bed at night, and when your parents went to bed how early?

HK: Well I think we went to bed by 9 o'clock any night, I don't remember my father much. I was only 6 when he died. But I remember the morning he died and all our neighbors came.

BS: And what did he die from?

HK: He died from complications from the flu.

BS: Do you have any memories of him at all, except from the day he died?

HK: No I have no memories but I remember the people coming.

[18 min in]

BS: Do you remember any home remedies your mother may have used when you were sick?

HK: Well she always had aspirin, she was a great believer in Bayer aspirin, it had to be Bayer.

BS: Anything like mustard plasters, anything that people don't do these days that they did then?

HK: No, Peg used to take this Father John's medicine that was a terrible taste, but she was always sick or something with a cold so that helped her with that.

BS: Can you tell me about your experiences with the flu, I know your father died from the flu, but how the flu affected the neighborhood aside from the tragedy of your father?

HK: Yeah we all got it, my mother took care of us. I don't know if we had a doctor or not, but she gave us medicine, I don't know what it was but some kind of a pill because she used to put the

pill in the ice cream for me and I'd find it. Oh I was terrible to take medicine. Peg had more things than anyone, you know one of those pea beans you bake beans with she put one of them up her nose one time and of course it swelled up inside so she had to have that removed and ever since she had sort of trouble with her nose.

BS: Can you tell us about the neighborhood, did anyone have cats or dogs or any kind of animals they kept?

HK: They all had cats, we didn't have a dog but I'm sure we had cats.

BS: How about rabbits or pigs?

HK: No nothing like that.

BS: Hens? Not your family but anyone in the neighborhood that kept hens or chickens?

HK: No, not pets like that but cats and dogs.

BS: Did people have vegetable gardens?

HK: No they really didn't, they probably didn't know how to plant them.

BS: Do you have any memories of a corn field I've heard about, near Reardon soap factory?

HK: There was one, I think they used to flood it in the winter and we'd go skating.

BS: Do you remember a section of town, of the neighborhood called "the pit" that kids used to take a shortcut through? Does that ring a bell?

HK: The pit, no.

BS: Going to school, did you come home for lunch everyday or did you stay in school?

HK: Oh yes we came home for lunch.

BS: And what did your mother do for your lunch? Did she prepare food for you?

HK: We'd have soup or a sandwich, probably peanut butter and jelly.

[22 min in]

BS: What are your memories of your school days?

HK: They were good, but I was sort of timid and if I was asked a question I wouldn't answer or wouldn't put my hand up because I was afraid I would be wrong. And it would be the same answer as I thought. In fact I came across a school picture of me yesterday and don't know what date it is, you may be able to tell me. That's the principal and that was Mrs. Donovan and Mrs. Kingsley and I'm here.

BS: We're looking at a school picture of Morse School. So generally you enjoyed your school days?

HK: Oh yes.

BS: Another thing that came up in my research was that you had these festivities in May, called them “May Day.” It wasn’t May Day but you had May parties?

HK: Oh they were wonderful, we’d be preparing for them for months, you know making the hoops and everything and we’d have the May party and walk around.

BS: What were the hoops for?

HK: You’d put them over your head, you know, one on each side and march through them.

BS: And what would you wear?

HK: You’d wear a nice dress and you’d have paper flowers on your head. You know it was fun.

BS: How many times would you have these events, just once in May?

HK: Yes, just once, maybe a couple of times.

BS: And what was the purpose of the May festivities?

HK: Well I guess May Day and May first.

BS: I wanted to ask you, how you heard news? I’m thinking of two types of news, world news for example if a big ship sank, in those days how did you hear about it?

HK: In the paper, we didn’t have radio in those days or television.

BS: And local news, like something happens in the neighborhood, how did you hear about it?

HK: Well word of mouth.

BS: And would you hear about it in the street or in the kitchen overhear the adults in the kitchen?

HK: In the street.

BS: I talked with someone who said he got lots of news from the pool hall, but I don’t imagine you hung out at the pool hall. But it seems the young men got a lot of information at the pool hall, so I wondered how young women would hear the news? Aside from Fort Washington where else would children play in the neighborhood?

HK: On the street outside.

BS: Hoist the green sail? Do you have any memories of going to the movies, the movie theater?

HK: No, we used to have a movie at Central Square called Durrells, we’d go there once in a while.

BS: Did you see silent movies or talkies?

HK: Silent, and [...] was there and would bang on the piano, we thought that was wonderful

BS: Can you remember any of the silent movies you saw? Any were memorable?

HK: No I can't.

[27 min in]

BS: I was surprised I dug up some records, the police reports in 1907 the things people were arrested for mostly larceny and breaking and entering and drunkenness, and I was interested to read that people were actually arrested for adultery and having illegitimate children. Did you ever hear anything about that? Never?

HK: No.

BS: What is your impression now of the crime in Fort Washington when you were growing up?

