

ORAL HISTORY T-0004
INTERVIEW WITH: RICHARD CONWAY
INTERVIEWED BY: DR MARGARET SULLIVAN
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This tape is being made for the University of Missouri-St. Louis as part of a St. Louis Ethnic Oral History program. I am Margaret Sullivan and today I am talking to Mr. Richard Conway. Mr. Conway, would you like to say something about where you were born and when you came here and how you came to St. Louis?

CONWAY: I was born in Ireland, in Kilkenny. That's in the East of Ireland, and I'm up in years. I'm older than I look, I guess. I guess I look pretty old. I was born in 1885...I'm 86 years old. I went to school there as a boy, and then I had an uncle that lived here in St. Louis and he came over...that was the year of the Fair, the World's Fair here. He asked my father to let me come along over here, and so that's why I came out here. And I've been here all the time since. I went to the Central High School, which used to be on Grand Avenue just south of St. Alphonsus Rock Church. I graduated there and then I went to Jones and Henderson's Business College which was almost across the street from there on the west side of the street. I took up a course there about, oh, I guess about a year, and then I went to night school to the old Benton College of Law. I went there for a couple of years, so that's all the education I got.

SULLIVAN; When you came to St. Louis, did you find many Irish organizations and...were the Irish pretty well entrenched in the city?

CONWAY: Well, there were quite a lot of Irish here at the time, mostly... of course the Knights of Columbus were new at that time...lots of Irish belonged to the Knights of Columbus, I belonged to the Knights of Columbus and I belonged to the Laymen's Retreat League. That's a Jesuit's organization...we meet on . I used to go down there to retreat every year. But for the past couple of years, since I quit driving, I don't go down there. And I belong to the Legion of the Thousand Men. That's up there at the Pink Sister's. And I belong to the Council and the Knights of Columbus. So that's the organizations I got affiliated with. Of course, regarding the Hibernians, you know why the Hibernians were founded?

SULLIVAN: No.

CONWAY: The Hibernians were founded to give protection to the Catholic priests in Ireland. They used to be hunted down like wolves by the English. And they organized the Hibernians, founded the Hibernians and that was in the 15th century. And then they branched to nearly all parts of Ireland and the counties of Ireland. They done a good job...they gave protection to the Catholic priest. Later on they branched out and helped the Irish in many

ways. And then they came to this country... You told me when they came to this country.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, I think it was 1870 when they were founded in St. Louis.

CONWAY: Yeah, I guess that's about right. ...Now what else would you want to know?

SULLIVAN: When did you join the Hibernians here?

CONWAY: I joined the Hibernians in 1906.

SULLIVAN: How many branches did they have?

CONWAY: They had eight branches then. Of course, they are like other organizations...they have shrunk a whole lot.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, they all have.

CONWAY: Of course, they only have the two branches now.

SULLIVAN: About how many members did they have in 1906?

CONWAY: Oh, they had about, I imagine, about 5,000 members here in St. Louis.

SULLIVAN: That's a lot.

CONWAY: Yes. I attended twelve national conventions of the organization. I attended one in Boston, Massachusetts...I attended one in San Francisco, I attended one in Montreal, Canada, I attended one in Atlantic City. And I attended one in Rochester, New York. I know I attended twelve national conventions. I held every office in the organization here. I was President of my own division, I was county president, I sat two terms as County President, and I sat two terms as State President. So that's my history with the Hibernians.

SULLIVAN: You were really connected with the Hibernians. What was the structure of the Hibernians? You have the divisions and then...each division was like a council or...?

CONWAY: Just like a council, just like a council. The same thing...of course, they call them councils in the Knights of Columbus. So, they're a little bit different.

SULLIVAN: And then the County Board was made up of...

CONWAY: It was made up of so many divisions. They had 8 or 9 divisions in a county.

SULLIVAN: And the divisions elected representatives to the County Board?

CONWAY: Yes, that's right. And the county...all the divisions had one or two delegates that would attend the state convention, too.

SULLIVAN: The divisions that made up the County Board included the City and St. Louis County or...

CONWAY: Yeah, St. Louis, St. Louis County, Kansas City and St. Joe, Missouri. And they used to have a division in Moberly, Missouri. Of course, I don't think they have a division in Moberly, Missouri anymore. They have a division of the organization in Kansas City. I don't believe they got any in St. Joe anymore. So you see how they shrink and dwindle. So that's about it.

SULLIVAN: What sort of...why do you think most people joined the Hibernians? ...for kind of a social ...or, what kinds of work did they do?

CONWAY: It was a Catholic organization, you know. You have to be Irish to be an Hibernian, you know...Irish or of Irish descent, either one. That's what's necessary to join the Hibernians.

SULLIVAN: It's more of a social organization, then.

