

DP-38

ELIZABETH JEAN MCGINLEY GRIFFIN

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PHILLIPS: Okay. I'm with Elizabeth Jean Griffin, whose maiden name was McGinley, M-C-G-I-N-L-E-Y. And, uh, this Andrew Phillips. It's the 26th of May, 1989. We're starting this interview about 3:30 this Sunday. (Break in tape.) Okay. It's Interview Number 412 [DP-38]. Elizabeth, could you start by, could you start by telling me what your name is, where you're from, and what year you immigrated in.

GRIFFIN: Elizabeth Jean Griffin. I was McGinley. And I came over here in 1950 from County Donegal, in Ireland.

PHILLIPS: And what year were you born?

GRIFFIN: I was born in 1937.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Could we start by your giving us some sense of your family, what your father did, a sense of your life in Ireland before you came to the States.

GRIFFIN: My father was a Customs and Excise Officer and my mother was a solicitor before her marriage. My father died when I was about eight, of TB, and my mother had, I was the oldest of four children, and I also had TB. I came out here, well, on my way to California, primarily for health reasons.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us a little bit about your life in Ireland? Perhaps start by telling us what your father did for a living?

GRIFFIN: Well, I think he had been a teacher, too. I'm not quite sure. But as a Customs and Excise Officer, he was, he patrolled the border. I lived close the north of Ireland, and it was just a couple of miles away from Ballyshannon, the town I came from. And he was, I

think, in charge of this particular office. What his duties were, as that, I don't have a clue. But that's what I remember anyway, up to, you know, the time of his death.

PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about your house where you lived, what the furniture was like, what your life was like as a young person in Ireland?

GRIFFIN: Well, Ballyshannon is a pretty big town, as towns go in Ireland, and it is right on the west coast.

PHILLIPS: Could you spell it for me?

GRIFFIN: B-A-L-L-Y-S-H-A-N-N-O-N. Ballyshannon. It's, as I said, it's fairly large. It's a typical Irish Catholic town. There's large convent, Christian Brothers School and so on. And I think life was devoted primarily to going to school, studying an awful lot, and well, I can't remember much beyond that since I came over here, I guess, when I was twelve and had been sick quite a bit, so I was kept inside a lot, too.

PHILLIPS: What was life like for you in Ireland? You were sickly, so probably was, wasn't a normal life compared

to other people. But can you give us a little bit of a picture of it?

GRIFFIN: Well, as you said, it wasn't quite normal. I was at home with the TB, which I got when I was about seven. I had to be kept at home in bed, flat on my back, for a year, and was kept at home because the sanitarium was judged too stressful, or children, I don't think, many children had TB. So I was kept at home, and at about the same time, my father, who had TB and spent most of his married life in and out of hospital in Dublin, was also home. And because, I didn't know for years and years really I had TB or what it was, but because it is so contagious, a hut had been built for him outside the house in the backyard in the garden, and he was on a frame and he also was on this thing for years. So my mother had to take care of this whole situation with himself and me. And at that time we had a maid, somebody who lived in the house, so there was help there, you know, for my mother, with the other younger children. I have a younger, a sister four years younger, and two brothers who are a couple of years younger for that who are still, one brother is in Ireland still and one's in /england. But during this period when my father was judged to be better and maybe completely cured of TB, he was taken up off the frame, etcetera, but then suffered like a total collapse and was rushed off to Dublin, where it was the nearest hospital for treating something like that, and I think died in Dublin. So it was very, you know, very upsetting.

PHILLIPS: What is this thing you describe as the frame? What is it?

GRIFFIN: It's a frame that's made to the length of the body and it was, I guess, like a wire frame. or something very sturdy. And then it was covered with, well, plastic, or whatever they had back in that time. And I think the body was actually strapped to this frame, I suppose to keep the bones straight because, or because there is supposed to be total inactivity with TB. And he was in this house. It had windows on each side. It was just like a wooden room. And he had a bell rigged up to the house that he would use, you know, when he needed something. His meals were taken out to him. He could have visitors, but because of being so contagious, he just wasn't really around the rest of the family, but I did get it. Then there was fear that a younger brother who was about four had it, and he was put into the hospital and checked out and turned out to be okay. But, I mean, it must have been a nightmare for my mother to, you know, go through all of this. And I'm trying to remember, about the frame, there was something else. Oh, I did get a curvature of the spine from it and when my mother first discovered it I had been feeling sick and feeling really horrible, but I was afraid to tell my mother because of, I didn't know what my father had, but I was just afraid to tell her that I didn't feel good. And then she discovered it bathing me one night, and there's, I have a

