

An Interview with
Helen Gannon

at *The* Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis
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Oral History Program

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

Helen Gannon: My name is Helen Gannon, formerly Helen Philips and I'm from Limerick in Ireland and proudly an American citizen today living in St. Louis for the past 47 years.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful. Would you talk about your childhood: your mother, your father, your grandparents, your cousins, the kids that you played with? Did you play just with the girls or with the boys? Did you have free play? Just talk about your family circle and then talk about who in your family encouraged you to be the kind of person you wanted to be.

Helen Gannon: Well, Blanche, I grew up in a very small community in the City of Limerick which is a very ancient city. My mother, my father and grandmother and my sister, my two brothers and I were in a two-bedroom house so we had to be close. So I went to the school around the corner, which was the convent school, St. Mary's and wasn't a very good student, I might say. I actually shoved my sister down in the pram because I came along 11 months after her so I was kind of in the way, if you like. So my grandmother was the biggest influence on me. She stands out in my mind as the person who really made me what I am today. My mother was good but my grandmother seemed to understand me. There was a time when we had to be coming home twice a day for break and for lunch. There was no heat in the house, no heat in the school. Times were different. The culture was different and our life, while I look back on it now, was wonderful, for the simplicity that it was, why do we long for that kind of life again? And, of course, I'm an immigrant and I was a non-happy immigrant when I came to America but a lot of happened since then to make me respect and enjoy but I often feel...I was in Ireland two weeks ago and I feel myself as two different people. I feel like I'm one person when I'm in Ireland and then when I come back to America, I'm a different person. So I think that the moral of that is that you really never leave home and I've kept my mother's house, go back there for the summer months and [audio glitch 02:44] my life. My father died when I was quite young but I remember the efforts that were made in the family. We had no kitchen. We had an open fire and a lot of the cooking was done on the range and my father would collect the bean tins, the tins of beans and when they were empty, he'd wash them and he saved them and when he had enough, he made a pipe. He soldered the bean cans together so we got our first kitchen while I was still living there. Those are things that my children and my grandchildren haven't been through. I

remember electricity come into the house and I remember my grandmother would turn on the switch to light the oil lamp and then she would turn off the switch to save the new gadget. It was amazing. And I remember getting our first bathroom, also very foreign to young people today.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I visited some cousins I had in Ireland in the mid '50s and their bathroom was outside and really, in St. Louis, Missouri, I taught east of Grand Avenue in high school when I first started teaching in public schools and there were many children on the north side, east of Grand, that did not have indoor plumbing and they did not have running hot water.

Helen Gannon: Right, we had to boil the kettle.

Blanche Touhill: That all came really to all of America, after World War II.

Helen Gannon: I often feel today that when you mention the washer and having to boil the kettle for the hot water, I'm often asked about our music and dance. Well, we only had one plug in the house which was for the kettle and I often wonder to myself, was that the reason that we were so abundant with music, because there was no plug to put in a CD or a tape recorder.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a radio?

Helen Gannon: We had a radio.

Blanche Touhill: But you'd have to unplug?

Helen Gannon: No, it was a battery radio and it was a big battery that we had to get refurbished and I remember, we had no telephone but my mother had a brother that she hadn't seen for about 49 years. My grandmother was married twice and she was an only child by the second marriage and there was a program on radio air, "Find your relatives in America." So my mother wrote away and sure enough, they found my uncle in Toronto and so they said that they would put him on the radio on the show in Toronto and she'd get to say hello from Limerick. And, of course, the day came. We were huddled around the radio, waiting for my uncle to say hello to his sister and every neighbor in the street came knocking on the door, "Turn on the radio, Sadie. Your brother is on the radio." So we

actually...my mother said, "I didn't hear what he said." But those were times that are hard to understand today.

Blanche Touhill: But then why do you say that they were good times?

Helen Gannon: I wonder about that and I just wrote a story for one of my grandchildren, telling them how exciting Christmas was for me and it was a poor Christmas but the aura of my mother cleaning the house and putting paper decorations up around the lampshades and a bit of holly and we had a Christmas tree which my father would bring in and we had balloons on it for ornaments and I noticed the grandchildren laughing their hearts out and then I'm thinking, why was I so happy about that?

Blanche Touhill: Well, I bet it was lovely.

Helen Gannon: It was very lovely and we had lots to eat and we would get a box of biscuits that we could have as many as we wanted and my grandchildren that would not excite them today. The life code today, it's hard to excite the child, very hard to excite the child and my mother was here when I was telling a school in St. Louis [inaudible 07:20] about how happy our Christmases were and then I said that on Christmas morning, we got sausages, bacon and a whole orange, Jaffa oranges because Ireland doesn't grow citrus fruit and we'd get a whole orange and when I came out, I was expecting my mother to say I did a good job. Well, she said, "The cheek of you," she said, "telling those people you only got an orange at Christmas and you only got this" and she didn't understand that I was actually emphasizing the joy of getting such things. But we were a very proud race of people so we always had to pretend that we were as good as the neighbor or better.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you know, I think in America, my mother talked about, at Christmas, she would get an orange and her sister would get an orange and it was a thrill.

Helen Gannon: An absolute thrill.

