

ORAL HISTORY T-0007
INTERVIEW WITH AGNES IGOE AND ELLEN MANNION
INTERVIEWED BY DR. MARGARET SULLIVAN
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This tape is part of the University of Missouri-St. Louis' Oral History Ethnic Project. I am Margaret Sullivan and today we are talking with Mrs. Agnes Igoe and her sister, Ellen Mannion.

SULLIVAN: Mrs. Igoe or Mrs. Mannion, will you please tell us something about where you were bom and when you came here?

MANNION: I was born in the West of Ireland, county Mayo And I came over here first, and I stayed with my aunt.

SULLIVAN: How old were you when you came?

MANNION: Around twenty.

SULLIVAN: Why did you decide to come?

MANNION: Well, I thought this country was better, you know, working conditions were much better here. I thought that was true, and it wasn't hard to get work here, and I found the people were very kind, very straight. They would tell you the truth, and not beat around the bush, so to speak. They were very good. And so, I worked in a laundry for a while.

SULLIVAN: Did you come right to St. Louis?

MANNION: Yes, I did.

SULLIVAN: Did you have any family in St. Louis?

MANNION: My aunt. That's why I came to St. Louis, and so, then I worked in a laundry for a while, and then I met another girl. She was related to my aunt's husband. And we were great chums. She was a wonderful person, very kind. And I worked there for a while, and I finally decided to see if I could get on for Bell, as a telephone operator. So, I was called. The supervisor, she usually comes out, and finds out if everything you've said is true. And then they give us two weeks' training at the school. And I worked there until I got married.

SULLIVAN: How many years did you stay there?

MANNION: Four or five. And then I got married.

SULLIVAN: Mrs. Igoe, what made you decide to follow your sister?

IGOE: Well, everybody had gone; There was no one left: All the young people that I grew up with left home and went to Canada and different parts of the world. And different parts of the United States. So I decided I'd better go, too. And I came here, and I took care of children. I liked that better because I could be outside. I liked the outdoors, and I did that mostly until I got married. But on my spare time we had Irish dances, picnics, a day on the boat occasionally, and maybe sometimes we'd go the zoo.

SULLIVAN: What year was it that you came, Mrs. Mannion? Do you remember the year?

MANNION: About 1922, I think.

SULLIVAN: Mrs. Igoe?

IGOE: October, 1924.

SULLIVAN: During the 1920's, were there a lot of Irish organizations in St. Louis? What were some of them?

MANNION: We had organizations at the church like the Young Ladies sodality. I liked that, too. They would go on hikes. It was really interesting. We would have an evening at church.

SULLIVAN: What parish were you in when you first came?

MANNION: St. Edwards.

SULLIVAN: St. Edwards was mostly Irish, wasn't it? Was the parish pretty well divided between Irish and German?

MANNION: I think they were. There were quite a few Irish there.

IGOE: Well, everyone got along well. There was no separation.

SULLIVAN: No argument?

MANNION: No argument! They got along very well.

IGOE: You belonged to the sodality, didn't you?

SULLIVAN: What organizations were there besides the Hibernians? I know the Hibernians were here? What about the Knight's of Father Matthew? Were they still around?

MANNION: I heard of them, but I never did meet any of them.

IGOE; I met some Irishman who was supposed to belong to it. They were some kind of people who took pledges, or something.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, not to drink: (laughter)

SULLIVAN: I know my mother said one time when I asked her about it, she said that I had a great uncle who belonged to it, and she said, "Poor man, he died an alcoholic'." (laughter) He was very active, she said, in the Knights of Father Matthew. Reading old newspapers, I noticed they have a lot of, apparently, a lot of dances and things.

MANNION: They probably did.

IGOE: The Hibernians had a lot of them, when I came here. She didn't like to dance as well.

MANNION: Not as well as she did.

IGOE: I was here in October, and I come in to her house to stay.

SULLIVAN: Were you married when you came here?

IGOE: No,...I wanted to go to a dance, all dressed up and everything. She was going, too. What was it up at church? Church doings...whatever was going on up at church. Church doings. So, after that, I decided, "Well, she don't want to go anywhere but church, good, and well, I'd have to find somebody else." (laughter) I found my own friends.

