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Charlie Kilkenny

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Interview with Charlie Kilkenny (Irish American)
By Jen DiLisi and Alice McCunn
Living Together Project Transcript
October 27, 1998

AM: This is October 27, 1998. Alice McCunn and Jennifer DiLisi interviewing Charlie Kilkenny at 9:30.

CK: Good.

AM: OK. How long have you lived in Knox County?

CK: All my life. I've been out a few times in other areas. And, but most, all my life.

AM: And you were born here?

CK: Mm-hmm.

AM: And your parents, did they immigrate here or umm,

CK: No, no. Their parents did, um, from Ireland. But, uh, my folks didn't immigrate to here.

AM: Did they ever talk about why they moved to Knox County?

CK: Oh, no, to be honest with you, my father died when I was very young, and uh, so, we never really had a chance to talk about that kind of thing, if....

AM/JD: Mm-hmm.

AM: So your mother raised you....did you have siblings?

CK: Did I? Is that what you said?

AM: Mm-hmm.

CK: Oh yeah...oh yeah, a brother, a sister.

AM: mm-hmm.

CK: A couple of other brothers that died very young. Yeah....

AM: So it was a very different experience growing up, cause your mother raised you. Did she remarry, or...?

CK: No, unh-unh, she didn't. Yes, she did (raise us on her own). In fact, those were the days of the Depression, when bread was 4 cents a loaf and we didn't have 4 cents to buy, if you know what I mean (laughs).

AM: Um, so what was it like living in Knox County? Growing up here, I mean...

CK: Oh, it was great. Knox County has always been a very good community to live in. Uh, of course, it wasn't anywhere near the size when I was a kid that it is today. You know, the growth in the business as you've noticed on the east side particularly. Uh, it's good to grow up in, and a good family community.

AM: Uh, do you still have family living in the area, or have your siblings....

CK: I have a brother living here. Yeah, umm, I have a brother. That's all. The rest of 'em are deceased.

JD: Besides your grandparents, did you have any other relatives that immigrated from Ireland?

CK: No...uh, not really...

JD: No?

CK: No...uh, my uh, father had two brothers, who were, uh, quite the Irish....live in Cleveland...

JD: Oh, okay.

CK: They, uh, they ALWAYS celebrate St. Patrick's Day! (Laughs)

JD: Mm-hmm.

CK: In a big way. Uh, and their name was Kilkenny, naturally. So, uh, they always, of course, you people know, cause you two both come from the Cleveland area...

AM/JD: uh-huh.

CK: And, uh, when St. Patrick's Day comes around up there it's something else.

AM/JD: <Laugh>

CK: I did have a great experience though, uh, last year. One of the greatest St Patrick's Day celebrations in Savannah, Georgia. You know, when the Irish uh, many many years ago, when the Irish famine happened, and all these people left Ireland, a great many of them went to Savannah, Georgia. And there's a tremendous community of Irish there. They have a St. Patrick's Day celebration for, well, a solid week, that's about 2nd to New York City. You know, they say New York City has the big Irish celebration. But boy, I gotta tell ya, Savannah, Ga. has an Irish

celebration that's just something else. We went down there to spend some time.

JD: Besides St. Patrick's Day, would you say that you celebrate your heritage in any other way? I mean, are those traditions still alive...?

CK: Oh yeah! They're still alive, sure. Yeah, we celebrate St. Pat's Day. Uh, I belong to the Shamrock Club in Columbus. And it's always a big family event on St. Pat's Day.

AM/JD: uh-huh.

CK: They have a big parade, and then they all meet the veterans, and there's usually 1500-2000 people, and that's with fam-, people bringing their families and coming in. They have a big celebration. They bring in a number of Irish, uh, groups, and have all the Irish food, and things.

JD: So, you can tell us anything about the Shamrock Club? I wasn't even aware that....

CK: Well, it's an Irish organization that's in a number of cities. And, uh, the Irish of course are the main people. I don't know of any other people that join the club. But uh, they take trips to Ireland, and uh, anything that's an Irish celebration, they're involved in it. You, know, with, whenever the Masses are held, you know, for that type of thing. Um, and I'm almost sure there's that club in Cleveland.

JD: I'm sure.

CK: Yeah. And they have an offshoot they call The Sons of Herman, uh, which is an Irish group. Then they have The Ladies Irish groups as well and uh...it's uh, it's a club of people that are Irish. You can go there, over there for example, Columbus. They're open every day. They, uh, they sponsor a lot of trips to Ireland like the one we took a couple of years ago. We went to Ireland, uh, not through them, but uh, that's an experience.

JD: Was that the first time you've ever....

