

DP-02

ELLA AHERN FITZGERALD

BIRTH DATE: MAY 13, 1902

INTERVIEW DATE: MARCH 22, 1989

RUNNING TIME: 50:00

INTERVIEWER: ANDREW PHILLIPS

RECORDING ENGINEER: UNKNOWN

INTERVIEW LOCATION: CONCORD REHABILITATION CENTER
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

TRANSCRIPT ORIGINALLY PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1989

TRANSCRIPT RECONCEIVED BY: NANCY VEGA, 4/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: MICHAEL A. FAZIO, 6/1995

IRELAND, 1916

AGE 14 (AS RECORDED IN THE INTERVIEW)

SHIP NAME NOT RECALLED

PHILLIPS: This is Andrew Phillips. I'm with Ella Fitzgerald at the Concord Rehabilitation Center. The sound may be a little bit noisy because of the nature of this location, but I'm sure it will be fine. This is Andrew Phillips. This is interview number 376 [DP-2]. It's the 22nd, Wednesday the 22nd of March 1989. It's twenty-five past two and we're going to be interviewing Ella Fitzgerald, who's originally from Ireland. So perhaps let me start with a question, you can tell me when you were born and

where you were born.

FITZGERALD: In the seat of County Kerry.

PHILLIPS: And what year was that?

FITZGERALD: 1902.

PHILLIPS: 1902. And what year did you immigrate to the United States?

FITZGERALD: 1916, I think.

PHILLIPS: 1916.

FITZGERALD: Yes. 1914. I was sixteen years old.

PHILLIPS: You were sixteen. Okay. You immigrated 1914. Could you tell me what life was like in Ireland in those early years before you immigrated, for you.

FITZGERALD: I don't know what you mean.

PHILLIPS: Tell me about your early schooldays in Ireland.

FITZGERALD: Oh, they were good. We had nothing, they were good. We walked to school in our bare feet. I'm even still amazed at that.

PHILLIPS: Did you, I mean, you had absolutely nothing, you walked to school in bare feet.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. We had one pair of shoes for going to church on Sundays.

PHILLIPS: But you didn't wear those shoes during the week.

FITZGERALD: Very seldom because they'd be full of water anyway. We'd be sitting in the water all day in those shoes.

PHILLIPS: Tell me what your house was like in Ireland

FITZGERALD: Well, it was a long house with two bedrooms and a big kitchen, nineteen by twenty inches, twenty feet, I mean. Nineteen by twenty feet and we had to share the beds.

PHILLIPS: How many people slept in one bed?

FITZGERALD: Three or four sometimes.

PHILLIPS: The children.

FITZGERALD: Yes. They were quite big too, a lot of us.

PHILLIPS: How many children in your family?

FITZGERALD: There was ten, but all I remember was eight. I think they died before I'd gotten on.

PHILLIPS: What did your father do for a living? What was his occupation?

FITZGERALD: Worked on the farm.

PHILLIPS: Did he work for somebody else or did he work . . .

FITZGERALD: By himself.

PHILLIPS: On his own farm?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And did he sell the produce to make money?

FITZGERALD: Yes. But then the English took over and they took some of my land away.

PHILLIPS: What did your father feel about that?

FITZGERALD: That there was nothing they could do. They didn't want to. Now they're getting it back, I heard.

PHILLIPS: Say that again?

FITZGERALD: They're getting it back.

PHILLIPS: Tell me, tell me how you felt when that happened.

FITZGERALD: Well, I was too young to understand it, you know.

PHILLIPS: Did you remember Eamon De Valera and some of those?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Famous characters from Ireland.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Did you remember those men? Did you know of those men back then? Do you remember hearing them speak, or . . .

FITZGERALD: No, I just heard them mention the name. I don't interest, you know, I just knew.

PHILLIPS: Was there fighting?

FITZGERALD: I think there was. There was fighting for the Irish, you know, the Republic of Irish.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember the Easter Uprising in Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Yes, I think I barely remember that.

PHILLIPS: You barely remember?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. I heard only wooden guns, marching with the wooden guns that they made. Make believe.

PHILLIPS: You mean that the men were training with wooden guns or the children were playing with wooden guns?

FITZGERALD: No, the men were training with wooden guns.

PHILLIPS: Where did they train?

FITZGERALD: I don't really know.

PHILLIPS: In the streets, or in the backyards?

FITZGERALD: I suppose the streets.

PHILLIPS: What was the food? What food did you eat? What was the diet like?

FITZGERALD: Oh, cabbage and turnip and beef and pork. Pork and beef mostly.

PHILLIPS: Did you eat that every night, or once a week?

FITZGERALD: No. Every once a week we got it. Or whenever we had it while it lasted after we killed the pig.

PHILLIPS: Did you have to kill the pig yourself?

FITZGERALD: Oh, well, uh, my father killed it and somebody helped him. But we had to clean the insides from the blood. Black pudding, they called it.

PHILLIPS: What is that?

FITZGERALD: That's made out of blood and spices and stuff.

PHILLIPS: That's, uh, bread, blood pudding.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Blood pudding, they call it.