CONWAY: Yes, it is now. But in days gone by, it gave a lot of protection to the Irish. You know, the Irish were kind of discriminated against in through the New England States in the early ages. And the Hibernians banded together and they soon done away with that. In fact, they are more respected now than nearly any other race through those states, the New England States. And that was always due to the English. You can't imagine how Ireland was persecuted in those days, in the dark and evil days of the penal laws. To be a Catholic was high treason, and to be Irish, you might say, was to invite death. So the way priests were dragged and they hunted them down like wolves.

SULLIVAN: I know, I know. I know the Hibernians gave picnics every summer, right?

CONWAY: Yes.

SULLIVAN: They gave huge picnics from what I can gather from the newspapers.

CONWAY: In, I believe it was 1904, they had 50,000 who passed through the gates at Fairground Park. Most of the picnics were given there at that time.

SULLIVAN: I think the highest I ever saw in a newspaper was 30,000...that was amazing, but 50,000.'

CONWAY: Yes, that's right.

SULLIVAN: Was that the biggest event of the year...the annual picnic, I mean...drew the most people?

CONWAY: Yes, generally on the 4th of July. They used to have their big picnic on the 4th of July in them days.

SULLIVAN: What other kind of things did the Hibernians give...what kind of social events, or ...?

CONWAY: Well, they used to give dances and entertainments of various kinds, you know. They still do. In fact, they're having a picnic next Sunday. They're having it out at Heman

Park. So, they generally have pretty good crowds, but nothing to compare with the days gone by.

SULLIVAN: Heman Park would be overwhelmed with 50,000 people.' You couldn't fit those in.

CONWAY: That's right.

SULLIVAN: I know the Hibernians engaged in other things. I remember reading one time that they did things like...I recall if a theater was burlesquing the Irish character, they used to sometimes tell them that they'd boycott them, something like that.

CONWAY: That's right. They'd write against them, and they'd take it up with them if they saw anything in the paper that was casting any kind of a reflection on the Hibernians or on the Irish. They'd take care of it, you know.

SULLIVAN: They were kind of a defense league, too.

CONWAY: That's right.

SULLIVAN: Another thing I recall reading was that they used to give Irish History prizes. They used to teach Irish History in the schools.

CONWAY: Oh, yes, they had Irish History in the schools. They had them lately...oh, twenty-five years ago. In fact, they've been talking about it again. But whether or not they'll materialize, I don't know. I hope it will, but they used to give prizes to those who were best in the Irish History, and so forth and so on. Now, anything else you want to know?

SULLIVAN: The Hibernians, as I understand it, had some kind of a fight about the 1930's. Was there some kind of a fight in the organization? I got this information from...do you know a Tom Flynn? He was a President...

CONWAY: Tom Flynn that died?

SULLIVAN; Yeah, I was talking to his son, Tom Flynn, and he was telling me something about his father had said about an argument over buying the old Columbian Club, or something.

CONWAY: The old Columbian Club...that was down there on Lindell Avenue. The Hibernians never met there...that...that was the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus owned that hall, and _____ was head of the Knights of Columbus.

SULLIVAN: Maybe he was telling me about the Knights of Columbus. I thought he meant the Hibernians. Did the Hibernians have their hall on Finney?

CONWAY: Yes. 3690.

SULLIVAN: How long did they meet there?

CONWAY: Oh, they met there for years.

SULLIVAN: The Hibernians met down on Finney.

CONWAY: Yes, 3690 Finney.

SULLIVAN: Do you have any idea how long? What happened to the building?

CONWAY: Oh, the building is some kind of a Baptist church now. They sold that...the other people moved in so much around there, that they sold it.

SULLIVAN: About what year was that? Do you have any recollection?

CONWAY: Oh, it was probably about 25 years ago. They have an auxiliary, you know, a ladies' auxiliary. And they didn't want to meet there anymore.

SULLIVAN: Were the Hibernians discontinued here for a while? Somebody told me...

CONWAY: The what?

SULLIVAN: The Hibernians...were they discontinued here?

CONWAY: No, no. They never did, to my knowledge, discontinue. No.

SULLIVAN: Maybe that was the ladies' division, or something.

CONWAY: I don't know that the ladies' division ever discontinued either.

SULLIVAN: I guess I have bad information.

CONWAY: They used to have a strong organization. I think they still have a good organization.

SULLIVAN: Yes, they do have an organization.

CONWAY: They meet in the same hall, too.

SULLIVAN: Yes, I know. That's how I found you.

CONWAY: They meet in the same hall, but in different halls, you know.

SULLIVAN: What was the function of the ladies in the old Hibernians? What did they do?