HK: Oh there was no crime, they were all good people, good kids growing up who never got into any trouble because they had no cars or anything to drive. They were wonderful family people

BS: Speaking of cars to drive, did you have a bicycle to ride?

HK: Oh yeah they had bikes but I don't think I did.

BS: Did you have sleds in the winter?

HK: Oh yes we had sleds, we used to in the winters were so bad, we had they were called "pungs" teams of horse drawn carriages. We used to get a ride on them once in a while, that was wonderful.

BS: That was like a big sled? Did you ever swim in the Charles River?

HK: Oh sure, Magazine Beach, you could swim there then.

BS: Did people have boats or rafts in the river?

HK: No, there were very few boats.

BS: How about in the winter did you walk or skate on the ice?

HK: No, but we used to cross the Charles River on the ice, but we shouldn't have done it because it would be cracking underneath us (laughs). My aunt used to live over on Beacon Street and we used to go over to her house to see her, Aunt Catherine. We used to cross the river, and today it is terrible you wouldn't do it today.

BS: It is funny to think about. Can you remember any other businesses in the neighborhood aside from Reardons soap factory that stick out in your mind?

HK: No I can't, well there was lally columns where my father worked, they made the beams that go in houses, if you looked down the beams that hold up the house that's what they made. Those are the only two businesses I knew of, but the smell from Greasy Village sometimes was

unbearable (laughs) whatever way the wind was blowing. But we all came out with good skin so it must have helped us somehow.

[30 min in]

BS: I wanted to ask you also about the nationalities that lived in the neighborhood. I know that you're Irish but what other nationalities lived in the neighborhood?

HK: Well there was mostly Irish but there were a few others.

BS: Any Italians or Scotch?

HK: Not Italians.

BS: Were there any Blacks?

HK: Oh yes, we lived next door to Blacks, the Smiths. They were very nice people and we got along fine. We never had any trouble.

BS: Which of the Smith's did you play with?

HK: Well my brother played with John, Johnny Boy, he was quite close to him.

BS: What other families did you play with?

HK: The Darts, they had the same amount of children so we each had a friend with them, I was friends with Naomi, we went to school together and everything.

BS: Can you tell me what Sunday dinner was like?

HK: We always had a big dinner on Sundays, we had a big dinner so we'd have something leftover on Monday, we had a roast, roast pork or beef, smoked shoulder with the vegetables and we always had dessert, mother would make gingerbread or something like that, she made a wonderful they called it a "war cake."

BS: What's a "war cake?"

HK: It was a very dark, with raisins and no frosting or anything, just a plain cake with a lot of fruit in it.

BS: And why was it called a war cake?

HK: Well I guess because it was probably cheap to make.

BS: And the war that it referred to, what war would that be?

HK: The first World War.

BS: You probably don't remember it breaking out, you were pretty young, or I should ask do you remember it breaking out?

HK: No, I don't remember that.

BS: Do you remember what it was like on the Fourth of July, what did you do?

HK: Oh, we'd always get ice cream at the playground, free ice cream. And they had games and stuff that you'd compete in. But the ice cream was the big thing, you'd have to wait in line.

[34 min in]

BS: And do you have memories of what Christmas was like in those days?

HK: Oh they were wonderful. We didn't get a lot of things but we had fun, we all got something, mostly things to wear. We didn't get a lot of toys or anything, things that we needed. But there was no competition like if something got something better than you it didn't bother us.

BS: Can you think of any other events or unusual events at that time, like any big funerals in town when you were a kid?

HK: No.

BS: How about ships going down? Not the Titanic, but any natural disasters you remember hearing about as a kid?

HK: It wasn't as far back, not a big fire or anything.

BS: What about the fire that killed all the horses? That was a local event but do you remember anything about that?

HK: Oh yeah, a little about it.

BS: I'm going to use this as a chance for you to tell me anything about the Fort Washington neighborhood before we wrap up the interview. Is there anything I should have asked you but didn't?

HK: Do you know all the families?

BS: Some of them, but I want to hear your memories and what you want people to know about the neighborhood that I didn't ask you.

HK: No, no they were all a wonderful bunch of people who got along good, no fighting or anything like that, there were a lot of boys in that neighborhood and you never heard them fighting or anything like that.

BS: That's good. I'll conclude the interview thank you.

Slavin, Mary. "1998-04-28 Mary Slavin - Side A." Interview by Barbara Slavin. 28 April 1998. Accessed March 2023.

Barbara Slavin (interviewer): I'm Barbara Slavin, at 34 Pilgrim Road in Wellesley Massachusetts, interviewing my mother Mary Slavin for the Fort Washington Greasy Village oral history project. She understands this will go into the archives of Simmons College and will be signing a release to that effect at the end of the interview. First I wanted to ask you, for beginners, what street or streets were you raised on?

Mary Slavin: Sidney Street.

BS: Any other streets?

MS: Right in the middle, opposite Hamilton.

BS: Ok. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

MS: 3 sisters, 1 brother.

BS: And what year were you born?