PHILLIPS: And what sort of clothes did you have? Did you have enough clothes? Were you warm, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Not too good. We were warm because the climate was damp and then in school we'd be cold because the teacher, the fireplace up then, she sat around that and we sat in the back where we were getting all, you know, the heat. And then they made dresses out of anything they could make it out of. I'd get, we used to get flour in hundred and sixty-pound bags and cornmeal and they took it and they bleached it and they made dresses out of it and slips and

underwear.

PHILLIPS: Out of the . . .

FITZGERALD: They dyed it. They dyed it.

PHILLIPS: They dyed it so that it was a different color.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Right.

PHILLIPS: What did it feel like? Did you actually wear some of this clothing made from these cornmeal and flour bags?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. They made out of it home bread and cornmeal bread. That's how, the guys in Winfield, they started making, recently they started making the bakery bread, and that was a big treat. You know when we got that? When they, you had the stations of the cross.

PHILLIPS: Could I go back a little bit. I'm very interested in the way you were describing how your family and people in your community, they were very poor.

FITZGERALD: All of them.

PHILLIPS: They were very poor.

FITZGERALD: All of them.

PHILLIPS: Very poor, and they used to make their clothes from flour bags, you said.

FITZGERALD: They'd bleach them out first, the brand off them.

PHILLIPS: They'd bleach the brand off of them.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And then they'd dye them with something, regular dye, I think.

PHILLIPS: This was very coarse on the skin. It would give you a rash.

FITZGERALD: No, no. No, no. The flour bags were very, very nice.

PHILLIPS: The flour bags were nice.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. They weren't a bit coarse.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what they were made from?

FITZGERALD: Well, it was something like we used to have those dish towels, that kind of stuff. They were having

dish towels here for the longest time made out of it.

PHILLIPS: Like similar to linen, perhaps?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, more likely. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: In the texture.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And they made their underclothing from it as well?

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: The men and the women? The men made, did the men make shirts from it and the women made dresses, perhaps?

FITZGERALD: Well, I think some were made but they had what they called flannelet, they call it flannel here, and they used to make shirts out of that. The women used to sew by hand.

PHILLIPS: Where did you get the material from, the flannel from?

FITZGERALD: Well, there was a store there they'd donate stuff

to you at Christmas time, and they had stuff that came during the year. And there was also a grocery store and they'd get, we would get a pound or ten pounds of sugar, a box of raisins, a bottle of whiskey and a loaf of raisin bread, I think. All free at Christmas time, as a gift.

PHILLIPS: From whom?

FITZGERALD: From the storekeeper that would be there.

PHILLIPS: Why did he give you the gift?

FITZGERALD: Well, because if you needed something bad during the season you would take it from him, and then you could bring up your bill and when you had some money you'd pay him.

PHILLIPS: So he in some ways acted almost like a bank. He would give you loans and food.

FITZGERALD: Right. And he trusted everybody.

PHILLIPS: People trusted everybody.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: You were all Catholics?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And everybody helped each other out. If you were short of flour before you could get to the store you'd get it from your neighbor. You would borrow it, and then you'd pay it back. We knew values.

PHILLIPS: And you would bake your own bread?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Did you have social occasions together with your neighbors? Social events?

FITZGERALD: Well, going to school we did, but that was about all.

PHILLIPS: I mean did you or your sisters, your older sisters perhaps, did they go to a dance sometimes?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Music?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Did they used to sing a lot amongst themselves,

tell stories?

FITZGERALD: Right. Even when they were going to school as kids, then. They'd try to dance what they'd call the Irish Set.

PHILLIPS: Could you . . .

FITZGERALD: The Irish Set.

PHILLIPS: Do you know how to spell that?

FITZGERALD: S-E-T. A hornpipe.

PHILLIPS: Someone would play the hornpipe?

FITZGERALD: No. They'd dance the tune.

PHILLIPS: They'd dance the tune.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: I see. Is this music still around? Did it come, do you know . . .

FITZGERALD: Oh, yes, it's still here.

PHILLIPS: You sometimes still hear it on a record, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right.

PHILLIPS: Tell me why it was that you decided, or your father or mother decided, and perhaps you could tell me who decided that you would come to America.

FITZGERALD: I did.

PHILLIPS: You.

FITZGERALD: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Did you come with your parents?

FITZGERALD: No. My uncle was here and I had a brother and two sisters here at the time, and then they sent you the fare and you paid it back.

PHILLIPS: Why did you decide to leave your home in Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Well, to make a better living. There was nothing there for it to . . .

FITZGERALD: You were sixteen years of age.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Had you left school already?

FITZGERALD: Well, at that time I did. But then that was equal to two years high school here.

PHILLIPS: Let me ask you, when you left school in Ireland what did you do?

FITZGERALD: I came here.

PHILLIPS: You came straight here from school?

FITZGERALD: Aye, after I was out maybe for a couple of months or so.

PHILLIPS: Had you corresponded with your relations?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And they, had they told you about the United States?

FITZGERALD: No. They didn't tell me much about it but I knew, you know, from hearing people talk.

PHILLIPS: Because those people also had friends or relatives in the United States? How did they know about it?

FITZGERALD: Well, I suppose they found it out from some other relations and then years ago, when this country was

discovered, they were the only people that came over here to teach them English. They didn't send for the English. They sent for the Irish, and they still do it in New York, sending over for the Irish, this year. Because they said they make better teachers, and more strict.

PHILLIPS: So tell me that, I'm interested in that atmosphere back in County Kerry so long ago, was there a lot of talk about America?