CONWAY: Well, of course, their reason was like of an auxiliary of any kind... to help the men's organization. And they've done a lot of good things. They had meetings, and they had people come here from Ireland. Like McSweeny. Remember McSweeny?

SULLIVAN: Yeah, I remember reading that.

CONWAY: Her brother...

SULLIVAN: Karen...

CONWAY: ...was the Lord Mayor of Cork. He went on a hunger strike, and he died on it. And she came here, and, oh, well, they had a big time here.

SULLIVAN: Did you belong to the Friends of Irish Freedom?

CONWAY: No, I never belonged to the Friends of Irish Freedom. I belonged to the other various organizations...the Knights of Columbus. That's more of a Catholic organization. And I belonged to other Irish organizations.

SULLIVAN: Do you remember... You mentioned belonging to Knights of Columbus and other Catholic organizations in St. Louis. Did the German Catholics and the Irish Catholics generally belong to the same organizations or different ones?

CONWAY: Oh, yes. Sure they did. Oh, the Knights of Columbus...

SULLIVAN: ...were kind of half German, and half Irish.

CONWAY: That's right. So many councils in the Knights of Columbus. I guess they've got a hundred councils here in Missouri. But I don't think they've got as strong an organization as they used to have in days gone by.

SULLIVAN: I meant way back about 1910...1920. Was there a split between the Germans and the Irish here or not?

CONWAY: Not that I know of.

SULLIVAN: Not really.

CONWAY: Not that I know of. There never were any, not to my knowledge. Of course, previous to...I'd say about 1900, the Hibernians were very strong here. I think they had a stronger membership than at any other period of the organization then.

SULLIVAN: When did the Hibernians begin to decline, would you say?

CONWAY: Well, little by little, you know.

SULLIVAN: In the 20's or 30's?

CONWAY: Yes, in the 20's and 30's...previously to that a little, too.

SULLIVAN: Do you think that maybe after 1920 when Ireland became a free state that they kind of dropped off?

CONWAY: Particularly since Ireland, the 26 counties of Ireland, became a free Republic. See, they used to be taking an active part in promoting the freedom of Ireland. And since they got the 26 counties free, they should be fighting to have Ireland united, you know. They really should.

SULLIVAN: There doesn't seem to be as much enthusiasm.

CONWAY: No, that's right.

SULLIVAN: I've gotten the impression from reading things that after Ireland, southern Ireland, became the free state, a lot of the Irish organizations began to decline a little.

CONWAY: Yes. They didn't have anything to fight for after that.

SULLIVAN: The cause was kind of something to hold everybody together.

CONWAY: That's right. Particularly since it was made a Republic. See, they...that's the big thing, but it should be united.

SULLIVAN: It should be one country.

CONWAY: And, of course, now, the British, at the present, say it's the Catholics and the Protestants that's fighting in the North of Ireland, but it's more the other way. They don't get the same privileges up there as they do, as the others...in jobs and so forth. And in elections, they ...these that belong to the British...they try to make them believe that it's just the Catholics and the Protestants...which it isn't. The Catholics and the Protestants march together and they're very good friends. And, of course, the British make them all believe that it's all a Catholic and Protestant issue.

SULLIVAN: My mother taught me to never trust an Englishman.' ...How many members do the Hibernians have now...here?

CONWAY: I wouldn't know. Ask _____ Sullivan, he could tell you. You know, Margaret Houlian?

SULLIVAN: Yeah, I talked to her on the phone.

CONWAY: She's nice. She's a good woman.

SULLIVAN: I have two children and the lady who babysits for me belongs to the ladies' auxiliary. Her name is Agnes Igoe. Maybe you know her.

CONWAY: No, I don't know her. I used to know a _____ Igoe. He was a congressman here...Pruitt-Igoe.

SULLIVAN: What about the Irish in politics? There are a lot of Irish in politics here. Do you have any comments about... Do you have any reminiscences about politics, or...

CONWAY: No, I never was...

SULLIVAN: Never very active in politics?

CONWAY: No, not in politics. When politics get into an organization, they don't help the organization.

SULLIVAN: No, they usually split the organization.

CONWAY: with politics in the organization. I often used to , you know. They used to talk about politics at those national conventions, you know. Their advice was not to mingle in politics.

SULLIVAN: I meant to bring you this book. I wrote this little article on the Friends of Irish Freedom. I wanted to show it to you.

CONWAY: Oh, yes, that was a good organization.

SULLIVAN: I found that the leadership was telling everyone to vote for Harding in 1920, but I don't think anybody did;

CONWAY: Woodrow Wilson.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, I know. But I don't think anybody followed much, did they?

CONWAY: I think Wilson was a good man. Of course, he was over there... out in an English Church. I think he was an intelligent man. Of course, Harding was elected and the poor fellow didn't live very long, did he?