Blanche Touhill: Just a thrill and they would not eat it right away. They would sort of hold it for a while but by the end of the day, it was gone.

Helen Gannon: And they were called Jaffa oranges, they were big oranges and they were expensive in Ireland because we didn't have any citrus fruit.

Blanche Touhill: And did you go to, like, a midnight mass?

Helen Gannon: Always, yes, and the ham was opened after the mass and my father loved that. We got something new to wear and then we went to mass and then we came home and we were put to bed and then our Christmas presents were never under the tree. They were beside the bed.

Blanche Touhill: So when you woke up...

Helen Gannon: Yes, the side of the bed and you got one thing. I got a doll and my sister always now jokes, she got a little sweeping brush [inaudible 09:13].

Blanche Touhill: Well, was it your doll?

Helen Gannon: It was my doll and I still have that doll.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful.

Helen Gannon: So it had to mean something to me. We didn't have a lot of things and I remember thinking, as a child, when I get big, I will buy a whole pound of butter. I will buy a whole pound of chocolate.

Blanche Touhill: You bought a stick?

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Or a quarter.

Helen Gannon: Well, my mother would mix it with margarine to stretch it so I said when I get big; I'll have a whole bar of chocolate to myself, when I have money. Looking back on that, it was a wonderful education for us to make do and to really enjoy the day when you could have that item. I can have it any day now. Hence, I don't look neglected.

Blanche Touhill: Well, how did you play in those days?

Helen Gannon: We played with dolls and paper dolls and coloring.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, I loved paper dolls.

Helen Gannon: Paper dolls were wonderful and then any broken china, this was left in the house, was kept and we would play shop and so all the colored glass was all laid out on little trays and we would play on the street. We would play skipping rope a lot. We would play ball.

- Blanche Touhill: What kind of ball did you do, throwing it to one another or bouncing it against the wall?
- Helen Gannon: No.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, volleyball?
- Helen Gannon: No, not volleyball either. I had never heard of volleyball. It was called handball.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.
- Helen Gannon: Where you hit it off the wall and we had to do songs in the house and the neighbors would come out and tell you to stop. And then I had one skate and my sister had the other one so we had to cooperate. She and I shared a single bed. I was telling my students, "I never had a bed to myself until I went away to college," but I had to share the single bed with my sister. She got piano; I got dancing. And so I would be practicing the step in bed and she would tell my mother, "Mam, she's practicing again," and so I would lose my lesson for a week. And that would really bother me, whereas today, we have to beg the kid to go to the lesson.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's right.
- Helen Gannon: And then Anne would play the piano and when the visitors, we performed our piece. So that was our recital and then my mother would send me to the store for a quarter pound of Marietta biscuits and I would count them on the way home and I'd count the people in the house and I'd estimate there'd be at least two left till they'd go home. So, strange young people today to hear me talk like that because I would take a tray of biscuits or cookies, as we call them in America, into the task and they're all the same but they would look at them and look at them and have a hard time picking it. They're all the same, different.
- Blanche Touhill: I can understand though that exactly, that sometimes you don't have as much materially but it was a lot of love and everybody was doing their best to help you. But it's interesting that you announced you wanted to be a nurse?
- Helen Gannon: I did want to be a nurse. I was sick a lot as a child and I think that's why my grandmother was such an influence on me. I had a positive tide chest which meant that I had been exposed to tuberculosis and that was

rampant in Ireland at that time. Families were wiped out in my neighborhood. So my mother was told to isolate me and so my grandmother said, "Give her to me," and so, in the two bedrooms in the house, my grandmother had one for herself. My mom and dad had the other and then my brothers had to sleep in there and my sister and I had the single bed downstairs. So my grandmother took me into her bed and, as I was repeatedly put into the hospital, that was when I decided, I'm going to be a nurse when I get big. However, my mother didn't think I was very smart in school. My sister, Anne, was smarter and so she was allowed to stay on in school and at 14, my father said, "Put her out to work," he said. "She's better off than staying in school." So I was put into the hotel to work.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness, okay.

Helen Gannon: So I didn't have what they call the leaving search or the high school diploma. So I worked in the hotel and I met this matron of a hospital in England and she took a liking to me and she said, what was I going to do with my life, was I going to stay in the hotel, and I said, "I'd love to be a nurse." So she said, "I think I could help you," she said, and so she arranged for me to go to England and when I went home and told my parents, my father put his foot down and he said, "You're not going to England." He said, "If you want to be a nurse," he said, "you can be a nurse in Ireland." However, it was hard to get into a hospital in Ireland. So the matron anyway spoke to the owner of the hotel and they knew somebody in Galway, the University College-Galway Hospital and they said we've brought this girl who wants to be a nurse and they weren't too anxious because I didn't have the high school diploma. So they said, "Send her down and we'll test her." So I passed the test and then I was short-listed into the next group and I ended up being...16 of us out of 32 were chosen. And I was the only one without a high school diploma.

Blanche Touhill: But you loved it?