curvature like around the fifth, um, disc, but it would have been much worse, probably, if I hadn't been, you know, hadn't been discovered, and had to kept flat in bed, also, for this whole year. I did not move. I couldn't have pillows, anything. Could not get up for anything. So I had to be watched pretty carefully, kept like on my honor that I wouldn't. But I did get out of bed one time. I know because I read everything in town. It was the only thing I could do was read. And I heard my mother and an aunt discussing, "A Tree Grows In Brooklyn." It's very funny. And she had it over on her bedside and I got out of bed somehow and got over there to get that book. Ad I managed to I think I must have done it more than once, because I read ,\most of the book. (She laughs.) But anyway there I was for a year.

PHILLIPS: That sounds like a pretty horrible way to be treated, to have to be locked away from people like that on that frame.

GRIFFIN: For my father yes, yeah, it must have been. Except that no, he did have visitors. People could come, and he always did have people, always. And Irish towns, anyway, still today, I mean, people just drop in constantly, for cups of tea and to visit and to sit around the fire, which is usually in the dining room

area, and they'll sit around and talk all night long about things. So people came all the time, and there were Franciscan Brothers who lived close by. My mother was very religious. She went to Mass every morning and went to, I think, to Lourdes one time, perhaps. And, you know, praying constantly. And the doctor one time told me here that he had never seen, apparently I had TB throughout my whole body, and he had never seen anyone who had survived that except a woman who had been through Hiroshima. And so I think it was my mother's prayers, probably, that cured me. You know, a little help somewhere else.

PHILLIPS: So your memories of Ireland are tainted by that experience, I take it. Did you go to school?

GRIFFIN: Oh, I did. I went to school before and after. And I don't think, I can't remember if I was still doing lessons when I was in bed. I know I read everything under the sun, but I can't remember really having to do lessons, but I went back to school. I mean, you work really hard. They have inspectors who come around to schools and question, you know, children at random. So there's panic, you know, when the English inspector's coming or the arithmetic, or whatever. And the hardest thing I

had when I went back to school after this period was, Gaelic was compulsory. They even did algebra and geometry and stuff in Gaelic, and that was horrible, because I had lost an awful lot of Gaelic with being in bed for that year, and I did not like school one bit when I went back. So it was a relief coming over here to go to school. No Gaelic. (She laughs.)

PHILLIPS: Can you talk a little bit about why you came to the United States?

GRIFFIN: I came to the United States because my father, who was the youngest of ten children, had a sister, the older sister, who had run away from Ireland. She had wandered. I think she'd been in nearly every state, and then settled in Ojai, California, and had kept contact with my father all the years. So when he died my mother was desperate to do something with me and contacted here and arranged that I come out here to California for a year. So I lived in Ojai for a year with this very eccentric woman. She had the first post office box in Ojai. And she was fierce little person about five feet tall, grey hair. She must have been in here sixties. And one of the Irish are very dark, with dark black, brown eyes, and I was scared to death of her. And she was very odd. Certain people she wouldn't let me play with or speak to, etcetera, etcetera. And I used to, I went to the Nordoff Union High School in town. Seventh and eighth grade, I think, and I used to walk to catechism on Saturday. I had

to do that, and walk back out. And my best friend was a Chinese girl whose father was the chef up at Thatcher Private Boys School, which was very, very close. And Felily and I had a fierce competition for grades because it was so funny, even though I lived so far away from my mother, I wouldn't think of not doing homework, etcetera, etcetera. My whole life was like that. And I was a straight-A student. So I was very proud. I could send my report cards home to my mother, etcetera. So anyway, but the aunt was fearsome. Then I came down to L.A. and stayed with friends of this aunt and went to St. Mary's Academy here in Los Angeles. And then about, when I think I was about seventeen my mother decided that I better come home. I don't know why I'd stayed that many years, but anyway, that I'd better come home for a while, so I went back home for two years, and then came back again to California because I had a re-entry permit, and it was easier to come back in with the re-entry permit. If I'd stayed home, it would have been a big hassle trying to get back over here again. And at this point the rest of the, my sister and brothers had won scholarships. My mother was, she was very, she was a solicitor, but after my, she didn't, I think she had to be apprenticed to an uncle after my father died. It was very hard after he died. She had all of us to support, and she did all kinds of things. She wrote short stories, which I used to have published here in California. and she set an English exam paper for all the technical schools in Ireland. She did, she tutored reporters in shorthand in Ballyshannon. She did everything under the sun, everything possible, to make ends meet. And the