FITZGERALD: No, not too much. You know, your friends would tell you, you would hear it, when you were going to school, from somebody else.

PHILLIPS: Did people think about going to other countries other than the United States, or was it just the United States?

FITZGERALD: Well, I think a lot of them came to Australia at the same time.

PHILLIPS: Do you have any reason, do you know why it would be that some people would decide to go to Australia and others might decide to go to the United States?

FITZGERALD: Well, I guess it was easier to get to Australia, or something, and get the pass, because at the time I came you had to have a pass and everything and you would have to have somebody here belonging to you to claim you.

PHILLIPS: Whereas in Australia people could just go regardless?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right. I think that was it.

PHILLIPS: I see. So you had to have a relative or someone here who would . . .

FITZGERALD: Yeah. To claim you.

PHILLIPS: . . . when you came over. So tell me what you did. Did you write a letter to your uncle, or your relatives, or somebody?

FITZGERALD: I think my mother or my sister did, I don't know which one.

PHILLIPS: What did they think about when you told them that you wanted to leave home and come to America?

FITZGERALD: Well, they didn't mind. They were used to it by

that time.

PHILLIPS: Why were they used to it?

FITZGERALD: Well, from the others coming over here that they had. The sisters and brother. I had two brothers and two sisters here at that time.

PHILLIPS: So that, obviously they had already come before you.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And my uncle was here, and he sent for them, I mean, for one of them. And then they sent the money back for the next one to come.

PHILLIPS: So tell me about the day that you left home to come to America. What happened?

FITZGERALD: What do you mean?

FITZGERALD: Tell me about the particular day that you actually left home and you were going to leave your home and come to the United States. It was a very big decision. It must be, you must, it must have been very emotionally moving for you to do that.

FITZGERALD: Well, that's when I had decided to come. But when

I was leaving there, it was.

PHILLIPS: Where did you leave from?

FITZGERALD: I left from, you mean, in Ireland? Took the boat from Queenstown, I think it was at that time.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me something about that trip on the boat?

FITZGERALD: I was sick the whole time. Everything came up. One man vomited his teeth right over the railing, over the, into the ocean. His teeth came out and they went into the ocean.

PHILLIPS: And you, obviously it wasn't very enjoyable for you.

FITZGERALD: No. I was sick. But we enjoyed it, you know. There was portholes we could look out. Little holes, you know, in the ship you could look out.

PHILLIPS: Portholes to look out.

FITZGERALD: Yes. It was very rough and . . .

PHILLIPS: How long did it take?

FITZGERALD: I think it was seven days and sixteen hours or something. Seven days and six hours, and so many minutes. I don't know just how . . .

PHILLIPS: And did you remember when you actually saw the United States and the Statue of Liberty?

FITZGERALD: Well, I remember the Statue of Liberty. That's about it. But I thought it'd be an all nice clean place with white houses. I thought it'd be all like the White House. Instead it was so dark and dreary looking.

PHILLIPS: And then you arrived at Ellis Island.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And Ellis Island was dark and dreary looking.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Very dark and dreary looking.

PHILLIPS: What happened?

FITZGERALD: Well, somebody was there to meet me and, like a social worker here. Something like a social worker. They were there to meet me, and then they put me on the right train.

PHILLIPS: Didn't you first go to be, uh, interviewed by some people on Ellis Island?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yes.

PHILLIPS: Interviewed, and had medical examinations?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. And we had a medical examination before we came here.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me about some of that experience? How strict was the medical examination, for instance?

FITZGERALD: I guess it was pretty strict. But I didn't think about it at the time, about it being strict. But they sent some back to Ireland. They were, they found them with fellows in the boat, you know, some of those, uh, what do you call, I think they served them meals and stuff, you know. Some of them. And they sent them back. They . . .

PHILLIPS: I'm sorry. I didn't get that.

FITZGERALD: They sent some of them back to Ireland because they found them with fellows.

PHILLIPS: They found them with fellows?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. In the cabins or something.

PHILLIPS: They were . . .

FITZGERALD: They weren't fit to come in, then, or something.

PHILLIPS: They were mixing company.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: The men and the women.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Right.

PHILLIPS: They were to be sent back.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. They were sent back. They were very strict.

PHILLIPS: Between separating the sexes.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: What happened, actually, do you remember, on Ellis Island when you arrived? You were a group of Irish people, I take it. Were there people from other nationalities, though, with you? Were there people from other parts of Europe?

FITZGERALD: Well, there was about four in one family, they were all Irish, like, that I knew. Well, I didn't know them, but I got acquainted with them, that came from some part of Ireland, too. And then I was met with this, after the examination, I was met by somebody.

PHILLIPS: You were met by somebody.

FITZGERALD: Yeah, like a social worker here.

PHILLIPS: The social worker. But do you remember how many people there were with you? Were there many dozens, or were there hundreds, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Well, there was, I don't remember how many.

PHILLIPS: A lot?

FITZGERALD: It was a lot, yeah.

PHILLIPS: A lot of people. And how were you treated. Were the people courteous to you? Did they treat you well?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, very nice.

PHILLIPS: They were very nice. Even though it was dark and dreary the people were nice.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Right.

PHILLIPS: And do you remember the actual place where you gathered, the big hall and the wooden benches? I think they were wooden benches, weren't they?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. I think they had them at that time. Yeah. That's barely, I barely remember that.