MS: May 4, 1908.

BS: Wow, and did you ever play at Fort Washington?

MS: In the summer mostly, it was a playground.

BS: Could you tell me what games you played there?

MS: We went to swim.

BS: At Fort Washington?

MS: No. Oh, you meant the games. Fort Washington, we were babysitting at times, we took our charges there. Mostly local children next door, on either side of us and in back. We would just run around the trenches. 1, 2, 3 trenches. And the guns, 3 of the large guns I suppose would be fired. And we rolled down the trenches' hills, very dusty and dry. And then, we just ran around and played and sat. And there wasn't a day of picnics like they do now, we lived so near. I would say a block behind our house. And we seemed to be, other children were there, but we seemed to be a group of 10. Anyway, and we all got along.

BS: You mentioned you were in charge of other children, how did that happen? It seems like everyone was in charge of children.

MS: No, babysitting.

BS: How did you happen to be a babysitter?

MS: Well, we knew everybody by name, the families behind us. One lady I sat for was Mrs. Henry, and she had 3 or 4 children. At the time I took care of Anna, Anna was the oldest. I took her everywhere, we walked block after block to stores and things. And she had 2 [...] on her head, and I got tired of having people stop and say 'Oh look she has 2 crowns [?], she'll travel the world.' And it kind of annoyed me, because I thought they were making, kind of, a little freak out of her. Because she wasn't a handsome baby, but she did have the 2 [...] and it meant good luck I guess. And I can remember if I didn't, if it was a stormy day, in those days we have blizzards not just ordinary storms. I went after school, I thought I'll go over, maybe they need an errand. And she opened the door, the mother, and the baby came out fully dressed in a sled. So I had to spend the rest of the afternoon taking her to my house, because you just couldn't go around, I thought she'd say we just won't have her go out today. And then also we had, we took our.. on the other side of a double - a triple decker was the landlord's daughter. Who, she was part of us.

BS: What was her name?

MS: Mary, Mary O'Hara. She was terribly deformed, but had a large head and a wonderful mind. A wonderful sense of humor, she could retain everybody's telephone number, and she was part of our life. She laughed at everything, and we always would never leave. They expected us to take her, and I think I was the one who did the most pushing. She was quite helpless but jolly, and we would always take her wish us.

BS: Do you know, today, what the name of that condition would be?

MS: Well, my mother said she was the youngest of 7, 2 sisters and 4 boys. My mother said, I said 'what happened to her, when she was born she was perfect.' But as I read later, and recently it's in the paper, she had spina bifida. And she was completely, except for one hand, just opened, and we used to say 'we'll exercise you.' And it was like pulling a lever you couldn't move, I think she managed to kind of eat, I'm not sure about that. And on rainy day, we were asked, or not asked, but a knock would come at our kitchen door and that meant we were to come read to Mary.

[7 min in]

BS: Did you ever get paid (laughs)?

MS: Oh no. I can always remember the busy kitchen, because they had horses and teamsters, a big kitchen table. And I often wondered why her mother didn't come to the door and say 'would

you like a glass of milk or something.’ But she was fun, and laughed at all the funny things that happened. And lived a long time, they didn’t expect her to live long. And she outlived some of her siblings. And she loved [...], because when radio came in that was a godsend. But I will say she didn’t live to the age of television which was the 50s.

BS: How old do you think you were when you first got a radio in the house?

MS: Oh, we were, I would say early 20s. We had an uncle who married my aunt, a Norwegian, and he could do anything. He made us a crystal set, and we were the talk of the neighborhood. Because they came in and just stared and couldn’t believe it.

BS: Do you remember any big events on the radio? Like, someone mentioned to me a big prize fight he heard on the radio. Do you remember anything like that?

MS: Well of course Jack Dempsey fought with some of the best, I remember Central Square in Cambridge being where some store, maybe a cigar store or something, would have a radio on. They stood, the crowds, just listening to the fight. And Gene Tunney was handsome, he didn’t look like a boxer. I wasn’t interested in that particularly.

BS: One of the things that interested me about stories of the old neighborhood was the peddlers that came through, and the things they would say. Like what the rag man would say, or the iceman would say. Could you tell me anything about that?

MS: Yes, it was kind of funny because the ragman was the funniest. He sang. We never could figure out what he was saying, but we gathered.

BS: What did he say?

MS: ‘Boil ‘em, and wash ‘em, and boil ‘em and wash ‘em.’ Well, that meant the big boiler, the boiler they put on the coal stove with [...] soda in it, and also the tubs were maybe the mending of the tubs if a hole got in it.

BS: And why would the rag man do that?

MS: This wasn’t a rag man, this was just the boiler man -

BS: The boiler mender man.

[11 min in]

MS: And the washer man. Which I assume was the tubs, 2 tubs, 1 for washing with a board in the kitchen or bench, and all that water had to be put in the sink. Never thought anything of it, that was wash day. You had a day that was your day to wash, 6 tenants. And dry, and if it was

cold, the sheets would be so frozen that you couldn't lift them in. You had to leave them until they softened up a little bit, they were just like pieces of board.