SULLIVAN: No, he didn't. When you came to St. Louis, where did you live? Were there any particularly Irish parts of the City, or...

CONWAY: Well, no. I lived out on Kennerly Avenue. After 500 Kennerly... That was west of Taylor. Oh, that was a nice neighborhood.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, it was.

CONWAY: Close to that school there. _____ School...

SULLIVAN: Oh, yeah. My mother's family grew up around there. She went to _____ School.

CONWAY: It was a very nice neighborhood.

SULLIVAN: Was that around St. Mark's parish?

CONWAY: I never did live in St. Mark's Parish.

SULLIVAN: Visitation, maybe?

CONWAY: I did live in the Visitation. I was in the Visitation Parish when I lived on Kennerly Avenue.

SULLIVAN: That was my mother's parish.

CONWAY: The pastor at the time was Father Dempsey, not Tim Dempsey, but another

Father Dempsey. I went to grammar school for a while at St. Leo School. Father _____ become Archbishop after that.. .Archbishop of, I believe. Archbishop, the first Archbishop of...

SULLIVAN: Would you say that some parts of the city were more Irish than other parts?

CONWAY: Well, there was Kerry Patch.

SULLIVAN: Well, that was gone by 1909.

CONWAY: Oh, yes, it's gone. I don't know that there's much difference in the Irish and the other nationalities. I don't think you could pin down any one part where there is more Irish than the other. So, that's about it, I guess.

SULLIVAN: Yes, I guess so. What did you do for a living when you came here, if you don't mind my asking?

CONWAY: I started out very good. I got a good job. I wanted to work very long. And a fella sent me out on a job with the gas company. And the gas company was doing a lot of work at that time, and I was with the fella who was . He had under him a hundred men, I guess. He came here from New York that had a new company come here, and I went to work there as a boy. And the general timekeeper came along and he said, "How about getting me someone who would be with the general timekeeper?" And he said, "I have the right man here for ya, a young Irishman." I said, "What would you have me do?" "Well, he said, " _____ and do a little figuring every once in a while." So, his name was Eugene Lynch. Boy, he treated me fine. I worked with him, and I worked with him, oh, I guess for a year. Then I got to be a foreman. He pushed me, you know. And then I got to be general foreman and for the last thirty-one years that I worked, I was superintendent of construction.

SULLIVAN: Oh, you did quite well.

CONWAY: It was a very good job. I was getting good money. Oh, after Franklin Roosevelt got in, we got good money. Previous to that, they didn't pay good wages. But after Franklin Roosevelt got in and the unions got in, I was making a thousand dollars a month. That was what you call a good job.

SULLIVAN: That is. Did you get married in St. Louis? Did you marry here?

CONWAY: Yes, in fact, I'll show you my wife.

SULLIVAN: You met your wife here in St. Louis?

CONWAY: Yes, I met her back when I went to _____ school. SULLIVAN: In grade school, huh?

CONWAY: In grade school, and we were friends all the time after that. And then when I went to with a transfer from the gas company...I was up there about a year...and my brother here was getting married, and he wanted me to come back to stand up for him. I had one

brother. And I came back and my mother-in-law and father-in-law was having their silver jubilee, and I was invited down there. And I got acquainted with my wife that night. Then we went together for a couple of years and then I got married.

SULLIVAN: To Kate Crowley, huh?

CONWAY: Yeah, Kate Crowley.

SULLIVAN: She was born in St. Louis, or ...

CONWAY: Yes, she was born in St. Louis, and they lived in Glasgow Place... that was a nice place...

SULLIVAN: Yes, it was.

CONWAY: Big mansions there. They had a big house, 3022 Glasgow Place. And she was living there when we got married. We were married in the Rock Church. The Pastor of Rock Church at that time was Father Maginn. We had good fortune, but we have a boy who is very sick, right now. Our oldest boy.

SULLIVAN: What's the matter?

CONWAY: He's got high blood pressure and kidney trouble. He was nine weeks in Barnes Hospital and then we sent him off to Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for four weeks... But they didn't tell him anything different from what he was told at Barnes. So, he's not a bit good. He's at _____ Hospital right now. And I'm afraid that he's not going to pull through. He's a big man. He's a little over 6 feet tall and 195 pounds. He's got a wife and three children, two of them are married, the girl has a little baby now.

SULLIVAN: You're a great grandfather, huh?

CONWAY: Yeah, that's right. They live out... They're staying at a motel at the present time, but they live out in St. Charles Hills. So, if the loan goes through... It is a very nice house. \$31,000. But you can't get anything for much less than that now..,

SULLIVAN: No, that's true. The prices are amazing. Well, Mr. Conway, I want to thank you. I'll turn off the recorder.