CK: Oh yeah, the very first time. We thought if we didn't go now, we'd never go! You know what I mean? And, it's an experience and a half, it really is. You thank God you live in America after you've been there a while, cause they don't have it anywhere near like we do. But they're much easier-going people.

AM: They are.

CK: Yeah, have you been to Ireland?

AM: I was, um, abroad last semester in Scotland and went to Dublin for a few days.

CK: Oh did you?! You did?

AM: It was incredible.

CK: Oh great....Scotland, love Scotland too. Oh, Edinburgh?

AM: Aberdeen, Edinburgh....

CK: And the castle on top of the volcano?

AM: uh-huh, it was amazing.

CK: You went to Dublin for a few days, you say?

AM: Yeah, for a few days. Everything's so spread out there. It's so different from here.

CK: Did you go to Trinity College by chance?

AM: Mm-hmm.

CK: Wasn't that something? Where the book...what's it called...the Book of Kells I think it is.

AM: Mm-hmm. Went to see that.

CK: Yeah...

AM: It was really exciting.

CK: Yeah.

JD: So would you say that the Shamrock Club is just something in big cities?

CK: I would say so, yeah. I've never known any to be in a community this size.

JD: You don't have something like that here in Knox County?

CK: No, no. The biggest group of Irish people who would get together in this community would be the Catholic people. You know, the Catholic Church. The (word unintelligible on tape, maybe Kaycee's??), that type of thing. Of course, everybody isn't Catholic that's Irish, but the many of them in this community that are belong to St. Vincents.

AM: Was religion a part of your life when you were growing up?

CK: Oh yeah. I went to school at St. Vincents in Mt. Vernon. My whole tenure, so to speak. Yeah it was very much.

AM: Was there a lot of social gathering around the church?

CK: Oh yeah, a great deal, as a matter of fact. There sure was. It was, quite a family situation. I think more so than it is nowadays.

AM: What kinds of activities would they have? I mean, what kinds of things would they do?

CK: Well, of course we had the sports situation. And they had what we call bazaars, you know, they hold bazaars periodically, you know, like today you go to craft shows and so forth. They had what I guess you'd call the bazaar, that kind of thing, and uh, St. Vincent had quite a family get together every year at the school.

AM: So you went to school at Kenyon for a year and a half...

CK: About a year and a half.

AM: Why did you decide to come here?

CK: Oh I guess because I had some good friends who came here. I had a good friend from Mt. Vernon who went to school....a good friend up in Rocky River, A fellow named Dick Takus (sp?). As a matter of fact, he and George Porterfield, who was from Mt. Vernon, uh, were great friends with Newman, when he came here. In those days, he was just getting started. Wasn't into theater until he got to Kenyon, and then did a lot of that.

AM: Was coming here, was part of that decision so you could be close to home, or was that an incentive?

CK: Not necessarily, I don't think so. It just, a good school, an opportunity. That type of thing.

AM: And then, you transferred to Ohio State.

CK: uh-huh.

AM: What was behind the decision for that?

CK: Business administration. Decided to go into that area.

AM: And then you were...

CK: Of course, I came back from the service, and the only way I could go because my family wasn't in the position financially, I could go on the GI Bill. Which wasn't much, really, but at least you could go to school.

AM: When you were finished with school, did you go anywhere else first, or did you just come back here and begin work?

CK: Oh, I would say I probably did several things. In what I'm in now for example and have

been, this is my 47th year, of radio. And I'm somewhat different than most people in the business because I'm either. You're either/or, not both. I do an early morning radio show, and then I also sell and have always, at 9:00. Like when we get through here, I hit the bricks, so to speak, as they say, and have done that for all those years.

AM: So where...what other places have you been?

CK: In regards to....?

AM: Before coming here, have you been in other cities, in other areas

CK: You mean radio?

AM: Yeah, I mean just work...

CK: Well, I've taken some time off periodically over the years, but not that much. I was with WMMI in Columbus for a time. And was in Ashland for a short time, who, by the way, owns our company now, the Ashland Broadcasting. And, but, I always seem to come back.

AM: What would you say was your best experience growing up in Knox County?

CK: Oh gosh, that's hard to....that's a little bit hard to answer I guess.

AM: Or is there one experience that sticks out in your mind as the best or the worst or as something you...

CK: Well, when I was a kid, which is much different nowadays, I was working when I was nine years old because my father died. And I was working in a place called Pitkins, which was quite a treat, which was downtown Mt. Vernon years ago. Pitkins Corner it was called. It was a market, an old time market where they had the restaurant and they had the bakery, and they had the meat department and nowadays you go in and pick it out. We had 10 butchers there in those days. People working everyday you know. Uh, that was a great experience, doing that.