SULLIVAN: During the 1920's, were the Hibernians kind of the main Irish organization in the city?

IGOE: Yes, I would say so. There was an Irish-American organization, but I don't think they were as prominent. I never did belong to it.

SULLIVAN: The Irish-American Club?

IGOE: I didn't belong to any of them at that time. And, they had a Swedish Hall. You've been there, haven't you?

SULLIVAN: Where was that?

MANNION: Taylor and Manchester.

SULLIVAN: Really?

MANNION: Yes. It faced Taylor, I believe, (can't understand)

MANNION: I remember this Swedish Hall where we used to go for dances.

SULLIVAN: Did the Hibernians have their dances at the Swedish Hall?

IGOE: Yes.

SULLIVAN: Were most of the people that you knew when you first came over, Irish? Were most of the people you met Irish?

IGOE: Not all. I got acquainted with quite a few other people. You mixed in.

MANNION; To begin with, you started with your own, and then you found out there were other people.

SULLIVAN: That there were other people?

IGOE: Yes. You know, it's much easier to get acquainted with a strange country with your own people.

SULLIVAN: Everybody is that way, usually.

MANNION: Yes, that's right.

SULLIVAN: That's why I wondered if most people you knew when you first came, were Irish when you first came here, you know, because I know most people tended to be more comfortable.

MANNION: Yes, but once you got to know people, they were all alike.

SULLIVAN: Did most of your social life revolve around the church and church hall?

MANNION: I guess it did. Quite a bit of it.

SULLIVAN: They had dances and a lot of social life around St. Edward's?

MANNION: Yes, they did. They each had their own nights...like they do now, with CYC and Sacred Hear[^], they had their own nights for dancing. And outsiders would have to pay a little more...tickets for them...and then, I used to go to night school.

SULLIVAN: Oh, where did you go to night school?

MANNION: Soldan.

SULLIVAN: Oh, I know a lot of people who went to Soldan. I grew up in the Soldan district.

MANNION: It was very nice there. Very nice. I liked it.

SULLIVAN: What did you take in night school?

MANNION: Mostly...at first, I took grammar and arithmetic, and then we got into that bookkeeping, trial balance, and stuff like that. Of course, I forget it now. A refresher course, I guess.

IGOE: Didn't impress you much, I guess.

MANNION; Yes, but the teacher was nice. She always said, "If you're late, come anyway." She was very sweet. I thought it was wonderful that she would take an interest in people like that. She was very anxious that we come.

SULLIVAN: I remember, Mrs. Igoe, you said one time, you made a comment about that anybody, you said, who came from an war area would have some problems adjusting. And

you said that American girls you met, you know, rural girls you met coming into St. Louis said that they probably had some of the same problems. Do you want to elaborate on that...what were some of the things that were different or strange to you? Or, things that you found funny?

IGOE: Being tied down in the house, you know...or if you work in an office you couldn't get around as well. You didn't meet as many people. It was altogether different living in the city than in the country.

MANNION: I wanted the country so bad. I wanted to just look up at the stars.' Some places, you can't even see them!

SULLIVAN: You can't even see them here now, I know! Were you ever homesick?

IGOE: I was, yes. Very homesick. One day I wrote home to my mother, and she said, "Well, there's nobody left here. I'm sure you can't be that lonely. But in your letter you seemed to. It's so changed here. You wouldn't want to be back. You wouldn't enjoy it, I know you like to get around, and you can't even get around because there aren't any young people left any more." After that, I decided, "Well, I'd better get used to America."

SULLIVAN: Or go back and be a hermit. Huh? Population; keeps going down all the time.

MANNION: They go to England now.

SULLIVAN: Oh, England, now?

MANNION: Oh, yes. There's more Irish in England than in our country. They'd come back with their families.

SULLIVAN: Easier to travel back and forth. Did you find that the Irish in America were any different than the Irish in Ireland, or did the Irish-Americans strike you as being any different? Or had they picked up any different habits or customs that were different from what you were used to?

IGOE: Well, the environment is different altogether, you know, here. Other than that, they made fun of what we said. The basin, you know, to wash in, the wash basin. What else?

SULLIVAN: Different terms?