Helen Gannon: My mother had to come up with some money because you had to have a uniform and all of that so she was wonderful, she said, "I'll give you a chance," she said, "and see what you can do." So she came up with the money for the uniform and I remember being in the car and my mother was crying and my father said to my mother, he said, "Dry your eyes," he said, "Don't worry about that lady. She'll take one look at a bedpan and

she'll be home in a week." And that was the statement that forced me, absolutely, and I ended up being first in Ireland in surgery and he was there, as proud as punch. And I often think, you know, how that was the driving statement because I didn't have it easy. All of the girls had come from boarding school and they all had a high school diploma. So I did that, graduated.

Blanche Touhill: Do you think he did it purposely?

Helen Gannon: I suppose he did. He was feeling sorry for my mother because she had gone to such an effort to make it happen and he was worried that the money that she spent was wasted because nobody else in the house had got that kind of a start. I think that he was a kind man but I didn't stick anything. I didn't stick school. He talked, "Oh, she'll come home and it will all be wasted."

Blanche Touhill: What I'm saying is, you don't think he said it to spur you on?

Helen Gannon: I don't know. It's interesting that you ask me that.

Blanche Touhill: Maybe he knew you were stubborn.

Helen Gannon: Maybe. I was stubborn.

Blanche Touhill: It sounds like he knew you.

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Now, in one way maybe he was just making a statement; on the other hand, maybe he knew enough about you...

Helen Gannon: ...to make it happen.

Blanche Touhill: ...to make it happen.

Helen Gannon: Well, he did. He died young but he lived to see me graduate and then I did a post-graduate in nurse midwifery and so I stayed the extra year-and-a-half to do the Master's and I was a nurse midwife and that's when I met PJ who was a young doctor.

Blanche Touhill: But let's go back to your nursing school career: How was that?

Helen Gannon: It was difficult for me. I had been able to go to dance lessons, go out. I wasn't allowed to wear pants. I wasn't allowed to wear shorts. I would crawl out the window to go to a dance. So I was very bold.

Blanche Touhill: And you were able to crawl back in?

Helen Gannon: And I was able to crawl back in and I was caught once and that cured me because I didn't want to be sent home. I was different than the others. I had a taste of working, had a little money. In actual monetary terms, at the hotel I made ten shillings a week which is about a dollar-and-a-half and I had to give two-thirds of that to my mother for the house and then I was allowed to spend the remainder of it. But we were taught to save, Blanche. Again, you know, you could only have what you could afford and so one of our favorite things to do was they would take us uptown to shop window and we would get great joy out of that. Then we saw these gadgets called TVs and you could rent them and we were on to my mother to rent a TV. So she finally rented a TV and only she was allowed to turn the knob on and off and it came on at 5:00 o'clock in the evening and went off at 11:00 with the national anthem and then everybody said the rosary and went to bed. My father would kneel down. We had to kneel down and say the rosary and then off to bed with us. But my father then decided that we'd have color TV so he went out and he bought orange and blue cellophane paper and he put that on the front of the TV and we thought we had color TV. The kids laugh at me when I talk about that but it was wonderful, the excitement, watching him putting this piece of paper over the TV. It was magic, magic. Jumping forward, I don't like TV. I don't watch TV and when my mother aged and my father was gone, we, the siblings and I decided to give my mother television and I ruined her life. We paid for it. She stopped knitting, she stopped sewing and when the neighbors came to the door, they were annoying her. She didn't want to gossip anymore. Gossiping was such a wonderful thing.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Helen Gannon: We could make a mountain out of a molehill. So the TV was...

Blanche Touhill: It isolated her.

Helen Gannon: It did, It did and people stayed home. They didn't visit. You know, you always went to a neighbor for a chat and a cup of tea but when the TV came...and we did get a telephone; we were one of the few houses that

had a phone and we were one of the few houses that had a car and my father was constantly asked for rides, constantly asked for rides.

Blanche Touhill: But in those days in Ireland, you could go out to a corner and sort of thumb your way.

Helen Gannon: I thumbed my way through Galway to Limerick and I would visit my parents.

Blanche Touhill: Which is, what, 100...not 100 miles...

Helen Gannon: Sixty-five miles, and then I'd thumb my way back and go [inaudible 21:24]. No problem, say the rosary that we'd get a ride. Sure enough, someone would take us in and give us a ride home.

Blanche Touhill: I remember that as late as the...I'm going to say the early '90s, you could be a woman out on a road, sort of looking for a ride and there was no danger.

Helen Gannon: Absolutely not.

Blanche Touhill: I used to research in Dublin from probably the 19...well, certainly the '70s but I might have made a trip in the '60s and I would come out of the National Library of Ireland at night, 10:00 o'clock when it closed and one time I had a hotel, it was a mile away and the lights had gone out and I turned to somebody and I said, "Well, should I take a cab?" They said, "Oh, no, just go up to the main road and turn left and you'll just be fine." And I just went up to the road. Everybody was out. Nobody was bothering anybody else. It was wonderful.

Helen Gannon: Well, I was in Milan this year at the World's Fair and one of my favorite memories to keep now is, they had a village and there was every culture in the world living in this village and it was the most peaceful place I've ever been in my life and I couldn't help thinking, like you said when you were in Dublin, what a wonderful feeling it was to feel safe with all different people. It was wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, out at night, you couldn't see their faces but you could hear them chattering and laughing as they went up the road.