AM: What kinds of activities did you do growing up? Were you involved in sports, when you were here (Kenyon) you were involved in drama, but what else?

CK: Oh yeah. You mean in high school for example?

AM: Yeah.

CK: I played basketball in high school. About had to, we only had 19 boys in the whole high school. So everybody had to take part.

<Laughter>

CK: And later on they had football, but not when I was in school, so it was quite predominantly basketball in the sports area. That type of thing.

AM: How did you become interested in radio?

CK: Well, I was the first radio operator for the city of Mt. Vernon police department. And in those days I handled the Mt. Vernon police and the sheriff and the state highway patrol whenever we got any kind of calls. Nowadays it's not like that. In those days when you had a call for a check on a license plate or something of that nature you'd have to call Columbus and it would take 20 minutes to get it back. Today, you just touch a button and it appears on the screen, you know, that's how high-tech it is nowadays. Doing that, I checked around, I got so I enjoyed radio, because of that. And I checked around. I tried to get into old WTAM in Cleveland and they said if you had a years' experience we'd give you....well I said I've got to get the experience, you know?

AM: mm-hmm.

CK: And it was difficult and then a story came out in a local paper. It said they were gonna build a new radio station, they were able to get a frequency for the area. And I contacted them and got together with them, and we started out with nothing on comparison with what we have today! Yeah.

AM: What's the most enjoyable thing about doing radio?

CK: Oh gosh...I do a lot of remotes....broadcasts, you know, that type of thing. But I do an early morning show...I'm bragging now, it's true, I've got the listeners in the morning. And I have a great camaraderie, a lot of people in general. I have a lot of good phone calls. We get some bad ones, but a lot of mail and that particular end helped me in the sales end of radio. To be able to go out and call on people cause they knew who you were right off the bat, you know what I mean? But there's been a lot of great things that have happened. I've met a lot of interesting people. I was just thinking today, coming down here as a matter of fact, here's John Glenn going up again Thursday, and had a great interview with him on the steps of the Knox County Courthouse when he, that first time and he came to Mt. Vernon.

AM: Wow.

CK: And some of those kinds of things I've been able to interview about all the top name bands- big bands- years ago. And had a lot of good experiences like that, meeting a lot of people, and as a matter of fact, we were talking about Ireland. When we went to Ireland a couple years ago, there's a town there, the same name as mine, which is a little bit unusual...

JD: My friend sent me a postcard from there.

CK: Is that right? Kilkenny. What an experience it was to go there. They have their own radio station there. They call it Kilkenny 98.6 FM. And it's unbelievable. I had hoped....our tour didn't

include Kilkenny. Fortunately I talked the bus driver and the tour people into taking us there one morning. We only got to spend about four hours there. But what was great was the night before, I called, the radio station and there's a fellow named Johnny Reilly who's quite big in Ireland on the radio. And I guess the guy has something like 100,000 listeners. And the girl said to me, "I won't promise you can talk to him, because he gets so..." and I said Ma'am, I don't want to talk to him, I just want to say hello and the fact that my name is Kilkenny and that I talked to somebody and she said "Wait a minute", and I did, and boy, he came on the line and he said "Is your name *really* Kilkenny?" and I said Yeah. So we were on the air for about a half hour, we did a half hour bit.

AM: Oh, wow.

CK: And then they sent me a lot of tapes and CD's, and but I never got a chance to go to the station, which I still want to do someday. Kilkenny is a real nice community. Kilkenny Castle is there. We went there and met a lot of fine people. And there I was able to find out from the director of the castle, my, my heritage so to speak. It was really interesting. And he said "I've got to tell you something, when they had the big famine in Ireland many years ago, your people really had it hard. You know, they died by the thousands coming over." You know, boats, it was something else. There was a fellow that, how the name Kilkenny came about was there's a fellow, his name was Church and he built churches for St. Patrick. They called him the "Church Kenny". And in Gaelic I guess church means kill, I can't remember exactly that rundown. But they told us all about, this fella who was the head of the Kilkenny Castle was able to tell us about the heritage, which was really interesting, it was something else. As a matter of fact, we went into a store in Kilkenny, wanted to ship some things home and I gave them my credit card and this lady said "I don't believe this."

<Laughter>

CK: Yes, she did. And they checked it out to find out if my name really was Kilkenny! And they about flipped out because there really aren't that many Kilkenny's in that city.

JD: So you've been able to trace your ancestry to that particular city.

