

EI-1003

SISTER ROSE O'NEILL

BIRTHDATE: JUNE 9, 1908

INTERVIEW DATE: JUNE 3, 1998

AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 89

RUNNING TIME: 49:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL SIGRIST

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: TAPESCRIBE

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY:

IRELAND, 1928

AGE: 19

SHIP: CUNARD LINE

PORT:

RESIDENCES:

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Wednesday, June 3rd, 1998. I'm in the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Sister Rose Winifred O'Neill. And Sister Rose came from Ireland, from the central part of Ireland. She came in 1928 to America. She was nineteen, almost twenty—but not quite. And I should also say for the sake of the tape that Kevin Daley is running the recording equipment. Sister Rose, it's a pleasure to have you here. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date?

O'NEILL: My birth date?

SIGRIST: Yes.

O'NEILL: June the ninth, 1908.

SIGRIST: And where in Ireland were you born?

O'NEILL: I was born in Offaley, King's County. Offaley, Ireland.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Offaley for me?

O'NEILL: O-F-F-A-L-Y. Or, O-F-F-A-L-E-Y. E-Y.

SIGRIST: E-Y. And how long did you live in Offaley?

O'NEILL: I would say about five or six years. Then I was transferred down to Cork, because my mother, my father and mother—you see, my father was working on the railway. And then he was transferred to Cork, although he was originally from Cork, and so was Mum. But Mum was anxious to get back to Cork anyway. So we brought up in Cork; then for the rest of my life I was—I left Cork to come here to the States.

SIGRIST: I see. So you spent your very early childhood--?

O'NEILL: In King's County.

SIGRIST: --in King's County.

O'NEILL: In King's County.

SIGRIST: And then you pretty much grew up in Cork?

O'NEILL: Yes, right.

SIGRIST: And then you came to the United States?

O'NEILL: Came to America.

SIGRIST: Great!

O'NEILL: That's it. You got it!

SIGRIST: [Laughs] What memories do you have of when the family lived in Offaley, the earliest memories that you have?

O'NEILL: To be honest with you, I don't remember anything. All I just hear them saying that I was in Offaley. I didn't [unclear] or anything like that, that I know of.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the house at all, or any details?

O'NEILL: I remember the house; it was a two-family house. And I remember about ten or fifteen years ago I was back in Offaley, and I was with my sister. And she pointed out to me where I was born. Now, I was on this side of the street; the house was over there. And I was dying to go over, just to say

that I was born here and brought up. "Oh," she said, "You can't do that!" I said, "Ann," I said, "Why?" She said, "Oh, no." She said, "That's not proper." I said in the United States we would do it, and we'd see nothing wrong in it." I said—so I said I wouldn't go in and ransack or anything. I'd just walk in and say, "I was born here," and look around. I said, "That's it." "No." That's all I know.

SIGRIST: But you saw it from the distance?

O'NEILL: Oh, I saw it from the distance, yes. It was a two-family, [unclear].

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of the move to Cork as a child?

O'NEILL: Just that we came down by train. That's all I know, came by—that I remember, coming on the train.

SIGRIST: What do you think the earliest memory that you have is? What's the very first thing in your whole life that you remember?

O'NEILL: Of what? Of anything?

SIGRIST: Of anything. Of anything.

O'NEILL: Of anything? The first memory in my life? Well, I suppose when I went back to school, when I went to school, and I remember distinctly. I was about seven, six or seven, and I had met with an accident in school with a child poked me in the eye with a pencil. And that gave me an awful lot of trouble. So I had, finally after being months, and in and out of the hospital, I had to go to the—I had to wear glasses. And I used to be afraid to go to—so I wore the glasses leaving home, as any ordinary person would do. But when I got outside, the glasses went off and into the pocket. Reason? Youngsters were making fun of me. They were calling me Grandma, and this and that, you know, and that went against me. So I never wore the glasses in school, and I did more damage by that than anything else. What could I do? I had pride against—they say, pride comes before the fall, right? So, you got it in a nutshell?

SIGRIST: Yes. What was the name that you were born with?

O'NEILL: Christina Mary O'Neill.

SIGRIST: And were you named after anybody?

O'NEILL: My mother.

SIGRIST: Which name?

O'NEILL: Christina.

SIGRIST: Christina. And do you know anything about your birth? Did your mother or father, or a family member, ever tell you anything about the day that you were born?

O'NEILL: Not that I—no, I don't think so. I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Well, people didn't always talk about those things.

O'NEILL: Yeah, right, and we didn't—what shall I say? We never celebrated birthdays in Ireland like we do today, and like we do in the United States. Now they're falling right in line with the United States. You know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Well, how did you celebrate a birthday?

O'NEILL: Nothing, never even noticed it, never. It just came and went, that's it! Well see, I'll tell you, too: we were all very, very young when Mum died. I was three and a half when my mother died.