IGOE: Oh, very! They made fun of us when we first came. The way we talked, I mean the things we said. (laughter) I found this country wonderful for another reason. You go and get your papers to become a citizen. And they are real nice. They tell you what you should know and you study that, and that's it. But you have to have two witnesses, of course. One of my witnesses wasn't Irish, you know. I didn't get mine until later.

SULLIVAN: About what year?

IGOE: Oh, when did I get mine? (can't understand) And I had Mrs. Whipper, my neighbor next door, and Mayor Stanton.

MANNION: I had her, too, and another American. She was Mrs. Reilly.

SULLIVAN: You got yours about when, do you remember?

MANNION: I think...I sure don't know.

IGOE: You were married when you got yours.

MANNION: Oh, yes, I was. On top of the war, you know, your children...to go to war...it would be a disgrace not to be a citizen.

SULLIVAN: And you just didn't complete them?

IGOE: Sometimes, having children, then you don't have the time. You should have the time, make the time.

SULLIVAN: It's one of those things you put off.

MANNION: That's right, you do.

SULLIVAN: The country will always be there.

MANNION: But it isn't fair.

IGOE: It isn't right. Especially if you're making a good living in a country, you know, there's no country like it. If you want to be a citizen, you shouldn't...! used to...Everyone used to say, "Are you voting today?" And I'd know all the people canvassing on both sides, and I'd say, "Oh, I've got my vote already!"

SULLIVAN: They all thought you were voting?

MANNION: I would never say I couldn't vote.

SULLIVAN: Well, the Irish were always very political, weren't they?

IGOE: Oh, yes, I worked with them. I enjoyed it. I worked with them lots of times...different people. Mr. Cavanaugh, he was running for committeeman, we lived upstairs, and he lived down. Well, many times my husband used to work at the polls, and we'd give out the posters, and John was great for being out there at the polls. And there was another lady. Her name was Walters, she was a Republican, and she got a job_____, and so she'd get him up so far, "You're not supposed to go up that far to hand that stuff out. Watch out, your husband's going to get caught." I didn't know there was such a bloody rule. (laughter) You can't do it, they can arrest you. She could turn him in. I never told him about it, but I remember that day well.

SULLIVAN: Were you ever involved in politics before? Before you were married?

IGOE: No.

SULLIVAN: Just after you were married?

IGOE: Yes. I liked to read about it. In Ireland. You know, I came out with a free state passport, and I remember at election bringing all the old people so that they had to register. They brought them to the school. And those old people used to say, "What do we have to back there for now? We were there last week," when they came back to vote.

MANNION: I was getting interested in politics already then.

SULLIVAN: In Ireland?

IGOE: I was interested to see what was going on and who was going to win. In fact, we were helping them to open up, but I wasn't old enough to vote. They would say "Get back. You look like a kid. Do you want to break the elections?" That's when I found out about that rule.

SULLIVAN: Going to close, (laughter)

IGOE: John said he hadn't known about it.

MANNION: He may have, you know.

IGOE: No, he didn't know. Mrs. Walters, she knew about it, and she was getting him up there.

MANNION: They were neighbors.

SULLIVAN: Was this in this country?

IGOE: Yes. At the elections everyone has something to say.

SULLIVAN: Oh, yes. I'm sure. John didn't know about the rule, or...

IGOE: No, he didn't. He said, "I didn't know there was such a bloody rule."

SULLIVAN: Did you get interested in politics as part of the neighborhood? You know, committeemen, ward...?

IGOE; No, I liked to read about it. Of course, then when Mr. Cavanugh ran. ..

SULLIVAN: That's when you really got interested?

IGOE: Yes, that's true. Most of the Irish were.

SULLIVAN: Yes, I know most of them really took politics seriously.

IGOE: He didn't want to be anything but just helping out..John...he was in charge and came around with all the data for election.

MANNION: We worked out here in Ferguson at the polls.

IGOE: You and I worked together at the polls.

MANNION: Oh, that's right. For the county.

IGOE: Yes.

MANNION: We worked over there on Pagedale; yes, we worked when Heames went in the first time. How long has that been now?

SULLIVAN: I don't remember.

IGOE: I don't either.

SULLIVAN: This last election, 1968, which would he have been?