BS: Was wash day a whole day affair?

MS: For my mother, except that she always had friends drop in from Ireland or somewhere, and would drop anything just to give them tea and let them sit and talk. And that delayed the washing, she did all that on her own. And then of course, we had, the iceman came and went. He would take, windows, people on the upper floors would have a 25 cent or 10 cent piece of ice, he would take it all the way up 3 flights of stairs and put it in their refrigerator. Which was maybe, near the stairway, and put the piece of ice in.

BS: How did he know how much ice they wanted?

MS: They had a piece of cardboard with 10 cents, 25 cent piece, they knew when he was coming. The coal man put the coal through the cellar, a ton of coal went a long way. My mother knew how to bank at night, very careful.

BS: What's involved in banking a stove?

MS: It's to put it down, to bank it so that you didn't have coal heat coming all night. And in the morning you'd put coal on, and that had to be brought up from the cellar.

BS: Were these people, the coal man and the iceman, come with horse drawn carts?

MS: Oh always, yes.

BS: Was the fire and police horse drawn? When there was a fire did -

MS: Oh yes. Reardon's, there was a fire at Reardon's factory and you could see it as far as North Cambridge. We had relatives who lived around us, and they came all by street car I guess, or subway, I don't know. But they came, the street was, we were frightened you know, because the horses would be rushing to the thing, and the fire was like a background wall but everyone wanted to see it for some reason.

BS: That wasn't the fire where all the horses died? This was a different fire?

MS: No, this was a different time. A barn that Reardon owned, I think. We had horses almost in our backyard, you know. And I suppose they were teamsters, I don't really know what they did but I suppose trucks pulling and hauling. But Reardon's horses, I'm sorry that I had to see some of them panic, they went back instead of getting them out, all roasted.

BS: I didn't know about the fire at the Reardon's factory itself, do you know roughly how old you were at that time?

MS: I would say, well, I'd say 7 or 8.

BS: Did it burn to the ground, did they have to rebuild?

[15 min in]

MS: I don't remember, I don't think we went over and looked or anything. But it was right in the village, the village we called it. We didn't call it Greasy Village.

BS: You didn't?

MS: We were on the outskirts.

BS: Oh oh, I see. Can I ask you how it got the name Greasy Village, even though you aren't really from the village (laughs)?

MS: Well I think because of the making of the soap, they used horse's hoofs or something from the [...] in Allston. And on a nice humid night, you would get this pretty unbearable odor. And I think it was called, it somehow got the name greasy. But fine, wonderful people lived there. People with families. And right across the street from, well, the streets were narrow. But facing these rowhouses, these cold water flats, that was the village. And then in the back of that, in about a square, that was all those people. Wonderful people, church going people, all with 7 or 8 children. They grew up, and they were handsome. People used to say it was the rosy cheeks and skin that's why they look so beautiful.

BS: Rosy cheeks from what?

MS: From living near the factory (laughs). And they all went to school, went to work, very few went to high school.

BS: Did you go to high school?

MS: No, my father died, during the flu. Several of us had the flu, had people come in. Nothing you could do but sweat it out, but so many died.

BS: Could you tell me more about the flu, and what it was like in your neighborhood?

MS: Well I don't know about other people, but in my family the day my father died. He had complications after, he worked hard at lally column which was walking distance. He drove a truck, horse drawn. And later of course an automobile, you know, motor. He took care of us, or tried to. And it was after 1918, he died April 12. And there were women around him, I happened to look in the room, it was the end. And I went out on the steps, long steps covering where we all sat on a summer's night. And I sat there, hanging onto a pole, and a hearse drove up with some relatives in it.

BS: A hearse?

MS: I don't mean a hearse, I mean a -

BS: A wagon, a cab?

MS: No, a hack. They call it a hack. And they got out and they said to me, my father had just died and they said to me, they were coming from his sister's funeral in Arlington who had died from the flu. And they came directly to our house, and I sat there and they said, 'How's your father today?' And I said, 'a little better.' I think back now and I couldn't tell them he died. Because I figured one shock was enough, and they'd know in a minute. And that stayed with me for so long because I said I lied, and you know afterwards I thought I spared them, you know, a little more grief, that's about it. But getting back to the peddlers. We had a man who sharpened your knives.

[20 min in]

BS: Did he have a chant?

MS: I forget what he chanted, I suppose he said 'knives sharpened.' And we had a fellow called Blubber Gallagher, and he would have a truckload of peaches. And he would holler, 'Delaware peaches, Delaware peaches.' We bought everything he had. Then we had Angelino, who sold chipped ice. I think back now, how'd he keep the ice, well it was shaved ice. And he had orange, grape, strawberry, and different flavors of syrup.

BS: Oh, I see.