PHILLIPS: Yes. And then you, did you know how long you stayed there? Did you stay there for days, or for just hours?

FITZGERALD: No. I think they were almost ready, just hours.

PHILLIPS: Just hours.

FITZGERALD: They were almost ready with the train, to put us on the train.

PHILLIPS: So very soon you were on the mainland?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right.

PHILLIPS: And when you say you were put on the train, the

train to where?

FITZGERALD: Well, to Chicago.

PHILLIPS: So you, your relatives were already in Chicago?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Right.

PHILLIPS: So you knew before you left that you were coming to Chicago.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And they were supposed to meet me in New York, I think, because we had to change there, change trains.

PHILLIPS: Okay. So tell, then you caught the train and you came out to Chicago straight away?

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: What was that trip like?

FITZGERALD: Oh, the trip was nice compared to the boat.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us, do you remember what the weather was like, what feelings you had at the time?

FITZGERALD: I think the weather was nice, at least as far as I

remember, compared to all the rain in Ireland.

PHILLIPS: Was that one of the things that struck you about the United States, that the weather was nicer?

FITZGERALD: No, I didn't think too much about that. I was thinking of where I was going and what it was like.

PHILLIPS: So what, where did you come to? Where did you finish up?

FITZGERALD: In Chicago.

PHILLIPS: In Chicago. And tell us what it looked like when you first arrived.

FITZGERALD: Well, after it was so dark and dreary and I thought I'd see all white houses and real clean streets. Instead it was so dark and the houses looked all dark to me and dirty and everything.

PHILLIPS: This was in Chicago.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And so what happened next? What did you do? Where did you go to sleep when you first arrived? Where

did you stay?

FITZGERALD: Oh, at my sister's house in Indiana. She was down in Indiana.

PHILLIPS: In Indiana.

FITZGERALD: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And you were, this was when you were sixteen years of age.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Um. Can you, what did you do? Did you go to school or go straight to work?

FITZGERALD: No, there was no place down there where you could go to school, you know. There was just places, I think, for eighth grade or something, you know. So I came to Chicago after a couple of months, and then I went to school.

PHILLIPS: Where did you go to school?

FITZGERALD: Inglewood High School.

FITZGERALD: Inglewood?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Inglewood High School.

FITZGERALD: High School.

PHILLIPS: Uh-huh. And were there many students at that school?

FITZGERALD: There was a lot of young people, you know, that hadn't gone to school before, I mean, to high school. So they gave me a test and I was fit for high school.

PHILLIPS: And there were students from all different parts of the world.

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right. Well, I think they were from Chicago, most of them because I met a lot here since i've been here, in here. From Chicago, they went.

PHILLIPS: Was this school a very, uh, there were children there from different nationalities . . .

FITZGERALD: Yeah. But they were all older ones like sixteen and eighteen.

PHILLIPS: I mean were some, were they all Americans, or were there Polish students, perhaps.

FITZGERALD: A lot of them were Americans, I think.

PHILLIPS: A lot of them were Americans. And Irish, too? Were there may Irish students?

FITZGERALD: I don't think there was too many Irish. I don't remember. Cause, I was afraid. I kept away from them.

PHILLIPS: You were afraid.

FITZGERALD: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: How were you treated at the school by students?

FITZGERALD: Very good. Very good.

PHILLIPS: Did you enjoy it?

FITZGERALD: Uh-huh. It was wonderful to be up in front of the class. I didn't want to go home.

PHILLIPS: They wanted you to go in front of the class.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: To do what?

FITZGERALD: Just to show them that I knew, you know. And I was dressed nice. My sister made a special dress for me, had it made. I wore that.

PHILLIPS: It was hand sewn?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, no, I think my sister might have had a machine by that time.

PHILLIPS: So when you left school what did you do?

FITZGERALD: In Chicago? I went to work.

PHILLIPS: Where did you go to work?

FITZGERALD: It was at a dressmaker, a tailor shop.

PHILLIPS: So you must have had some skill. You were a good dressmaker?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know if I, but we had to sew from the time we were in first and second grade.

PHILLIPS: Back in Ireland.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Every class we had we had to, Monday, Wednesday and Friday we had sewing for one hour. And it was the most, you got slapped on the hand if you didn't do it straight. And our fingers would be full of welts here sometimes. We used to get stuck with a needle when we were young.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell me a little bit more about that sewing? Did you enjoy sewing? Did you enjoy that? I mean, obviously you didn't enjoy the needle, but did you like the actual finished result of your work?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah, they were very pleased with it, because it was all handwork then. They didn't have very many machines. Maybe a one.

PHILLIPS: And so in the United States you continued sewing. That training had been valuable for you.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Right. And then I got my room and board.

PHILLIPS: Room and board?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. First I took care of children in the building. Yeah. The people downstairs wanted me,

and these were Greek people, but they were very good to me.

PHILLIPS: So you were looking after their children.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And it . . .

FITZGERALD: And helping out with meals and everything, you know.

PHILLIPS: And did you have a job as well?

FITZGERALD: That was the job. I was paid for that. I was getting my room and board.

PHILLIPS: How much were you paid? . . .

FITZGERALD: Oh, about eighteen dollars a week or something.

PHILLIPS: Eighteen dollars a week.