other three had won scholarships, but because I didn't have Gaelic, which was still very compulsory, and there was no money really to send me on to school in Ireland, it was better that I came back out here, which I did, and then settled down really in California. And eventually married an Irishman here from County Clare, and then lived in Los Angeles most of my life, just going back to Ireland once since then.

PHILLIPS: Can you tell us a little bit about Ellis Island and your experience coming through Ellis Island?

GRIFFIN: Oh, yes. What happened when I arrived in New York was that when my x-rays were examined, they thought there was spot on my lung, that there was still TB. So I was detained, taken off the ship and taken to Ellis Island and I had a woman, my mother, it had taken my mother a year to find a sponsor who would take me with, you know, back, or bring me out here. And this woman came from Riverside, California. She had been Irish, married a G.I., was coming back to a little town called Pettigo, which was very close to Ballyshannon. And I think everybody in the surrounding area knew that my mother was looking for someone to come to America. Anyway, this woman--

PHILLIPS: Can you spell that, Pettigo?

GRIFFIN: P-E-T-T-I-G-O. This woman, Mrs. Bowler, agreed to be my guardian on the ship. So she was very upset when I had to be detained at Ellis Island and she volunteered to stay with me. But her husband at Riverside was, you know, wanted her to get back to California. So she did come back out here. But I had an aunt in New York still, on my father's side, Catherine Darien [PH], who had been McGinley, and she knew that I was coming, so she kept in touch. Anyway, I was kept on Ellis Island for the weekend, and I think, well, I was the only child who was by myself, but there were families that had been on there, you know, that couldn't come in and couldn't go back to their various countries. And I remember the place, it was packed. And I had a little room. All I remember is like a central ha;; and there were, like a balcony, type thing around the edge of it, and there were little rooms. And I had a bedroom up there, and a little bathroom. And I prayed to this statue of Blessed Martin DePorres, that my mother believed in at that time. And--

PHILLIPS: I'm sorry, can you describe that? What was that statue?

GRIFFIN: Oh, it's a little statue. The saint is Blessed Martin DePorres, D-E P-O- double R, E-S. And he's a, he's a patron saint of, actually I think a South American country. I don't know his background too well, but he was supposed to effect miracles, and so on and so forth. So I prayed frantically to him. I thought I was on this place forever, and I didn't understand why or what was going to happen to me. But it was very interesting. They had Mass, they had church, you know, activities, because we must have come in on a Friday, I think, because I know, I was there like a Saturday or Sunday. And then they took x-rays of me and decided that I didn't have the spot on the lung. But at this time in Ireland, people used to wear, both adults and children, wore holy medals and scapulas, which was supposed to be a little, it was kind of a cloth relic of some saint, and you wore these things. I mean, you never took them off. Well, when I had to be x-rayed in Dublin, I had to take them off. But I think what they did was just put them over my shoulder when they took the chest x-ray, and this is what showed up on the x-ray and they found it, I mean, they knew what it was in Ellis Island. I'm sure if they did all the Irish coming through this had probably happened before with somebody. So I was released then, like on the Monday.

PHILLIPS: In other words they, instead of it hanging from the front, it was hanging from the back.

GRIFFIN: Yes. They just threw it over the shoulder.

PHILLIPS: So it was x-rayed through the body and it came up.

GRIFFIN: Yes. So they figured out what it was. And I'll never forget, but that was quite an experience. I remember playing volleyball with an orange with some people out in a yard. And looking at the skyline of New York. I'd never seen such tall buildings in my life. It was something.

PHILLIPS: So what happened when you left Ellis Island?