MS: And we would, I suppose it cost, I doubt it would be 5 cents, but I would say 'I'll have grape.' And anyone who ordered anything he'd say, 'Grape is the flavor for the baby, orange is the flavor for the baby.' Smiling all the time with the cart that he pushed. Now let me see, who else came.

BS: Vegetables?

MS: Oh the rag man. The rag man came, and I forget now. 'Rags, rags, rags,' or some other thing like that I can't remember. But we had, something about the woman upstairs. I don't know if she threw her rags out the window but we always got a little fun from that.

BS: Do you remember the soap grease man? Does that mean anything to you? You'd give him your saved up grease and he'd give you a cake of soap?

MS: I remember during World War II, we took our grease to the market, any leftover grease. They wanted all that.

BS: Oh that's World War II, not World War I.

MS: No, this was World War II.

BS: Do you remember World War I breaking out?

MS: Yes, I remember. We got the Boston Globe.

BS: Well, to this day (laughs)!

MS: And we looked at [...] and Jeff, and at a few comics, and we, my father and mother read it. And we had, well I got hooked on the Globe to this day.

BS: How did you know that the war broke out?

MS: I can remember the headlines, plain as can be. I was, well let's see, I was 10. 1915 or '14, I was 8. And I remember the terrible words that took up half the page: 'War, war, war.' In these big letters. And pictures of the Huns [?] and of course I had dreams I met them over by the Grey and Davis building -

BS: The Huns?

MS: The one that leads onto Cottage Farm Bridge, which is now BU Bridge. And we had wonderful, oh that places to play, we always had Magazine Beach. We went there to play on the 4th of July. We had -

BS: What was 4th of July like?

MS: 4th of July they gave out boxes of ice cream: chocolate, vanilla, strawberry. You stood in line and got one. We would play around there and wait for that, that was a big day.

BS: And where were you?

MS: At home, walked over on the 4th of July.

BS: Did you go to Fort Washington?

MS: No, well, yes of course. But there was a flag up there, and I can't remember, maybe a small ceremony.

BS: Did the children ever tell each other stories about what was buried at Fort Washington?

MS: Well we wanted it to mean something. Not even in school did they mention the fort, but the plaque was there, 'George Washington commanded the Continental Army in 1775' or 6. I don't know why they thought the British were coming up the Charles River, but the Charles River was there years ago. But what we saw was a filled in land with no road and behind, the railroad tracks. The Boston-Albany went through. So we would watch the tracks. But it had an iron fence around it, and we would walk, and of course there were cattle go by and pigs yapping.

[25 min in]

BS: So tell me about the cattle and pigs. Where were they, and what were they doing there?

MS: They were on the train. On the way to someplace, and especially we'd get another whiff of you know... and then several boys were killed when they, you know, got outside their fence.

BS: Killed by what?

MS: By playing when the train came along, and they got too near or something. Got under it. And it was so sad, because the boy, whether I saw it or not I can't remember. But it is vivid that he was calling for his mother, and of course everyone gathered and I guess he was gone. I think his name was McFee.

BS: I did want to ask you, just to clarify something. I heard some other people say that children used to say that George Washington's horse was buried at Fort Washington. Was that something you used to hear as a kid?

MS: Well, we talked about it so much, we said 'Well, he isn't buried here but maybe his horse is buried here.' We wanted to have some meaning, you know, I don't think we ever knew why it was there (laughs). We were so young. But I wanted to say, too, about people coming to the house selling things.

BS: I'd love to hear it.

MS: We got a Catholic paper, The Pilot, and of course The Globe. I'm sure that was delivered, and we had people selling insurance. My mother, 5 cents for our children for insurance, that was a lot. By the time you got married, say 25 or so, that 5 cents would accumulate to a couple of hundred dollars. 200 or 300 dollars, could buy you a wedding dress. A whole wedding in fact for that. He came every week to collect the 5 cents.

BS: Do you still have your policy?

MS: I don't, no.

BS: I thought you still had your policy.

MS: No, you had to turn it in. I didn't take that with me when I got married. And then we had a man who sold clothes, mostly to my mother. House dresses, corsets, anything you wanted. But anyway, he was a salesman. Nice quality stuff. Let's see, who else came. Of course we had the beggar who came, not a beggar, but somebody came to my mother's. [...] talk about?

BS: Anything you want to talk about.

MS: My mother made beautiful bread, enough for a half a week anyway. And biscuits, and a pot of baked beans. That was Saturday's doing. And we had one, I remember one particular fellow who came to the back door. Sit on the stoop, the small back stoop. And my mother would give him biscuits, several with butter on it. No margarine. And a cup of tea, I'm sure. And he would sit there and eat it. And one day, we wondered if it was a good habit, you know, there were no lines waiting for anything. And one day he went, and took, and came back after a while. Oh, he asked if he could have a few, to take with him. And my mother gave him 3, but it wasn't long until he came back and said 'you didn't butter the biscuits.' Later on we had fun telling, talking about it, saying you have a big chalk mark on your door so that everyone will know where they can get biscuits. Or my brother, who you know, everything touched him funny, would say 'Ma, that man that just left, I just saw him get in a limousine with a chauffeur in the car' (laughs).