FITZGERALD: Which was very good at the time.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what the Greek man did? What was his job?

FITZGERALD: He was in the candy business.

PHILLIPS: Candies.

FITZGERALD: Yeah, at 63rd and Ellis.

PHILLIPS: How many children did you have to look after?

FITZGERALD: Oh, two. And then I'd write out the notes for them in English, you know. If he was out of school, or why he was late or something. I'd write it out for them because they couldn't write in English.

PHILLIPS: Could they speak English?

FITZGERALD: Yes, but they couldn't write. They had very little English then. When they were talking by themselves they would speak in Greek.

PHILLIPS: Tell me what you, um, what you did after you, how long did you stay in that job? Did you . . .

FITZGERALD: I don't know. About six months, and the people downstairs wanted me because they were moving way to the North Side and there would be, it would be so far for me to go and come home to my sister's. I'd got Thursday and Sunday afternoon off.

PHILLIPS: Did you, were you happy during these times?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. I was very happy. Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: Do you think you were happier here than you had been back in Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Well, I wouldn't say that.

FITZGERALD: But you were happy in both places.

FITZGERALD: Oh, yes.

PHILLIPS: Different? Different, I suppose.

PHILLIPS: Well, they were playing, you worked, you know, you had something to do. So then I worked, the lady downstairs wanted me, in the same building. So she asked me if I'd work for her. So she was, she was a dressmaker and her husband was a tailor at 62-43 Greenwood and I helped them in the shop all day and then I came home early and got their lunch a half hour before they got in and I also got supper for them. They'd tell me what they were going to have and they had a book, and I read out of it how to do it.

PHILLIPS: I'm sorry, how to do what?

FITZGERALD: To fix their meals way they wanted.

PHILLIPS: They wanted them fixed in a particular way.

FITZGERALD: Yes. Well, not exactly, but I didn't fix that much then, you know, the meals were plainer.

PHILLIPS: How long did you do this work for? How many years?

FITZGERALD: Not too long. Then I got married.

PHILLIPS: How old were you when you got married?

FITZGERALD: Uh, I think I was twenty-two. Was it twenty-two or twenty-four? Twenty-four, I think. I was married in 1922. Was that it?

PHILLIPS: And then, so you got married. Was the man that you married, was he also from Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: He immigrated to the United States as well.

FITZGERALD: Yes. But he was here ahead of me a long time. He was ten years older, I think, ten or eleven years

older.

PHILLIPS: What sort of career did he have, what sort of work?

FITZGERALD: Well, the construction line.

PHILLIPS: The construction line.

FITZGERALD: Yeah, and then he was on the, on the streetcars, it was, at that time. He was on then, but he had kind of a weak stomach and he couldn't take it. So then Depression came. I was raising a family then.

PHILLIPS: You were raising your family then.

FITZGERALD: I was staying home, raising a family and we got along with what we had.

PHILLIPS: I'd like to talk a little bit about the Depression in just a moment. Your husband, though, what did he do, specifically, on the streetcars? Did he drive them or . . .

FITZGERALD: Oh, he was a driver.

PHILLIPS: He was a driver?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And then, after he stopped working on the streetcars what did he do?

FITZGERALD: The construction line. But that wasn't, that wasn't good at the time. They weren't, you know, there was a lot of days off that was raining. They weren't paid for that like they are now. And they also get paid now, and they get insurance and everything. There was nothing then. They also get paid if they show up two hours in the morning for work. There was none of that then, and the pay was very small.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember how much he got paid?

FITZGERALD: I don't know.

PHILLIPS: I'm going to turn this tape over.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

PHILLIPS: This is Side Two of the Ella Fitzgerald tape, interview number 376 [DP-2]. So, the Depression. Can you tell me what your experience was during the

Depression?

FITZGERALD: Well, my husband was out of work all the time and then when it's, when it was over with he hadn't paid his dues in the union because he couldn't afford it. So then we decided to get back, you know he couldn't unless you paid up all your dues and we didn't have the money.

PHILLIPS: Which union was it?

FITZGERALD: It was the, some kind of a construction company.

PHILLIPS: Because he was a construction worker?

FITZGERALD: Yes.

PHILLIPS: Like a carpenter, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Well, he did everything. Like he could do carpentry work and cement work.

PHILLIPS: I see. Tell me, perhaps, about the Depression, when you realized that things were going to get very tough for you you must have, did it happen gradually or did it happen very suddenly.

FITZGERALD: Yes, it happened gradually, I guess. Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And, uh, so, were you working at the time or were you just looking after the children? No, no. No, I was looking after the children.

PHILLIPS: How many children?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Five altogether.

PHILLIPS: You had five children.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And then the Depression came. What did you do to make the ends meet?

FITZGERALD: Just do the best we could with what we had. And then there was something like, uh, towards the end there was something like relief out, and you got so much to eat, like. You got maybe a stew in a can, cornmeal, and items like that.

PHILLIPS: Stew in a can, cornmeal?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Yeah. And I don't think they gave any meat because we had peanut butter and jelly. Peanut

butter and jelly a lot and . . .

PHILLIPS: Were you still baking your own bread in those days or did you buy it?

FITZGERALD: Oh, no. You couldn't buy your bread then. Everybody made their own. It's only when we had the stations and somewhere we used to get those, bakery bread we used to call it.