- Helen Gannon: See, we had no guns in Ireland. The guards weren't allowed. So things were better then. And then I say "better" and then, if I ask my grandchildren that question, they think today was better.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, of course. So who encouraged you? It was really the woman in the hotel who encouraged you?
- Helen Gannon: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: So she saw something in you.
- Helen Gannon: She did and she saw my determination. I didn't have the education to go but in England you could go. You could be accepted in England. A lot of Irish people went to England to train but it was more prestigious to train in Ireland but I didn't have the education. So I had to prove myself. And it's a regret in my life but as I go on with my story, it came back to haunt me because, when I married PJ and we came to America, I was given an immigrant visa instantly because doctors and nurses were welcome, very welcome in America. And so that was fine but when I went to get my license, reciprocity, I couldn't because I couldn't produce a high school diploma.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness. So you never practiced nursing in America?
- Helen Gannon: I did.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, you did?
- Helen Gannon: I did. I fought the system for a long time and they kept at me and I finally had to do the GED.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, well that's...
- Helen Gannon: But that was humbling for me, very humbling for me but I had to do it and I like to talk about that to children because the piece of paper became paramount in my progress and so I did the GED and then I went down to Columbia, Missouri and Jefferson City and passed my nursing degree in America.
- Blanche Touhill: So you had to take the test here?
- Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: But you had been a nurse so you knew...

Helen Gannon: I had been a nurse and they accepted all my credits except I had to do three months English at Forest Park because I was a foreign graduate. Funny but...

Blanche Touhill: That is funny.

Helen Gannon: ...I was a foreign graduate. I had been the only nurse midwife that had trained with Dr. Lamaze's method of education in childbirth. So I was the first nurse midwife trained in that method to come to St. Louis and so a Dr. Wisner had heard about me through a friend of mine who was a nurse midwife and so he sent me to patients to teach them about psycho prophylaxis and I became certified in teaching psycho prophylaxis which was, of course, mothers in America at that time all went to sleep and the doctor presented you with the baby and you said thank you even though you had done all the work yourself. And so I trained women how to be awake and aware and now natural childbirth is...after all, what's unnatural? But it's very popular now in America and there was a woman in London, Mrs. Irma Reicht who wrote a book about it and she had been to St. Louis and she told them I was coming. And so that was another stepping stone for me.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was.

Helen Gannon: And there are very few midwives here.

Blanche Touhill: Can you practice midwifery in Missouri?

Helen Gannon: No.

Blanche Touhill: Can you practice in Illinois?

Helen Gannon: No. In fact, a friend of mine said to me one day, she said, "Don't say you're a midwife." She said, "In America," she said, "that indicates you're a woman that goes on a horse and goes around and learns your trade," which is amazing. We were all delivered by a midwife and we had to get 20 home deliveries in our training to be nurse midwives, but you have to be a registered nurse first. So there was no room for my career as a midwife in North America, even though I had the license. So I worked at State Hospital for a while and then I worked for the Red Cross just to keep my license active. But along the way, the nuns who had nurtured us

in America wanted me dancing every time they had a little party. And so I would go dancing and you would remember, Blanche, that there were only two teachers here and that was Captain O'Sullivan from the east side and Pete Sullivan. He was the piper and the master dance teacher but there was no qualified dance teacher in Missouri at all.

Blanche Touhill: In my youth, there were no Irish dancing schools.

Helen Gannon: No. And so they learned, had found these two men and they had [inaudible 28:12] and they enjoyed it but I had a little bit more because that was my thing at home. I had known how to dance and I had won competitions. So Valerie Hazelton who's also a lovely dancer here in Missouri, had been a dancer so the two of us decided we'd start teaching Irish dancing.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, and there was a market here.

Helen Gannon: And there was a market here.

Blanche Touhill: Most people don't realize there were as many Irish Americans here as there were.

Helen Gannon: So, we got a studio, rented a studio in Green Tree Shopping Center.

Blanche Touhill: Where is that, in Webster?

Helen Gannon: Yeah, in Kirkwood. So we started teaching Irish dancing and, lo and behold, we discovered that the kids couldn't enter competitions because neither one of us were qualified. So that was a big hurdle. So I called a master teacher I knew in California and her name was Maureen Hall and I told her our problem and she said, "You have no option," she said "but to find a teacher." So I knew this young lady in Chicago who was a very good dance teacher and she was qualified so I asked her if she'd come in and she came in and she trained the kids and after a year, she opened a school.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, in competition with your school?

Helen Gannon: In competition, and the kids had to go to her because then they could enter competitions. So that was a real blow to me. But I was determined again and Maureen said to me, she said, "You have to get your TCRG," which is the degree to teach Irish dancing. I was 45 years of age. So she

started to come in to visit me and give me material and she'd come back in six months and she'd say, "No way, you're not ready. You've got to work harder." So I did and I finally, in 1987, I passed the TCRG in California.

Blanche Touhill: So you had to go out there and was it written and performance?

Helen Gannon: Five parts to the exam and now we have seven dance teachers in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: In your school?