[31 min in]

BS: Could you tell me about the chalk marks?

MS: I don't remember that but somebody said -

BS: Oh, it was made up?

MS: Yup, made up. Well, we kidded my mother because she was so good to be so charitable. And who else did we have selling stuff at the house? One time my mother didn't have, something cost \$2 and she gave a man \$5 and he never came back.

BS: Oh, that's terrible.

MS: I forget what it was, we never got, whatever it was, it was something.

BS: I'm kind of jumping around, but do you have any memories of your father on his day off? Did he play with the children, what did he do on his day off?

MS: He worked so hard that I don't remember [...] a time on Sunday to let my mother go to church. He would wheel us around, we, my mother and father, had 4 girls and the last one was a boy. And that's why the whole neighborhood was so proud that he walked us. One in a carriage that must have been my sister Helen. And the rest of us went with him, the 4 girls and John was the baby. Oh, they opened their doors and couldn't believe it, at last you have a boy. And he went a lot to visit relatives, that was a custom. His cousins were in Randolph, he went there on Sundays.

BS: How did he get to Randolph?

MS: Well, somebody said, he had a bicycle and all, skinny bicycle. Somebody told me he rode all the way, on the bicycle. He would sit on the bench in the kitchen and play the harmonica, I remember that. And he played cards at night with the O'Haras. Mostly men there, he'd go in there and play cards. And we really had a lot of, with a small house so forth, everything was family and cousins. Everything was celebrated. And how we happened to put on food and so forth, in such a small house, but we managed.

BS: What was Sunday dinner like? Speaking of food.

MS: Well, the men in that day always went to the market. There really wasn't a good market in those days, you know early days, that you could go to. So they went into Boston. The market I suppose was Faneuil Hall. They always bought roast beef, always roast beef. They'd come home with a roast beef big enough to use for a few days, a week.

BS: So the men would go into the North End, Faneuil Hall, to get the meat and bring it back once a week?

MS: Well, Saturdays.

BS: Saturdays, ok.

MS: Sunday. And that would go quite a way for a family.

BS: And how would he get to the North End?

MS: Oh, well you know -

BS: Streetcar?

MS: We were the first country to have a subway before other transportation, cars. I don't remember that. We would have, whether it was 90 degrees, we'd have that for dinner on Sunday that was the main thing.

BS: And what would you have to eat?

MS: Well, roast beef. Lamb. Not much pork. Chickens were skinny, they were not like today. So we would have chicken soup, we'd use fowl. My mother could make out of that enough soup with flavor all that went into it. We would always have, of course, potatoes. And a vegetable, green beans or squash or turnip. And of course, the homemade bread. And we didn't have much dessert at dinner so much as at night. Supper, we would have a lot, as we grew old we would have a lot of our friends come in. And we would make the cakes and desserts in those days were gingerbread with whipped cream. And apple cake, a cake with sliced apples across the top, called maybe Dutch apple cake. And then sugar and cinnamon on the top. Once in a while, Indian

pudding. And pies and cakes of course, and snow pudding which is made of Jell-O. White instead of, mix the Jell-O with the egg whites. And Jell-O was a dessert, and ice cream. Without a refrigerator, you'd wait until Fourth of July and make your own. In the backyard, putting it on the salt to make it just right. But drug stores you could get a cone, an ice cream cone. They called them hokie pokies, it would be just like that. Our uncle came into our life after my father, was quite an asset to our family. He loved children. He could do anything. We thought he was rich because we went to the drug store and he bought us all sodas. Ice cream sodas.

BS: Which uncle was this?

MS: Uncle Harry. Olsen.

BS: Harry Olsen. And what country was he from?

MS: Norway.

BS: So he's your uncle by marriage.

MS: Married my aunt, she was a domestic work for the very wealthy Lumineers. That was the only job she had.

BS: Lumineer?

MS: Well, he was German. They lived in Boston, as most of them did. No, New York, rather. And the North Shore. The wealthy people in Boston, it was Ipswich and Marblehead. Beverly Farm, Magnolia. All those coastal places because they could take their boats and come into town.

BS: Do you have any other aunts who were domestics?

MS: Oh yes, my aunt Bridget who worked for Henry Lee Higginson, who founded the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Alvin Fuller, the governor, as a cook. My aunt Katherine, she was the one with the Ayer, Nathaniel Ayer. And she was a governess, for the Lumineers. I don't know what she did, a maid, at Ayers. And she worked for Eleanor Sears, she just took time off.

BS: What about - you're forgetting the very famous person that she worked for (laughs). In the army?