PHILLIPS: Bakery bread.

FITZGERALD: Yes. That was a big treat. Made in the bakery.

PHILLIPS: And it was bread actually bought from the bakers.

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right. But you could only get that whenever you were at the stations.

PHILLIPS: When you were at the stations.

FITZGERALD: The stations.

PHILLIPS: I don't know what that means.

FITZGERALD: Nobody here does. There's a certain number of houses, like six or seven, and they're called the town end. And then they take the stations in towns

so that everybody, the older people that couldn't get to church, could come to the house and get Confession and Communion. But none of the young people would come because they had the Confessions out in the open in the room and everybody could hear, so the old people was all that went.

PHILLIPS: This was during the Depression? Or was this after the Depression?

FITZGERALD: It was during, it was all the time. The stations were all the time.

PHILLIPS: Why was it called the stations? Was it like the Stations of the Cross, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Oh, no. Everybody thinks it is, but it's not. But that's what they called it.

PHILLIPS: Now, let me explain that again. Let me see if I understand what that is. The stations, these were like groups of, small groups within the community?

FITZGERALD: Yeah, right.

PHILLIPS: Where people could gather to, in effect, carry out their own church service so that they didn't have

to go to church.

FITZGERALD: Right. They weren't able to go to church, maybe.

PHILLIPS: Because they may be ill or they may be elderly?

FITZGERALD: It might be too far for them to walk.

PHILLIPS: They had no transportation.

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: And so they, would the priest come to them?

FITZGERALD: No, there wasn't enough priests, I guess.

PHILLIPS: So who would hear the Confession?

FITZGERALD: Well, the priest, the day we had the Mass in the house.

PHILLIPS: In somebody's house?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. In this number of houses that we called together the town end.

PHILLIPS: Which was called the stations, for some reason that we don't quite know. And the priest would come to you?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Then he'd bring, uh, what he called the Clerk with him, and then you would have money to pay for the Mass and money for the Clerk. We could pay both of them.

PHILLIPS: How much did it cost?

FITZGERALD: I wouldn't know.

PHILLIPS: Was it expensive?

FITZGERALD: I guess it couldn't be too expensive then. And then they got a big long table like the kitchen table, which was real long, and they put it up on two chairs and that was the altar, and then you put a cloth on it.

PHILLIPS: You put a what? Sorry?

FITZGERALD: A cloth, a white cloth on top.

PHILLIPS: On top of what was now the altar.

FITZGERALD: The table, yeah.

PHILLIPS: Which was a table which became an altar.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And he would serve . . .

FITZGERALD: He would say Mass there and then the Clerk would answer.

PHILLIPS: Oh, I see. And then he would serve Communion from that.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And then we'd have to have a special breakfast for him. And then he'd get a special breakfast, you know, and we'd all wait until he was gone. And then we'd get our breakfasts, the rest of the bunch that was there. He'd get a special.

PHILLIPS: What would he eat?

FITZGERALD: What he ate wasn't much but, I mean, it was a big treat. He'd get plenty of eggs, I guess.

PHILLIPS: Was he fat?

FITZGERALD: No, no. Plenty of eggs and bread and butter and tea, I guess. That was his, that's what he was used to.

PHILLIPS: Was there a good relationship between the community, between these communities that you could describe as the stations and the priests?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. Very good. Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Was there just one priest, or many different priests would come?

FITZGERALD: One priest made up the parish.

PHILLIPS: So you'd get to know the priest.

FITZGERALD: Oh, yes. They all knew him.

PHILLIPS: But in those days you weren't so old, were you?

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: But you still went to the stations?

FITZGERALD: Well, it was, no, I didn't go when it was somebody else's house, but in our own house. Just the older people went. And the children didn't go either.

PHILLIPS: Did this, did this happen, did this way of worship begin before the Depression or during the Depression?

FITZGERALD: Oh, long before Depression. They still have it in some parts of Ireland. They still hold it.

PHILLIPS: This was a carry-over from Ireland, then? This idea was a carry-over from Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah.

PHILLIPS: And you say they still do it in Chicago?

FITZGERALD: They do it in Ireland.

PHILLIPS: Oh, they still do it in Ireland.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: I see.

FITZGERALD: But not here, I don't think. But we have Mass here every Monday now.

PHILLIPS: That's at this particular place, this Concord Rehabilitation Center.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Tell me a little bit more about life during the Depression. Your husband had no work at all.

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: Did you have to go to work?

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: So you were at . . .

FITZGERALD: Simply managed with what we had and what we got.

PHILLIPS: So you were reliant on the relief?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Which came how regularly? How often did you get relief?

FITZGERALD: Well, you know, I think about maybe, maybe once a month or something, but you would have that for the whole month and stretch it.

PHILLIPS: So you, you and your family must have been hungry sometimes.

FITZGERALD: No, we were not.

PHILLIPS: So there was enough relief and help from other peoples.

FITZGERALD: Yes, with what you could make out of the farm, you know.

PHILLIPS: Oh, okay, so you actually grew your own food as well?

FITZGERALD: Potatoes and turnips and cabbage and onions.

PHILLIPS: Where was this? Which? Where was this location? Where was this small farm and house that you lived in.

FITZGERALD: In Kerry. Near the store, outside. The store.

PHILLIPS: Oh, I see. That's back in Ireland.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Now, when you came to Chicago during the Depression did you have a vegetable garden?