Helen Gannon: No, in their own school but they started with me and then they became teachers. So the mushroom grew and that was one of the best things that ever happened to me because in 1975, our fourth son died from enstpoly and I could not go back to nursing. I couldn't look at pregnant women at that time, in my own grief and trauma and so I turned to the dancing and it worked out wonderful for me. I met Leecy Schweight who was the head of Springboard to Learning and so I went into the public schools and started teaching there.

Blanche Touhill: Teach dancing?

Helen Gannon: Yes, dancing and Irish culture and it was a way for me then to be with my own children and so I need to fill. I'm a great believer in the mother being home with the child and I still hold fast on that and I'm grateful that my daughters-in-law stay home with their children. I think that a lot of our problems have come from letting children make choices when they're not ready. We were never allowed to make a choice. It was that way and you did it. So life was stricter but I'm thinking we liked it. The nuns were hard on us but they didn't hurt us. We came out of school knowing something.

Blanche Touhill: What was the order of nuns?

Helen Gannon: Mercy.

Blanche Touhill: And they're in St. Louis too?

Helen Gannon: They're in St. Louis, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Did you make any connections?

Helen Gannon: Absolutely. In fact, actually it was the Sacred Heart nuns incarnate ward nuns and PJ's father used to drive the novitiates to the boat in Cove and so Sister Teresa was the administrator of incarnate ward showed us where to get a house, showed us and helped us to settle in.

Blanche Touhill: So she helped you and did she know you were coming?

Helen Gannon: She knew I was coming. What she didn't know was that I was pregnant and what I didn't know is that you...without medical insurance for 10 months, you were on your own. So she allowed me into the hospital graciously for one night to have the child. We were so inept in many ways. It was exciting to come to America until you woke up in the morning and you were thousands of miles away from the ocean and thousands of miles away from home. I found it much more difficult to immigrate than PJ.

Blanche Touhill: Well, PJ had his immediate work. He had a job when he came so he just got off the plane, settled and went to work the next day or something.

Helen Gannon: I was totally...

Blanche Touhill: And you had the responsibility of setting up the house and getting ready to have a child.

Helen Gannon: Well, we were living in the State Hospital.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, but they had living quarters.

Helen Gannon: Yeah, the dome that's still standing there, that was our apartment.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, was it?

Helen Gannon: Yes, indeed. I just spoke to Josie about the 5 & 10 store which was magic for me.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Helen Gannon: And the State Hospital was on the hill.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, you could look out.

Helen Gannon: I could look out and I'd see these little houses with a picket fence and to me that was the closest thing to Ireland and I wanted a house, a little house like that. And so I met a woman who adopted me, if you like. She

was a German woman and she asked me where I lived and I told her in the State Hospital and she said, how did I get there, and I said, "Oh, my husband is a psychiatrist." So she put me in the car and took me home to the hospital and she said, "I'll pick you up next week," she said. She found me a house. I said I wouldn't live in a flat so she found a house for us and she had a shower for me and I never heard of a shower and I thought everything I needed for the baby. It was amazing, how America influenced. One of the things I felt at that time was the freedom to be who I was. The doctors worried about me and told PJ to buy me a television set and we couldn't afford very much. We had four suitcases, \$50, a three-year-old and a pregnant wife. So we looked in the paper and there was a TV store in north central and it was called Moon's. And so we went out to Famous Bar which was on South Kingshighway.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a car?

Helen Gannon: No.

Blanche Touhill: You went on the bus or the streetcar?

Helen Gannon: We did. We bought a stroller and we took the bus, got another bus and went into the store and they had lots of TVs. Well, one of them was \$50 so PJ said to the shop keeper, he said, "I would like to buy that," and he said, "Is that check or charge?" PJ said, "Oh, I have the \$50. We don't have check or a charge." "Oh," he said, "very well." He said, "Bring your car around." PJ said, "Oh," he said, "we don't have a car. We came on the bus." He said, "You came on the bus? Where do you live?"; "Oh, we live in the State Hospital. I'm a doctor, you know." And this is the nicest story that I like to tell. The man said, "Oh," he said, "would you ever sit over there," he said, "I'll be off in a half an hour," and that man put us in the car, drove us to the State Hospital, unloaded this big TV and waved at us. That was the nicest thing that ever happened to us. And that was North St. Louis at that time. So it was wonderful. However, the TV didn't quiet me too much. Franz got me the house and I sort of settled in, but not really.

Blanche Touhill: Where was the house?

Helen Gannon: On Devonshire.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, in St. Louis...near...

Helen Gannon: In South St. Louis, near Buter school and Hampton Village.

Blanche Touhill: And what's the park?

Helen Gannon: Windmoor.

Blanche Touhill: That's right. Oh, that's a beautiful area.

Helen Gannon: And I can walk to Hampton Village.

Blanche Touhill: That's a beautiful area.

Helen Gannon: And I haven't driven in my life. I've never driven a car.

Blanche Touhill: So it was time to learn how to drive a car?

Helen Gannon: Time to learn how to drive a car. Time to learn how to write a check and Franz took me in hands and showed me how to...she took me shopping once a week.

Blanche Touhill: Was she a realtor?

Helen Gannon: No.

Blanche Touhill: She was just a friend?