SIGRIST: Still in Offaley?

O'NEILL: Yeah. She died in Cork. She came down for to die in Cork, and she died in a very, very freak accident.

SIGRIST: Would you talk about that?

O'NEILL: Well, she went to see my Aunt Babe, who was living in Cork. And the baby was just born; I think it was about two or three weeks old. And she wanted to tell Aunt Babe all about—that's her sister—tell her all about the baby.

SIGRIST: And you're saying Aunt Babe, B-A-B-E?

O'NEILL: Aunt Babe, Babe. Aunt Babe. We used to call her that. So anyway, she stayed quite some time with Aunt Babe. And I don't think they had supper. They had lunch and everything together, but that's about it. But anyway, on the way home, she left my Aunt Babe, and she was walking down the distance. I guess we weren't too far apart. And as she was walking down, I guess the lights were not as bright as they are today, in any city. She went into like a decline to go into the river. And she only went on a few steps, and she wet her toes in the water. And she realized she was in the wrong place, so she backed out immediately. So instead of going home like any ordinary person would, to change her shoes and stockings, Mum kept on looking, window shopping, all the way home. And she got home I would

say about eleven o'clock at night, and we were all in bed, naturally. But my sister Ann was waiting up for her, 'cause she was the oldest one—the oldest girl, anyway. So, she [unclear], and they got into talking, and Ann made tea for her, and you know, they had something together. [Unclear] So two o'clock in the morning she wakes up, and she calls my sister Ann. She says, "Get me a hot drink!" She says, "Why, Mum?" She says, "I have chills." She said, "I am so cold! Get me an extra blanket, blah, blah blah." She ran right up, got the blanket, got the hot drink, and gave her, you know, made her as comfortable as could be. Then she said, "You better go to sleep now, because," she said, "It's early." So the next morning she woke up, and she wasn't feeling any better. In fact, I think she was a little worse. So she said, "Wait, we better get the doctor." The doctor came, and he said, "The hospital, right away." She had contracted pneumonia, and she wasn't strong enough, after giving birth to the baby, to fight the pneumonia! Thirty-seven years old! Left ten children.

SIGRIST: And you said that she went down to Cork?

O'NEILL: She was brought to Cork.

SIGRIST: She was brought to Cork. Before she died or after she died?

O'NEILL: Before she died. I guess she had premonition something was going to happen, because she was very anxious to get down to Cork!

SIGRIST: And that's where her family was?

O'NEILL: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your mother's name.

O'NEILL: Christina Heffernan.

SIGRIST: Can you spell her last name?

O'NEILL: H-E-F-F-E-R-N-A-N.

SIGRIST: And she was thirty-seven when she died?

O'NEILL: Thirty-seven when she died, and left ten children.

SIGRIST: Ten children?

O'NEILL: Seven boys and three girls.

SIGRIST: Can you name everyone for me?

O'NEILL: I could. Eddie, Michael, Charles, John, Tom, Patty, and the baby's name was [pause]. What was the baby's name? It was an odd name.

SIGRIST: Well, maybe it will come to you as we're talking.

O'NEILL: Was it Kevin? I think it was Kevin.

SIGRIST: Seven boys.

O'NEILL: Seven boys, and my two sisters were Ann and Alice.

SIGRIST: And how do you fall in to all of that?

O'NEILL: I was the eighth one of the whole gang.

SIGRIST: The eighth one, my goodness!

O'NEILL: The eighth one!

SIGRIST: How many years between you and the oldest sibling?

O'NEILL: My sister was twelve when I my Mum died, and I was three and a half.

SIGRIST: So they all fell in to--?

O'NEILL: Yes, that's right.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about when you were growing up. How did you think of the idea of Mother? You didn't really have a mother. How did that affect you as you were growing up?

O'NEILL: To be honest with you, my sister spoke very, very little about Mum, because every time Mum's name was brought up, there was tears. And she, you know, kept it away from us, and didn't want to say anything about it. So I just barely remember. In fact, I don't remember a thing about Mum, only what I hear about her from my sisters.

SIGRIST: When you were growing up, did you have a photograph of her? Was there some way that you could visualize?

O'NEILL: Oh yes, I have a picture of her, Mom and Dad, home in the convent. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: But I mean, when you were a child in Ireland, was there a picture that was kept in the house?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! And in fact, it was still there when I was leaving.

SIGRIST: Were you given, when you were a child, something that had belonged to her?

O'NEILL: No, no. Never thought of anything like that, you know? Never thought of it.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk about your father a little bit. What was his name?

O'NEILL: Edward.

SIGRIST: Edward. And what do you know about his background?

O'NEILL: Well, my father had four brothers, and they were all very chummy, you know what I mean. And they were all working on the railways. My father was a conductor, and that's why he was transferred from Cork to Offaley, Offaley back, over here—wherever there was a change, he was changed.