MS: Oh yes, General Patton. When I was at [...] during the second World War she was stationed there. She came from Washington, which wasn't too far. She worked for Patton, but briefly not too long. She always liked the men, she never liked the women because they didn't like anyone coming into the kitchen and telling them what to do. But the real wealthy people didn't do that. The newly rich didn't have the charm, I mean they wouldn't interfere. But they didn't get big money but they were so well taken care of, the domestics, chauffeurs for church. They were very

refined ladies, all of the help that I knew. They were at our house on days off because they wanted to see children. So we had company absolutely around the clock every week, which was kind of nice.

[41 min in]

BS: One of the stories I've heard from other families in the village is families taking in sick people for long periods of time. Did that happen in your family, did your mother take in anyone who was sick?

MS: Well, relatives. She never had to -

BS: She never nursed a relative back to health?

MS: No, no. She was too busy with us, she was a homebody. Did everything well, and slow. But very thorough, and wonderful common sense. Which is sometimes better than any other talent you can have. We had some, when I look back now, some bad times. But I feel that they were... came from Ireland, and was sponsored by my mother's aunts who lived on Hamilton Street. It was like a little compound. And two of the sisters took these, met these people, sponsored them, took them from Boston right to their homes, where they were bedded until they got married, most of them. It was wonderful, because they didn't come without anyone there to support them. And so as a result, I had relatives all over Cambridge within walking distance. And on Sunday, that was visiting day, we went to see them. Took the children, came home, and another time they'd come to our house. So it was like open house all the time.

BS: People could just drop in, when they felt like it?

MS: I'm the only one in my neighborhood who would wave and walk in the door, and be welcome.

BS: You mean here, in this neighborhood?

MS: Yeah, it was very common. You came in, and sat down and always had tea. And talked. My sister in laws, of my father's family. And Arlington, visited there. There was nothing to visit, we were like one unit, we were all within walking distance. But that wasn't like other people, they had no one, some of them that came to the house. So it was like, evidently, didn't have relatives over here, they came. A Scotch family, a German family, and others. It just wasn't, they all came from a certain place in Ireland, County Cork. They were neighbors over there, and became sisters and brothers, sisters especially because the women were the social ones. And even though we all

had to go to work, I had to go to work early. Because my mother had 2 babies, almost at 40 years of age, there was no help in those days.

BS: Welfare?

[46 min in]

MS: No not welfare, but no benefits, maybe \$1000.

BS: So no social security?

MS: Insurance, no. But each one took their turn working, and women could always get a job because we were surrounded by factories. I want you to look up, we had what we called library bureau, and we all worked there sometime or another on Albany Street.

BS: I never heard of that. Library bureau?

MS: Library bureau, it was a card... I can't remember, we sorted cards and things. I can't tell you anymore.

BS: What was their business, making cards?

MS: No, I don't know why it was called library bureau even. When they moved somewhere else, my sister worked there, my cousins. We just took things for granted I guess, but I worked there a very short time when Remington Rand took it over.

BS: But what business was it?

MS: Card business, filing, all kinds of things. I can't tell you, we just did our work.

BS: (laughs)

MS: I didn't, I wasn't there that long because I had an offer to go to a store, a candy store.

BS: When you say card business, what do you mean by card?

MS: Well, I remember when I worked for, they moved away after a while. And Remington Rand, do you know what that is?

BS: I'm not sure.

MS: Well, they were in South Boston. I worked a short time there when my cousin of my mother's called to say there was an opening in Central Square's Hennesseys. And I thought that was a nice place I could walk to work every day. I was there 4 years. But all told, we think we had the most wonderful past. And now when I think of today, with the benefits and everything. But my mother wouldn't have taken, there was some aid for, help for -

BS: Widows?

MS: Dependent children, or something. But we really didn't, they would be at your house every 2 weeks to see if maybe you bought a new broom or something.

BS: You know, I read the police reports for that time, and I was surprised there were a lot of arrests for all sorts of things. Public drunkenness, breaking and entering, thievery, stealing teams for horses, and all sorts of crazy things. When you look back on the village, what is your memory of crime in the village?

MS: None, absolutely none. We never knew of anyone, we knew one girl who was pregnant -

BS: Ah!

MS: We were told not to even mention it. You just dropped it. The boys, we played girls, I don't know forever. But the boys would tease us, but that's about it. We were never out looking to be glamorous or anything.

BS: I noticed a lot of this talk of, attitude of, not talking not mentioning bad things that happen. Talking to other people, it seems like they were told by their parents when something bad happens, that you're not supposed to talk about it.

MS: Oh yeah.

BS: And that's not the way I was brought up, I don't think. That you just can't talk about it. Could you tell me why they did that?

MS: Because it was morally right to do it, just the same way it is today. When you scandalize somebody, whether they were guilty or not. To me, it was up to, whatever they did, it was up to God. You just didn't go around like you do now.

BS: So not talk about it in the way of spreading it? Ok.

[50 min in]

MS: You don't tell. Even if something was bad, like you know what's going on today, you did not spread the news that was bad. You kept it to yourself, you didn't just go around scandalizing people. Even if it was, it was their business with God. If they sinned terribly, God is the judge, not us. We learned all that, we were drilled plenty when it comes to right and wrong. And lie, once in a while, you'd say they 'handled the truth carelessly' rather than say they lied. You wouldn't say that.