Helen Gannon: Just a friend that met me on the street.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Helen Gannon: Yes, and we always went to her house for Christmas. PJ, at that time, had done the specialty boards in London and so he had to leave and I was terrified so she took me in to stay with her and she took time off work when the baby came. Isn't that amazing?

Blanche Touhill: Yes. So you were in and out of the hospital in one day?

Helen Gannon: In one day, one day.

Blanche Touhill: And you were at the Incarnate Word Hospital.

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And that was on Grand?

Helen Gannon: On Grand Avenue.

Blanche Touhill: And Lafayette?

Helen Gannon: Yes. It's part of St. Louis University today, yes. And so Nile was our first American citizen.

Blanche Touhill: Now, your older child then was born in England?

Helen Gannon: In London.

Blanche Touhill: I know Nile but who's the older one?

Helen Gannon: Sean.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, Sean. Is he the doctor?

Helen Gannon: No, Nile is the doctor. Sean is an electrical engineer that flies drones. We call him the spy of the family. Maybe I'm talking too much.

Blanche Touhill: No, no.

Helen Gannon: But he lives on Lindell Boulevard, three houses down from the History Museum.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.

Helen Gannon: And after they had bought the house, he discovered that 200 feet from the DeBelievre was the Irish Village in the World's Fair.

Blanche Touhill: I never knew where it was.

Helen Gannon: So he has the site of the Irish Village. And then I had a little neighbor who died in my arms at 99, a wonderful lady who had been to the World's Fair in 1904 and on her bookshelf she had a book written by Mr. Yates, W.B., signed by him.

Blanche Touhill: Was he here?

Helen Gannon: He was here in 1904.

Blanche Touhill: Really?

Helen Gannon: Yes, and she gave me that book. She bought that book for 50 cents at the book fair in Clayton.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they didn't look at it. They didn't know.

- Helen Gannon: And so I have that book, so we're great Yates scholars. PJ loves to teach Yates. So life has been good for us. The connections that we've made here in St. Louis have been amazing.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, they have. But part of that was your initiative because it was the dancing school that spread your reputation.
- Helen Gannon: It was (Coldice?) that actually gave me...
- Blanche Touhill: How did you get in with Coldice?
- Helen Gannon: Well, in 1971, Larosso Maracle was one of my role models, if you like, had brought a tour to North America and they had a cancellation of a concert and Bill McAvoy who was organizing the tour from New York, called the Folk Music Society here in Missouri, and said, would it be possible to get a concert in to St. Louis and the concert came in and the St. Louis community didn't enjoy it because it was traditional. They weren't used to...they were expecting When Irish Eyes are Smiling.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, there's a whole bevy of Irish American songs that most Irish Americans think are Irish but they aren't Irish songs at all.
- Helen Gannon: Absolutely, like Danny Boy. So I was in heaven at the concert and so we gave a little party afterwards at our house for the artists and there was a branch Coldice after that and it gave me a real handle on something solid that was home and so it grew and grew, with your help and the help of many and we are today the strongest branch in North America.
- Blanche Touhill: Really?
- Helen Gannon: We were the only branch selected to represent Coldice from North America in Milan this year and in Shanghai five years ago. So our school is amazing.
- Blanche Touhill: I think that's due to you. You would think Chicago, you would think Boston.
- Helen Gannon: You would. Boston is good but the after school program you have at the ground level to children. There aren't too many. Now, the Jansen ward has progressed immensely. For every 10,000 dancers, we might produce maybe 1,000 musicians. Music is hard and so we like to incorporate. Coldice believes in the whole thing: the language; the music; the song;

the story and the dance. And so we have run by the Coldice model and have now twinned with the branch in Ireland and we have 79 kids going to Ireland in August next year.

Blanche Touhill: To perform?

Helen Gannon: To perform and to learn, to study for a week and perform.

Blanche Touhill: And where do they stay?

Helen Gannon: They're going to stay in Skipereen and the competition is in Ellis this year and so I keep saying this will be my last trip but I love to take them back to the grassroots after we've given them the music and the dance and let them learn it from the masters.

Blanche Touhill: I know that your graduates always win these Congressional Awards. What is that?

Helen Gannon: The Congressional Award was initiated by Colin Powell for the youth of America and he said that they should be self-motivated. The program consists of role modeling yourself. You have to be 13 ½ to register and you have until you're 24 to reach gold medal level. You set your own goals but you must achieve them with a validator and with an adviser and we latched onto that program and it's wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, because you have winners every year.

Helen Gannon: I have had many gold medals and it's not from win; it's achievement, accomplishment and so you advise them. We can cover most of the areas for them also. Nile was the first to get a silver medal and believe it or not, that's helped him to get into the citadel.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I can understand that.

Helen Gannon: Yeah. You have to set a goal for physical fitness, personal development, community service and you have to go on an expedition without your parents and be self-sufficient.

Blanche Touhill: Now, what does that mean?

Helen Gannon: That means you can go camping. Some of my students will go to Ireland without their parent. I'll be there as the advisor and they learn to fend for themselves, make decisions, learn the currency, prepare for the trip, pack

the proper things...we don't help them...and they have to do four nights for their gold medal and then Congress will award that medal and it's a wonderful program and every state in the Union, every state in the Union. And those are the leaders of tomorrow.