GRIFFIN: Well, when I left Ellis Island I stayed with this aunt, Catherine Darien [PH]. And she lived in Greenwich Village. And I stayed with her just for a couple of days because I was on the way out, supposedly on my way out to California to this other aunt. So I just stayed there, you know, a couple of days. This part is very hazy. I don't remember at all. And then was just put on a plane and came out to Los Angeles where I was met by this aunt who had come down from Ojai and stayed then with some friends of hers, the Robinsons, around (?), maybe for a couple of days, and then from there went up to Ojai. And some time afterwards I guess I was enrolled in school once I got up to Ojai and started the 7th grade up there.

PHILLIPS: Going back to Ireland, is there anything that you can remember which might be of interest to us? Perhaps it may be predictable, but the question of the Protestants and the Catholics and that kind of background, were you involved or hear much about that?

GRIFFIN: No. I never gave it any thought until years later. We had very good friends who were Protestants. There was never any problem. In fact, we had, I had very good friends in school who were English. A girl called Molly Devareux [PH], whose father was over in Ballyshannon working on what they called then the river scheme. There was a very large river, I think it's the River Erne, E-R-N-E, that goes through the middle of Ballyshannon and do you know, the things, you forget, it's so funny. We didn't have electricity when I was little. I'm trying to remember. I know that the countryside around us did not have electricity because my mother had a brother who was a parish priest that we used to visit in the summertime. He always had a parish in the country, which was outside of, anywhere outside of Ballyshannon. And he, a maiden aunt, who was also one of her sisters, was his housekeeper. So two or three of us would get sent for the summer to these parish houses. And I remember the kerosene lamps. But going back to Ballyshannon. The river was really cut in half lengthwise, and filled in. And they destroyed a falls, waterfalls, it was beautiful, in Ballyshannon. But it was to create electricity for the surrounding countryside. And these English engineers, I mean, were there

for years, so there was never any problem at all at that time. And the same with Protestants. We knew that there were different churches. I had to ask my mother one time.

PHILLIPS: What year was this?

GRIFFIN: That must have been around, let's see, '37, in the '40's, somewhere in there, like '42, '43, around that time. I remember asking my mother permission to go into a Protestant church. They had a Thanksgiving type of celebration, which was nothing like anything the Catholic church had. And, I mean, there was no problem about that. My mother said, you know, "Fine." I could go look, you know. But there wasn't any problem between the Catholic and the Protestants, but now again we, Ballyshannon is about two miles south of the border, the so-called border, between the north and the south, but there was never any of this problem at all in those years.

PHILLIPS: South of the border.

GRIFFIN: Yeah, south of the border. Or even in the north. Even in the six counties, which is north, they didn't have any of this stuff going on at all. So there was, there was definitely, um, a division. I mean, you knew who was Protestant. It was like the Protestants and the

Catholics lived different types of lives, in a way. But it was kind of taken for granted, and you didn't think anything of it, you know.

PHILLIPS: Can you remember at the time, or can you describe some of these differences which were most evident to you at the time?

GRIFFIN: I think different schools, different churches. Definitely the Protestants didn't go to the Catholic, to the convent schools. In fact, I can't even remember now. I couldn't even place where they went to school. We knew, and we used to laugh because, not laugh at them, but think it was funny, because the Irish placed such an emphasis on your having a saint's name. I mean, my oldest daughter is named Catherine Tracy. And when I named her I remember my mother saying, "Tracy isn't a saint's name." Or writing to me and saying, "Tracy isn't a saint's name." And I thought, "How funny." You know, after all these years, etcetera, and she was so advanced in so many ways, but this was so archaic to me. As it turned out, Tracy turns out, by accident, to be an old Gaelic name, meaning something. I'm not quite sure what. But the Protestants had names that we envied like Daisy, Pansy, really, names after the flowers, and totally different from Cathleen and Bridget and Mary and all the Catholic-Irish names that we were so used to. But there was no problem about friends. You were friends with anybody. I mean, children all mixed and played together. Ireland was beautiful. I remember we would play. We'd go for walks, we'd

go for hikes, we'd bake potatoes, but never ate them. That was, that was very American. But we had all kinds of, we built forts, played cowboys and indians, did all the things. American comic books were something we looked forward to getting from somebody who had a relative in America. We loved those.

PHILLIPS: Why didn't you eat the baked potatoes?

GRIFFIN: Because you never saw a baked potato in Ireland. They only had the new potatoes, boiled potatoes, really. Boiled potatoes, or mashed potatoes. They never baked. Maybe it wasn't too economical. Really, it takes so long to bake a potato, I'm not sure what.