CK: Well, yes and no. Not really. I shouldn't say that I've traced it to there because no, I haven't. But I'd like to do that yet sometime and find out where, but you know, I haven't to be honest with you.

AM: So today, in Knox County, there's I mean, you've got the Shamrock Club and...

CK: Well, not in Knox County.

AM: Well, so people travel to Columbus...

CK: Well, yeah. There are some, there's not...there's several Irish folks that I know who belong over there.

AM: How....are you still involved with the church now?

CK: St. Vincents? Not really. Not like I was when I was a kid.

JD: So would you say that as time goes by, or with more generations, that your Irish heritage seems to be.....

CK: Mean something to me?

JD: I mean, do you find that it's still alive in your family? Or as time goes on you kind of lose a sense of it?

CK: Well, like I say, not that many of my family are left, so, but, I love the Irish heritage. We enjoy it a lot. I get, I can't think the name of the publication, every month. Uh, Ireland of the Welcomes it is, or something of that nature. I get that and keep up on it.

JD: IS that something from the Shamrock Club?

CK: No, it comes directly from Blarney. From, Ireland.

AM: Cool.

AM: You've been living in Knox County for a long time and there's been a lot of change, I mean, just in how it looks.

CK: Tremendous.

AM: And the people living here. How do you feel the immigration of different groups has changed over time?

CK: I don't know...I guess it would be for the better. You know what I mean? I remember Gambier when it had a girls' school. Many many years ago and they had a golf course. Over near where the uh, Bexley Hall. And they had a very small golf course, and they had a ladies college there. Of course I was just a kid in those days. But, I guess maybe the changes like say for example here, have ben tremendous. It's funny how we were in Cape Cod recently, walking down the street and here comes a girl with a great big sweatshirt that says Kenyon on it, you know. And I said, do you go to school at Kenyon? And she said "No, but my sister did." And this was up in Hyannis Port up on the Cape! So you can go anyone place in the world because Kenyon's well known for that, but there've been some big changes. Mt. Vernon's been tremendous if you're familiar with that part. On the east side of the city the growth is phenomenal. You know, by comparison. Nobody ever believed years ago....you couldn't get a McDonald's, everybody and his brother wanted to get a McDonald's and they said "No, that town's not big enough." And now there's two of them here!

JD: Are you familiar with any Irish restaurants or stores or places that are run by Irish people in this area?

CK: In Mt. Vernon, no. Not here.

JD: Are there any Irish pubs or anything?

CK: Not in Mt. Vernon, no. But they're great if you've ever been to one. They're something else in Ireland. You ever go to one while you were in Dublin?

AM: Mm-hmm. We went to a few of them to eat and things.

CK: Did you notice how they were family-oriented?

AM: Yes!

CK: I mean, they're not like a lot of people think bars are joints, you know what I mean? And in Ireland, you'll find the pubs are a lot of family.

AM: It was a much more family, home-style meals.

AM: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us, I mean, anything we haven't asked you about that you might think is important?

CK: I can't think of anything off the top of my head. You're principally writing this for what project? On Irish people, is that right?

AM: We're doing an encompassing project on, it's called Living Together. And what we're doing is, we're in teams and we speaking with people from different groups in Knox County.

CK: Oh that's great.

AM: So we're speaking with African-Americans, we're speaking with Mexican Americans.

CK: Oh that's good.

AM: And we'd just like to get a perspective from everyone on what it's like to live in Knox County and how their experience is. Eventually, we're going to write a series of articles for the Mt. Vernon News.

CK: Good!

JD: It'll be published in February in the Looking Glass section. So you can read about the different projects.

CK: Well, I always enjoy getting together with Professor Sacks. We've done a lot of things together over the years, and when he mentioned the fact that you wanted to chat, I was really pleased. It was a pleasure to get together with you. I can't think of anything else in particular unless you can.

JD: Well, we really appreciate your time and coming out here for us.

CK: Well, thank you.

AM: DO you know anyone else that we might be able to speak with who might be able to give us even more information?

CK: Well, I can tell you somebody who Howard, for example, chatted with him because of an Irish thing that they did. There's a fellow named Jim Kelly.

JD: You mentioned him on the phone.

CK: Yeah. And Jim is one of the PR heads for Sprint. Located in Mt. Vernon. He has several areas. And his uncle, who is Lawrence Kelly, was one of the greatest Irishmen that ever lived. He might be able to, when we're through here I can give you a number to call.

JD: Ok, yeah.

AM: If we think of anything else can we call you again?

CK: Sure, I'd be happy to chat with you. Thank you for asking.

AM: Great. Thank you, this has been really helpful. This is our first interview, I hope we've been...

CK: It was good, very good...