Blanche Touhill: So it's not Irish American?

Helen Gannon: Not at all.

Blanche Touhill: It's just an American citizen?

Helen Gannon: It is. Colin Powell is in charge of it totally. The Congressional Award Foundation do their own fundraising and every year...we had this year, 250 nationwide gold medalists which is a drop in the bucket for our population but they're wonderful.

Blanche Touhill: I don't think that many people know about it. They concentrate on the Eagle Scout.

Helen Gannon: Now, Eagle Scouts are one of the best programs for that child to achieve a gold medal because they've already done most of the work. The 4-H program and the Eagle program, those kids are often among the gold winners, often. We've been very fortunate. In Missouri this year we had two and there was one from Kansas.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Helen Gannon: One gold medal. We had 11 bronze medals.

Blanche Touhill: As you were making your way in the world, did you have trouble renting property or anything like that? What I'm saying is, did you have a problem as a woman making your way in the American society?

Helen Gannon: No. I found it easier as a woman in America. I did not find it easy in England and I did not find it easy in Ireland.

Blanche Touhill: So there's a difference in the cultures?

Helen Gannon: Well, it's changed but in Ireland, the girls were never nurtured. We always nurtured the boys because we felt that they were the bread-winner. So everybody worried about getting a good job for their sons but not for girls and so my hobbies were, I was taught sewing, knitting, cooking and those were the things that they would emphasize for the

girls and the boys were trained in either carpentry, but there was no college in my town, Blanche.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, so that made a big difference when the University of Limerick came in.

Helen Gannon: Oh, it did. It's a wonderful asset to them.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I met John Hume one time and his wife said to me the largest change she noticed...because she was in the Northern Ireland so she was tied to the English educational system and she said the biggest change was that, after World War II, high school became required.

Helen Gannon: Right.

Blanche Touhill: she said that really changed Northern Ireland.

Helen Gannon: It did change, and it changed the South because at 14, you could leave school and now you have to be 16 before you can stop your education.

Blanche Touhill: Well, in America...and I think it's probably still true today...you could get a worker's permit at the age of 14...

Helen Gannon: That's right.

Blanche Touhill: But it was assumed that you would continue your school and then at 16, if you wanted to drop out, you could drop out.

Helen Gannon: I suppose it's okay for me to say that I feel that basic skills are more valuable than...there's very little room today...I had a young man who was going for a gold medal and he's going into medical school but he had difficulty writing an essay by hand. So I worry about that and, of course, at that time, we thought our parents didn't know anything and now our children think we don't know anything. But we may have filled the curriculum so full that we have lost some of the basics.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I understand that totally because I went to college in the early '50s and it seemed to me that the doctors who treated me when I was a child would come to the house.

Helen Gannon: Oh, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And I could see these young men getting ready to be doctors. They were really focused on the patient coming to them and that they were the experts and it wasn't a family connection. My childhood doctor treated everybody in the family, knew all of us, knew the health history of the family for generations...

Helen Gannon: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: ...for two generations at least and I guess I was the third generation that the doctor that brought my mother into the world, that he was still giving shots and things of that nature.

Helen Gannon: Oh, absolutely, and even in my own nurses training, I feel that we got to learn more perhaps practical than theory. We were allowed to give shots. We were allowed to put up blood. We were allowed to take blood. We had a lot of on-the-ground experience which actually, when I took the exam in Jefferson City, made me realize what a wonderful training I had. I had no problem. Much of it was common sense.

Blanche Touhill: Well, when I went to high school, I was taking the academic course. My family wanted me to go to college but they said, "Now you have to take typing and shorthand," because in the summers you might need a job or know what's going to happen to you in life and so you better be prepared to make a living some other way than teaching or whatever you're going to do. I never really did much of that but I always thought...I felt more secure. I felt, well, if I don't like this teaching job, I'll just go back and become a secretary or something, do something else. So I do understand that carpentry and...

Helen Gannon: Absolutely and even today, there's a need for those people.

Blanche Touhill: But, you know, I think we've become so demanding of people who want to get into professions such as medicine, there's so much intensity in high school and in college on those people. They don't have much time to do those kinds of things that really would help in their development.

Helen Gannon: Well, I had to learn the hard way when my first child went to college, Sean, and he wanted to go to Bradley and my husband was a professor at St. Louis University. We assumed that's where he would go. His teacher thought he was better than that and he should go to Bradley if he wanted to be an engineer and I went with him for orientation and how would he

get in and all of this and I remember the lady saying, "If your son or daughter doesn't like their major, they come to our office and we fine..." ...and I stood up as I saw my son sinking in the chair, saying, "I don't need that," and she said, "Oh, excuse me," she said, "where are you from?" and I said, "Where I'm from is that he's got four years to produce his degree" and he did in the end but I was inept in the culture of...you can talk and change and take six years if you want to.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, the European system is [inaudible 51:42].

Helen Gannon: In our family...and the child was embarrassed by my behavior. I remember going to the fraternity house and objecting to the bar and not wanting to pay.

Blanche Touhill: Because they were underage.