IGOE: Well, he was always working for some small politician, not so high up as that. (can't understand)

SULLIVAN: The Irish in this country, are of course traditionally Democratic. Did you find that?

IGOE: Well, I vote for the man when it's president. Anything as high as that, even in the local election I vote for the man.

SULLIVAN: You do?

IGOE: Yes, if you think one is better than the other, then you vote for that one.

SULLIVAN; Do either of you have any comments about the Democratic Party in St. Louis? It has always been rather heavily Irish.

MANNION & IGOE: Oh, yes. That's true.

IGOE: But, even then...

MANNION: I think the last time we voted Republican.

IGOE: Even there... (can't understand)

SULLIVAN: Were most of the Irish you knew Democrats, though?

IGOE: Yes, most of them are.

SULLIVAN: Yes.

IGOE: My neighbor next door, she's a Republican, but she did vote Democrat when Roosevelt came in.

SULLIVAN: How about Al Smith?

IGOE: Oh, yeah.

SULLIVAN: Do you remember him?

IGOE: Oh, yes, when Al Smith was running. Everybody was for him.

SULLIVAN: Even your Republican neighbors.

MANNION: I don't recall that part of it, but I remember it was very close for him.

SULLIVAN: Well, Al Smith took all the big cities; you know, his vote is credited now to the immigrant and children of immigrant vote, but all your big cities switched in '28 rather than '32. I just wondered if you remembered that election or you remember...

IGOE: Roosevelt. But, now, '28? Who ran then?

SULLIVAN: That was Al Smith and Hoover.

IGOE: I don't think I did so much for them. Smith, I remember, you weren't Irish without knowing about the election. And after that when Roosevelt was running, I really didn't...My neighbor said, "I'm Republican. But I can't help but like Roosevelt and I'm going to vote for him." That was unusual for her.'

SULLIVAN: This was your neighbor?

IGOE: Yes, my neighbor.

SULLIVAN: Were you both married in St. Louis? You both met your husbands here? Did you meet them at the dances or the...

MANNION: I met mine at my aunt's. He and another fellow came in.

SULLIVAN: How did you meet your husband?

IGOE: Well, (laughter) he was a blind date for Mary when I first met him. Mary was my girlfriend, and I was going with another boy. And he brought Jim out to meet Mary there. Well, then, I dropped this boy and Jim called me up. It took quite a while but I finally did go out with him.

SULLIVAN: Courtship customs weren't any different in this country than they were in Ireland?

IGOE: Oh, the thing was...

SULLIVAN: You weren't chaperoned?

IGOE: No, not when we grew up. But getting married over there was a different story.

SULLIVAN: Why?

IGOE: People generally left there in our time. They didn't have any meetings. They didn't have any jobs much, and most of the young people weren't around for a long time. But we

did go out with boys. To dances.

SULLIVAN: How was getting married different?

IGOE: Oh, when I was young, my father said, he would never make a match for anyone. There was matchmaking at that time.

SULLIVAN: I was wondering if they still did that.

IGOE: I don't know. I wonder. I think it is, but maybe not so much.

SULLIVAN: When you were growing up, did they?

IGOE: Oh, yes. Sure, they did.

MANNION: Oh, yes, they would say, "I would like so-and-so for my daughter." Or some remark like that, but that was...

SULLIVAN: Just a joke?

IGOE: Ho, no. I remember my aunt. (plane going over...can't hear; something about Mary Margaret)

SULLIVAN: That was more the generation before you than the one you grew up with?

IGOE: Yes.

MANNION: Even after that.

IGOE; They wouldn't stay around for that matchmaking.

SULLIVAN: I know it's common for a lot of countries to do that sort of thing. Some people, you know, the first generation here, did it. I know some of the Italians did. But here, you were free to go out with anyone. Did you go out on dates like they do now, or just more in groups?

MANNION: I think we had more groups then.

IGOE: You mean here?

SULLIVAN: Yes. And there.

IGOE: Well, we did go on dates though.

MANNION: Oh, yes, maybe two.

IGOE: No. Didn't you ever go to the show or some place like that?

MANNION: Oh, yes, yes.

IGOE: Maybe we'd go to a party or a show. Or, just for a long car ride out to Creve Couer. We loved to do that. And to the Highlands.