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: No, you didn't.

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: But during the Depression how did you get enough to

eat?

FITZGERALD: Well, we had enough because we got the vegetables from the, from the garden, out of seeds or something that we could count the vegetables.

PHILLIPS: So you, did you have a garden in America, in Chicago?

FITZGERALD: No. Because it took me some time to save enough money to have a home.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Tell me, tell me what happened after the Depression and life got better again.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Well, he got something else, I guess, anyway. I forget what. Oh, he worked at the, uh, I think it was the A&P then, you know, with Ken Ford, no yes, he was working with Ken Ford I think, putting up the shelves and doing things like that.

PHILLIPS: And you were working bringing up your children still?

FITZGERALD: Yes. And I think he made about eighteen dollars a week or something like that. It was very little, but it was enough to get along on because

everything was cheap then.

PHILLIPS: Did you have enough money to be able to eventually buy your own home?

FITZGERALD: Well, after he got to work, and he was working at the A&P, I saved up enough money to put five hundred dollars.

PHILLIPS: Was that like a deposit?

FITZGERALD: It was a down payment, yeah.

PHILLIPS: A down payment on a home.

FITZGERALD: But then your interest was more than the principal, I guess. Eighty dollars a month, I think, we were paying the principal, it was principal and the interest. But it was in two flats. And what the other flat got me, I paid out for it. For the rent, like, and for the, for everything. It paid out for everything, like, for the time being.

PHILLIPS: So you, you'd got, you bought a place which had a flat alongside it so you could . . .

FITZGERALD: Yes. Oh, it had a flat on top. Six rooms on top

and five on bottom.

PHILLIPS: So you sounded like you had some business sense. I think that's, is that the word, I think it's Scottish, you were canny. Canny, is that the word?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Um, so how did your life progress here? Were you happy in America? Were you glad that you'd come to America?

FITZGERALD: Yes, I was.

PHILLIPS: Did you miss Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Well, I missed it, yeah.

PHILLIPS: Did you ever go back?

FITZGERALD: No. I never had the money to get back because I was raising a family. And then it would take you six days and, you know, and some hours to go back there, six hours to come back, and you wouldn't have any time to stay because you were working. We couldn't go home, we didn't have enough money when we got married.

PHILLIPS: Is there anything particularly that you can remember about your experience that you'd like to talk to us about, about your experience, your life in Chicago. Perhaps it may be something to do with the Depression and how you managed to survive through that or is there anything in particular you would like to tell us?

FITZGERALD: Well, I had only two of the children, I think. One died. Three I had, but one died on me. Two-and-a-half years old. And then I got a job for a little while like, it was selling at Frank's store.

PHILLIPS: Do you remember what year that was?

FITZGERALD: No.

PHILLIPS: Roughly? Was it after the War or before the War?

FITZGERALD: Oh, it was after the War and, uh, then the neighbor was changing, and they didn't want . . . And then they had me as a seamstress then, and it was firemen and, uh, firemen and mailmen, you know, they'd come in for these pants, and they would take it in and let it out.

PHILLIPS: So, you were a seamstress.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. So I did that for a while.

PHILLIPS: What about the War? Tell me what it was like for you during the War years in Chicago.

FITZGERALD: Well, it was bad. But I can't remember too much about it.

PHILLIPS: Was your husband still at home, then?

FITZGERALD: Oh, yeah. He was home. He was home all the time.

PHILLIPS: Uh-huh. What was bad about it?

FITZGERALD: Well, you had somebody belonging to you, maybe, in the War or something.

PHILLIPS: Did you correspond much with your family back in Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Yes, a while, because then they wanted some money and I didn't have it to send to them, and then I quit writing to them. And then I changed addresses and I guess they couldn't maybe find me there. Sent it, but I think the mail went back.

PHILLIPS: There's a lot of talk, you talked at the beginning of our interview about the English coming to Ireland, and we talked just a little bit about the Easter uprising and Eamon De Valera and the struggles of Ireland. Was there anything like that happening for you as an Irish person in America? Was there any sense of that struggle continuing? Did you find that the Protestants didn't treat you properly in this country, or was it different in America?

FITZGERALD: Well, this country too, I heard, was like that. And right now there's a young fellow over there, thirty-nine years old and he's given up his life. He says the Catholics have the same rights as the Protestants here and they should have their religion just as much as they have.

PHILLIPS: You sound to me like you still feel quite passionately about that issue of independence for Ireland. You still feel that strongly.

FITZGERALD: Uh-huh.

PHILLIPS: And, do you have friends, have you felt that, for

your whole life, have you always felt that political sense?

FITZGERALD: Well, when I was in Ireland my brother was in the service and we got a letter out that he had died and we couldn't trace him for the longest time, and then we got the letter from him finally. They couldn't get it through because they were all censored at the time.

PHILLIPS: This was during the, during the . . .

FITZGERALD: During the War.

PHILLIPS: During the Second War or the First War or the Irish . . .

FITZGERALD: I think it was the First World War. And they were censored, so we didn't get them. So finally we got one that wasn't censored, and we found out he was living.

PHILLIPS: He had died in the war?

FITZGERALD: No, he didn't die. He was living.