Helen Gannon: They were and I didn't want to pay his house fees and so most of the American peers I had as parents saw nothing wrong but I did and that came from the childhood that I had come from.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they are underage and you worry.

Helen Gannon: You do worry.

Blanche Touhill: You worry for an underage person away from home...

Helen Gannon: Right, but he graduated in four years.

Blanche Touhill: And did he go to Bradley?

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: He did go to Bradley.

Helen Gannon: He did and I went to Springboard that year because he was good, he had gotten the highest scores on his SAT and I was advised to let him go and so we made it happen for him. And then Nile came along and he didn't want to go to St. Louis U. He wanted to go to a military college. So he had to go to the Citadel and that was more money. So during those years I found out all about paying for college. Now I have a granddaughter waiting to know if she gets in to Fordham this weekend. So life here is different.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it is.

Helen Gannon: But acceptable and they've done very well and my son, the doctor, graduated from St. Louis University but he didn't want to go there because they used cadavers of animals for research and so they developed their own ideas of what was right for them and that's the beauty of America. We weren't allowed that as children. We weren't really allowed to have opinions.

Blanche Touhill: No, I understand that.

Helen Gannon: But our children have opinions and some of them are good, most of them are good.

Blanche Touhill: Well, let me change the subject a bit. Would your life have been much different if you had been born 50 years earlier?

Helen Gannon: If I had been born...

Blanche Touhill: ...50 years earlier?

Helen Gannon: In America or in Ireland?

Blanche Touhill: Well, in Ireland, I guess.

Helen Gannon: Yes, I think it would have been different.

Blanche Touhill: What would you have been?

Helen Gannon: A housewife.

Blanche Touhill: And a mother.

Helen Gannon: And a mother.

Blanche Touhill: And you would have volunteered for things.

Helen Gannon: I wouldn't have got a job. It wouldn't be an option for me to work outside the house at all; I'm pretty sure, in Ireland. Now, I don't know about America.

Blanche Touhill: Would you have volunteered for certain causes in Ireland?

Helen Gannon: Maybe. I was pretty outspoken. I was the most outspoken in the family but I was also very aggressive to be what I wanted to be. And so I've had success and I've met the right people in my life.

Blanche Touhill: And you've appreciated them.

Helen Gannon: Yes, and I'm amazed, looking back, that my mother allowed us that freedom to become who we are because it wasn't easy for her. Next year is 1916 anniversary and my mother wouldn't approve of me but I'm having a celebration for that. Her thinking was different because my grandfather was at the Royal Irish Academy.

Blanche Touhill: What awards have you received that you're very proud of having received?

Helen Gannon: I have received a Gratum of Coldis which is an honor given to somebody who put many, many years into the culture, and promoting the culture in North America and that was an Irish award. I was honored by me made one of the top 100 Irish Americans in North America and Grand Centre gave me Woman of Achievement Award. What else did I do?

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's enough. The Grand Centre is the arts?

Helen Gannon: Well, I'll tell you, Blanche, it's lovely when somebody says thank you or that you're worthwhile or that you contributed to society.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Do you speak fluent Irish?

Helen Gannon: I don't and I regret that. I had an opportunity when I was young but I didn't realize how valuable that was and when I arrived in America, I saw people speaking their language and I was envious because they identified themselves with their language and I didn't have that. So I am now working on it at 74 years of age, to learn the language of my country, fluently enough that I can converse.

Blanche Touhill: Does PJ know Irish?

Helen Gannon: Yes, he does. PJ is very well educated and so he's my mentor in many areas, a wonderful husband. We're married 52 years.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Helen Gannon: Our children have been very successful in this country and I'm very proud to be an American citizen.

Blanche Touhill: What are the names of your children?

Helen Gannon: Sean, Nile, which is an Irish name. He had trouble with that...and Liam, which is William. Sean is John; Nile is Nile and Liam is William and then Patrick and then Eileen came along after all that.

Blanche Touhill: So you had four boys and a girl?

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And I know Eileen is a harpist.

Helen Gannon: Eileen is a...

Blanche Touhill: She's a Master's Degree.

Helen Gannon: She's a master, fluent Irish speaker with a Master's Degree from the University of Limerick. We came all the way around to where she could take advantage of the university and she's now, I think, president of the American Heart Society.

Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.

Helen Gannon: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful. And is there anything else you want to talk about? I know Michael Flatley who brought Irish dance to America commercially...

Helen Gannon: Yes, Michael has been a huge influence on me as he has on millions of Irish people. Michael came and stayed in my house and at that time, he wasn't that famous but I was mesmerized by his ability to dance and his practicing in my house. He would practice and practice and practice and at that time, the Irish dancer wore nails on their shoes and I wouldn't change because that was tradition and he taught me that you couldn't stop creativity. I wanted to stay with the traditional form and he taught me that he could not do that, that he was going to be creator and so he has opened the door wide, both for me to become an Irish dance teacher, and for millions and millions of young people to learn their art form. So I'm a big fan of Mike.

Helen Gannon 12-18-2015

Blanche Touhill: I want to thank you today for coming. I do think that dance and music and storytelling and language are all tied to the culture of a people and I congratulate you for keeping the Irish culture alive in America. So thank you very much.

Helen Gannon: Thank you, Blanche.