SULLIVAN: Forest Park Highlands?

IGOE: Yes.

SULLIVAN: If you got here in the 20's, you were here during Prohibition, right?

IGOE: That's right.

SULLIVAN: Did you ever go to any speakeasies? (laughter) Maybe that's none of my business!

IGOE; My husband owned one.

SULLIVAN: He did? I didn't know that.' A speakeasy?

IGOE: He sure did. He was a streetcar man, and then they bought this out, and he ran it for a while. But then the laws got worse, and worse, and more tight, and he couldn't make too much, so he got out.

SULLIVAN: Did they really try to enforce the laws? I really thought it was kind of an open joke.

IGOE: Oh, no. They enforced it. You'd get raided and everything. On Easton, he had one with his brother-in-law.

SULLIVAN: Did they make their own or but it?

IGOE: They had a man who came from some place in the country, and he brought it with him. But the laws got tighter, and there was Prohibition. Well, then they had the 19th National amendment, but then they repealed it.

SULLIVAN: About what years was he in the speakeasy business? This topic of Prohibition interests me.

IGOE: Well, I think that was about 1928-29 that might have been it. '27 when I got married, he was still in the streetcar business, and he was thinking about that. In the summertime, he got out, because it was too risky.

SULLIVAN: He really got into trouble and was arrested?

IGOE: No, he was there, but they never caught him.

SULLIVAN: He was never there huh? They couldn't find him?

IGOE: No, he was there, but they just couldn't find the place where they had the stuff, it seemed like.

SULLIVAN: Oh, I see.

IGOE: In fact, there was this here man that came in, an Irishman, and he was in the government work.

SULLIVAN: What was this like? Would they just sell liquor there, or was it a place where people sat down at tables.

IGOE: Yes, tables sure, it was pretty much expense, too. They paid good rent, too, for it.

SULLIVAN: It was like a regular bar?

IGOE: And the bar, but mostly sat at tables, and a bar, too. The depression was coming on a little bit, and people didn't have money.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, yeah, I know. The man they bought the liquor store from, was he Irish? Or...

IGOE: No. His name was_____. I don't think he was Irish. He'd come in.. .

SULLIVAN; That's interesting. Did you ever go to any speakeasies, Mrs. Mannion?

MANNION: No.

SULLIVAN: You stayed out of them huh?

MANNION: No, I didn't like them very much.

IGOE: Some people sold from their homes.

MANNION: I had a pledge from the old country. I wouldn't touch anything.

SULLIVAN: Oh, you belonged to that?

MANNION: Yes, I took that when I was confirmed.

SULLIVAN: It was called Pioneers, or something?

MANNION: Pioneers, that's right.

IGOE: Well, you didn't have to follow through.

MANNION: No, if you didn't want to, but I did. I knew what I was doing, because I, another girl was with me, and she...

IGOE: She was older.

MANNION: Well, you don't have to say that.

IGOE: You don't?

MANNION: No, you don't have to say it, but I did and I knew what I'd have to do.

IGOE: Well, I said, when I took that pledge, until I decide to change my "mind that I wasn't going to tie myself down for life or anything else. I wouldn't take anything until I decided. They just give the pledge to children being confirmed, but later on...

SULLIVAN: I know, my sister was just over there and she was telling me that one of the things she commented on was that the pubs close so early.

MANNION: Oh, yes.

SULLIVAN: Earlier than she was used to.

IGOE: It's just awful over there when they close them.

SULLIVAN: Yes. She kinda felt so, I think.

IGOE: Yeah, when we went on our trip to see our cousins, you know, before you know it, they was singing "Meet Me In St. Louis", and everything they could think of, and it was time to close up.

SULLIVAN: During Prohibition, there were a lot of gang wars and things in St. Louis, too. Do you remember anything about that? Not that you have any first-hand knowledge, but I know somebody told me sometime that there were four gangs in St. Louis, two were Irish and one Sicilian and one was Syrian. Do you remember anything at all like that?

IGOE: No, I didn't. Maybe because I didn't get around too much at that time.

SULLIVAN: Yeah, you were too busy having children.

MANNION; That's right.