BS: Really?

MS: You know they were saying something. But we had [...] see once we grew up, you had 4 sisters, you had your own friends. You just don't play with your sister anymore. And of course, I

had a brother who was a real [...] brought up with women mostly. See the women did a lot of the visiting, the men didn't go too much for that. He was brought up, the youngest, with 4 sisters and aunts coming in. And one cranky aunt who gave a lot of orders. He felt he was picked on, and correcting my mother too much... what was I saying?

BS: Oh, that's ok.

MS: I was talking about...

BS: The cranky aunt?

MS: Well I was just saying that he became a comedian. By, not hurting anybody, but by what I judged, to women talk. And of course he was the tease. You know, there would be a call for us and of course there wouldn't be a call at all. But he grew up to be very very witty, without hurting anybody and having funny names for them. And we all knew that.

BS: Could you tell me about, you mentioned a Blubber Gallagher. Were there any other so-called characters in your neighborhood, who were known as characters?

MS: Oh yes. Curtis McKenna, who teased us a lot. I wouldn't say he was a character.

BS: But an adult character, an adult like Blubber.

MS: We would be sledding, we would have a sled, a flexible Flyer, a long one. Who knows how we got the sled, but anyway. The streets, of course, you know, were never paved. Never clean, they just had runners on them, the trucks. We called them caravans or pungs.

[54 min in]

BS: Pungs.

MS: It was so low you could sit on it, and get a little ride up to the corner.

BS: Could you tell me what a pung looked like?

MS: A very flat bed, that's all. Fat as this table, with the horse and wagon pulling it.

BS: Was it on snow or something, how did it -

MS: On thick snow, heavy snow. So that no trucks -

BS: It was like a sled?

MS: Well after a while it would be good enough to take a sled up the street, but there was never a street that was ever plowed. It was done by these, well they were in business, they were trying to get through [...]. But that was early on.

BS: How did you get your trash emptied? What did you do with your -

MS: Oh there were barrels that you put them into. And garbage was collected, but it happened to be where the O'Hara's had their barn. That was another row of houses on the left of our house, and I could never understand why the barrels were there because the people who lived there were getting the garbage. You know that they would throw in, there were bins for us. Metal barrels. They would come regularly. And I often thought it wasn't very pleasant, we didn't go to our backyard -

BS: So the garbage was picked up?

MS: And the rubbish.

BS: So everything was picked up by the town?

MS: Yeah, the town.

BS: You didn't burn anything?

MS: No, I don't think we had the rubbish. We didn't have packages that you open, we had brown paper bag that we bought a pound of sugar, you get a small brown paper bag. And during WWI, we had to use brown sugar for everything. There was such a cake, that was War Cake, it had suet in it rather than shortening. Delicious. We could get raisins.

BS: What was in it, besides suet and raisins?

MS: We could get eggs, 5 cents a dozen. They were called cold storage eggs. And I remember going and getting a half pound of sugar. It was like stealing it, you wait in line for a half pound of sugar. And the neighbors would say 'go back and get a half pound of me,' and I'd say I can't.

Slavin, Mary. "1998-04-28 Mary Slavin - Side B." Interview by Barbara Slavin. 28 April 1998. Accessed March 2023.

BS: We turned the tape over, you were telling me about the sugar, and the rationing of World War I?

MS: Yes.

BS: I was wondering, did they use coupons?

MS: No.

BS: So how did they - it was just an honor system?

MS: No, I don't remember any coupons. I just remember.. We had during the second World War. I don't remember getting... just going and getting [...]. But we were so honest, we wouldn't go back twice (laughs). The shortages were, during the second World War, were no butter, that's

why you used... Yeah I'm sure we had a little butter. You could get heavy cream, so you could make the butter with that by beating it up. Margarine, we had. I remember we had some sort of [...]. Not lard, but some sort of a thing you put in an orange thing that made the butter yellow. And people couldn't stand it, to this day margarine had a bad name until they improved it. It was awful. When my aunts worked in these wealthy houses, they had... you could smell the butter cakes as you went in. Everything was like a [...], unless there was a pound of butter in a cake or something. Sponge cake was the favorite thing in those days.

BS: One thing I forgot to ask you, was on an everyday basis, when your mother set the table to eat, did you set the table the same way we set the table now? With the fork on the left, and the knife and the spoon on the right?

MS: Oh sure.

BS: Identical to the way we do it now?

MS: We did all that, we did all [...] we all had to clean our room.

BS: Did you have a bread and butter plate? On an everyday basis?

MS: I'm not sure you wanted bread with the food we had.

BS: Right.

MS: But uh...

BS: Well, you know, I think this is a good time to close up this part of the interview. I want to thank you so much for letting me ask you these questions. And I'm going to close up the interview for right now, thank you very much.