PHILLIPS: Oh, he was living. You heard he was living.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And then he got lead poisoning. He was mixing paint or something all the time. No, I think it was here he was mixing paint after he got back at Winston's, and then he got lead poisoning, and I think he died from the effects of that, in this country.

PHILLIPS: So he survived the war, the First World War.

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: Was he fighting, he was fighting with the English, then, I imagine, in the first World War.

FITZGERALD: I think so, yeah.

PHILLIPS: And when he came, he immigrated to America and died of lead poisoning.

FITZGERALD: Oh, he was in, yeah, he was in America, you know, when he was drafted, not in Ireland.

PHILLIPS: I see.

FITZGERALD: And he went over, eighteen years old, he had to go in the service.

PHILLIPS: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your, any stories or any anecdotes or any memories that you would like to share with us that, you think that, uh . . .

FITZGERALD: Well, you know, when I was at school I used to sell the papers and pencils to the kids and we had a boys school and a girls school and the master had sent them in from the boys' school in to us. It was his wife, for supplies, and then I had to go and sell them to him. And they'd be making faces and everything, and making the teacher, trying to make me laugh, and they'd held the money and I'd know they had only a penny or two and they wouldn't want to give it to me right away.

PHILLIPS: So let me see if I've got that clear. You used to buy, you used to get pencils and paper . . .

FITZGERALD: Out of the press. It belonged to the teacher. Sell it to the boys.

PHILLIPS: It was run by his wife.

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: Sounds like the teacher had a bit of a business going.

FITZGERALD: Right.

PHILLIPS: and was using the students to sell the pencils.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. The pencils and the paper.

PHILLIPS: So the teacher was making . . .

FITZGERALD: And the pencil had to last you a long time. Only one pencil.

PHILLIPS: It would have to last a long time. Right down to the end.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Or maybe it would be stolen from you and sometimes you'd want to exchange it for somebody that had a different color, like yellow or blue or green, you know, in case you had only the one.

PHILLIPS: And you used to sell the pencils? You could make a little bit of money that way.

FITZGERALD: No, I wasn't paid for it. The teacher made the money.

PHILLIPS: Oh, he made you, you were his salesperson.

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: And he used you that way.

FITZGERALD: Then I used to mix the ink, we used to have the ink we had to mix. It was like powder and some water, I think, with it. And then he, and I was in the sixth grade, I think, I used to be darning his socks.

PHILLIPS: You used to darn the teacher's socks.

FITZGERALD: Darn the socks. You know, years ago they darned every hole because they didn't have the money to be getting new ones all the time.

PHILLIPS: Did you like the teacher?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: You did like him. Did he like you?

FITZGERALD: They both liked me because then, after he'd be out on a drunk or something, I used to go out to his house, the house was right next to the school, and

make him some real strong tea and bring it in to him.

PHILLIPS: He used to like to drink a bit of whiskey, did he?

FITZGERALD: Well, it, the kids used to say he did, the boys. I'd had to find out the things that made up to me. Then kind of shout-clock and Master Casey. His name was Casey, on the screen, it said. And then Ed said, "Write your name down and tell him when he comes in." He's coming in now keep quiet. They'd keep quiet for a second. And then they had the slate, by the way, writing their name.

PHILLIPS: You had a slate?

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: You used to write on a slate at school?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. With a pencil. With a some kind of a thing that you could write on the slate with. And I'd keep quiet for a second and then I'd really watch out of the window and I'd say, "Shh, he's coming," and they'd all come back to their seats and keep quiet.

PHILLIPS: Did he have a bad temper?

FITZGERALD: I don't think so. Maybe with the boys he did.

PHILLIPS: Did you enjoy school in Ireland?

FITZGERALD: Yeah. Very much so.

PHILLIPS: Were you a good student, or . . .

FITZGERALD: Yeah.

PHILLIPS: You were?

FITZGERALD: They tell me I was.

PHILLIPS: What did you like best, what sort of subjects?

FITZGERALD: I think sewing and knitting.

PHILLIPS: Using your hands.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. I think we had to make our own stockings when we were in school. Because of the dampness they were heavy stockings made out of wool and up to the knee, so we had to knit.

PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, if, unless there's something else that we can think of, is there anything else you'd like

to talk about or anything, between? No? Is there anything that you, I'm sure there must be a lot of things.

GEARY: During the Depression, you remember, we had a two-floor but we also split ours and the five rooms, it was split in half, it was another way she did that. Tell them about that.

FITZGERALD: Well, we split one, made two apartments out of it.

PHILLIPS: This was during the Depression, you split one of the flats in two.

FITZGERALD: Yeah. And then we were able to get rent from two instead of one, but not as much, of course. And then we had to pay back what it cost us to build, you know, to get the things to build it. And then that helped with the payments of the house.

PHILLIPS: So it sounds like you really had to struggle hard and use your, the little that you had, as you described, to make the most of what you couldn't . . .

FITZGERALD: And use your head.

PHILLIPS: Yeah.

FITZGERALD: But we were happy at it.

PHILLIPS: Yeah. Okay. Well, I think that's gonna wrap up this interview. I don't think, unless there's something else that you . . .

FITZGERALD: And them kids didn't get much either, you know, when they were young, like they do today, and they get all kinds of money and foolish ties.

PHILLIPS: Okay, so that finishes, it's now 3:15, finishes our interview with Ella Fitzgerald, number 376 [DP-2].