SULLIVAN: The church also, I know, also played a big part in the life of the Irish in this country, and you already commented that you, you know, a lot of your social life centered around the church.

MANNION: Yes, I liked that.

SULLIVAN: Do you think that helped the Irish coming over? You know, I mean, made it a lot less of a transition, a lot less of a change from the old country to the new country.

IGOE: I don't think it was a foreign to them, as a lot of other immigrants. It's a lot like back home.

SULLIVAN: Yes, and of course, you came to a city where there were a lot of Irish and the Irish were pretty well established, too. I don't imagine that you ran into any kind of discrimination, or anybody making any comments about...

MANNION: I was amazed at how they bring the outsider in. They were really wonderful. It

didn't make any difference. Now at St. Edwards, there was another Irish girl, but that was all. That was it.

SULLIVAN: And all your children went to St. Edwards?

MANNION: No. Holy Rosary.

SULLIVAN: What did your husband do, Mrs. Mannion?

MANNION: He was a bricklayer.

SULLIVAN: He was a bricklayer when you met him? And he continued?

MANNION: Yes.

SULLIVAN: And your children went to St. Edwards, Mrs. Igoe?

IGOE: Yes.

SULLIVAN: Do you think that, I suppose, during your lifetime in St. Louis, you saw...did you see any change in Irish organizations? Did they kind of begin to die out, or, do you think?

MANNION: No, not with the Irish, you see, because...

SULLIVAN: You know, like the hibernians, or the Irish Club. Did they begin to die out? Did their activities fall off?

MANNION: The Hibernians did for a while.

SULLIVAN: Yes.

MANNION: But they are picking up now.

SULLIVAN: But, like Irish dances and St. Patrick's celebrations. Did you see any change?

MANNION: Well, for a while, there was hardly any. But then, I wouldn't go anyhow because of my children. Oh, once in a while, I guess there was. But I haven't been to one for a long time.

SULLIVAN: I've heard some fantastic speakers, like at Hibernians Picnics. Did you ever go to the Hibernians picnics? Do you remember?

MANNION: Oh, yes.

SULLIVAN: Well, some of the figures I've read, like thousands and thousands of people. They really had huge crowds.

IGOE: There were large crowds, but not thousands.

SULLIVAN: Well, those are figures I've seen before the 20's. I was wondering during the 20's how much bigger the picnics...

IGOE: A lot of people would come in and then go after a while. Well I remember my some, he had a girlfriend, and he just took us out there and left me and my husband and the kids there, and they didn't stay too long. They wanted to go somewhere else.

SULLIVAN: You were talking about people going back to Ireland. Did many of the people you knew go back?

MANNION: Yes, there were a few that I knew here who stayed for six or seven years and they were going back home. Some didn't come back, you know.

SULLIVAN: You mean, there was a lot going back and forth?

MANNION: Yes.

SULLIVAN: Did you ever go back?

MANNION: I never went back. I had it soft here. Well, I would have if my father were still around. But he died pretty young.

SULLIVAN: And your mother?

MANNION: She died and that left me...and all the family came out.

SULLIVAN: Everybody? All your brothers and sisters?

MANNION: The last one came out, when my oldest boy was born. SULLIVAN: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

MANNION: There's seven of us, three boys and four girls.

SULLIVAN: Are they all in St. Louis?

MANNION: No, not all. One is in the convent here and one is in a convent in New York'.. The others, they were both married in New York.

SULLIVAN: Do they have_____in St. Louis today?

MANNION: That's right, that's right. But she has to go down there once. And it seemed like she was interested in the convent, she liked that.

IGOE: She did come to St. Louis, though. She often came to St. Louis. The convent was in New York. And Kathryn, she thought she'd like go into the convent, and she's still here. The Congregation of Mary. It's a relatively new order. It started in 1925, I understand. It was an Irish girl that started it, and she helped found it. They take care of a lot of older people, too. They have only two homes, isn't that right?

MANNION: Oh, no. They got one in Prospect Park, 16th Street, Muncy and Ben Harbor.

IGOE: That's about it.

SULLIVAN: Is that just for the Irish?

IGOE: Well, you don't have to be Irish.

SULLIVAN: Well, no. But years ago, didn't the Orders tend to be German, Irish