PHILLIPS: What you said was you used to bake potatoes as a kid over a fire.

GRIFFIN: Oh, we built a fire outside and we baked them, but I think we always ended up burning them. I can't ever remember eating them. I don't know why we did that, really. You know, it was more fun, some kind of easy food to get a hold of. We thought, you know, we were camping out.

PHILLIPS: Was it hard for you, or hard for people in your village in Ireland? Was it difficult? Was there much poverty?

GRIFFIN: No, not at all. Ballyshannon's a very, you know, it's, as I said, it's a very large town, for Ireland, really. And a very prosperous, whatever all the people do, you know. A lot of small businesses, hotels, especially on the west coast. Even, I mean, as I remember it as being small. Ireland is a great golfing country. Both my parents played golf constantly. They played golf every weekend. And there's a lot of tourism also on the west coast. And so there was nothing like poverty, nothing I'd even think of. I think after my father died, you never thought of being poor. I mean, you never thought. People grew everything, too. We grew everything, in this backyard, really like one huge vegetable garden. They grew potatoes, beets, lettuce, apples, pears, plums. Every kind of thing that possibly grows over there people did. And I remember my mother had someone, my father did it when he was alive, is dig and plant and do all this stuff. But after he died there was a man who used to go around, and that was his job. He would come in and plant the garden and stuff, and then you just went up and picked out whatever it was you wanted that day. The same with shopping. There were no refrigerators, but you had a thing outside the back door called a meat safe, which was like a wired enclosure up on stilt-type things so the cats couldn't get into it, and a door that opened and closed. And out there you kept milk and butter, that type of thing. But you bought meat from the butcher every day, so you just cooked every day what it was you wanted. Now, the milk, and I'm sure

this was a source of a lot of TB, we would take a tin can, whichever kid, you know, had to do it for that particular day, and we went up what they called the top of the town because it's hills, a few little hills, and go up to this one family who kept cows outside of town and you could get a pail of milk. I mean, the cow probably was milked just an hour before, and you brought that back. We never drank milk, never. I had never drunk a glass of milk until I came to California. Cold milk. It was really, like, different. But it was used for tea. Even little children drank tea, and we drank constantly. I mean, the kettle was always on the fire or, in our case, we did have electricity, and it was some kind of a small, like a little electric range. Then the milk was just used for cooking, for tea and cooking. But you can imagine the germs that were in that.

PHILLIPS: Was TB a real problem in Ireland at this time?

GRIFFIN: No. Tea?

PHILLIPS: TB, tuberculosis.

GRIFFIN: Oh, TB? No. Um, I think it was really kind of at that time wiped out. Or, I mean, whenever penicillin was invented. I don't know when that was. But they had nothing at that time, apparently. And it was just bed rest, it was the only thing that could be done. But people died

by, you know, there wasn't a family, probably that wasn't hit by TB, really. It was terrible.

PHILLIPS: What about diet?

GRIFFIN: Diet was a very, uh, would I say, sturdy. I mean, it was meat, potatoes, vegetables for dinner. You ate dinner in the middle of the day, which was one o'clock. We'd get out of school, and you came home and had dinner. There was always a dessert which was something like rhubarb or baked apples. Always something like that. And breakfast was porridge. Yuk! Which I hated forever until Lily, this, my mother could not make porridge. It was just ghastly. But when Lily came to live with us when she was about seventeen and I was about seven, Lily lived with us for years and years and years., Lily perfected porridge, so that was okay. And that was breakfast, porridge and a cup of tea, probably bread and butter, which was, a lot of bread was homemade bread. A lot of baked stuff was always homemade. And then tea time, which was around five o'clock in the evening, would be when people had bacon and eggs and fried tomatoes, sausage, what else, that was tea time. Then before you went to bed you might have Ovaltine, whenever that came along, and that was it. But there was no such thing as like eating in between meals. I mean, you weren't hungry really, because the food was very sturdy. But I remember when the first real bakery came to town, and we would save pennies to buy a cupcake with icing on it on

Saturdays. That was funny. But everything was homemade and very good.

PHILLIPS: Okay. Are there any other stories that you'd like to share with us, or is that it?

GRIFFIN: That's about it, I think.

PHILLIPS: Okay. So that brings us to a close. It's Interview Number 412 [DP-38]. I thank you.