SIGRIST: And what was your father's personality like?

O'NEILL: Good! Very, very lively! Outgoing, you know what I mean?

SIGRIST: What are some of the things you remember about your Dad when you were a child growing up?

O'NEILL: Well, I remember then that no matter when, when, where he went, or when he went, and no matter what time of the morning or the night or anything else, he came—naturally, we were always asleep when he came, when he came home from work. But he always brought a little something to each one of us. And, we were such a bunch! He'd bring home a big apple, or an orange, or something—no matter what he would bring home, that was sliced up for each one of us got a little bit. We did it ourselves, not my father. We were trained that way, to share, share, share, share!

SIGRIST: Was it your oldest sister, did she sort of become like the mother in the family?

O'NEILL: That's why. That's why I owe everything to her. Everything to her! When I entered the convent—you asked me that a minute ago. Am I jumping the gun?

SIGRIST: No. Well, I had asked you what order you were, and you said Dominican, before we started.

O'NEILL: Dominican, that's right.

SIGRIST: Did you—I should ask you now—did you enter the order before you left for America?

O'NEILL: Before I left what?

SIGRIST: When you were in Ireland, was that when you became a nun initially, when you were in Ireland? Or did you do that in the United States?

O'NEILL: No I left directly from Ireland to come over here.

SIGRIST: Yes.

O'NEILL: And I was met here at Ellis Island—I think it was Ellis Island—by two sisters. Two sisters met me at the boat, and took me off, and brought me to Elmhurst. And I was there for overnight, and the next day they took me out to Amityville.

SIGRIST: So you were coming to America to join the order?

O'NEILL: To join the order!

SIGRIST: I see. I see.

O'NEILL: And in back of my head, I had an idea I wanted to become a religious, to be trained here, to go to China! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: As a missionary?

O'NEILL: And I never landed in China! [Unclear], our community—I was in there about, I guess it was ten years, and I wouldn't dare come out with it, you know what I mean? Because I was expecting, well, [unclear] to catch up with me, you know. But they never did. Then about ten years later I found out that I did pick up courage, and I asked about it. They said, "Oh, Christina, we don't send any girls overseas!" She said, "We get the girls from over there," she said. And I said, "Oh!"

SIGRIST: Oh well [laughs]. You know, maybe this is an appropriate time to ask you about what your religious life was like when you were growing up in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Very—I mean, I always—there wasn't a Sunday no matter what, rain or sunshine, I went to mass. And I had to walk four miles to mass on a Sunday.

SIGRIST: And you were in Cork by now? Yes.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, I was there. And coming home [laughs] as kids, we used to walk the railway tracks, and right next to the railway tracks there was farms. They had these turnips. We'd pick up a turnip, crack it on [laughs] on the sidewalk, and eat the turnip on the way home, because we'd be in church for two or three hours. We wouldn't get anything. I would leave church at nine o'clock the morning, I wouldn't be home until two-thirty in the afternoon! We were starved! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: When you were growing up, who was the most religious person in your family?

O'NEILL: Well, that would be hard to tell, because they were all daily communicants. You know, any time they could go to mass, they would go to mass.

SIGRIST: But I mean of your brothers and sister--?

O'NEILL: That's what I mean.

SIGRIST: --or your father? Who was--?

O'NEILL: Well, Dad—well, Mum and Dad always went to mass and communion—always!

SIGRIST: How did you practice your Catholicism at home?

O'NEILL: Well, first of all let me tell you how I found it out. I really and truly wanted to become a religious, and because I was so lively, and so full of this, that and everything else, they would laugh at me if I mentioned something about the convent. Because I'm not a person to go to the convent! I was too—you know. That's what they had there in mind. So I had a little book, *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, and in that book—I used to get it once a month. And in the last page, they had lists of all the different communities in the United States that young men and young ladies wanted to enter their different communities. So I used to read that faithfully every month. And I guess in reading that, and analyzing it, I said to myself, "That would be a good thing for me," you know? So then we had a mission, and I went to church. I went to mass, I mean confession, and I mentioned it to Father. So he sat down and we talked together, and he says to me, "Go right to it!" He says, "Don't let anybody stop you!" I said, "Good." I said, "I'm glad I have you on my side." He said, "Yes." Never saw the man before! So, now how am I going to break it to my sister Ann? It would kill her! So I had this girlfriend who also came here to Ellis Island a couple of years later. And I said to her, "Ellie," I said, "Are you going to come down tonight?" She said, "Oh, no." She said, "[Unclear] tonight." I said, "Why can't you come

down tonight?" So I said, "Come on down." I said, "I wanted to talk to you." So she said, "All right, I'll come down." So when she came down, I met her outside, and I said, "I want you to tell Ann that you would say something about that I would like to enter the convent." So she said, "Okay." She said, "I'll mention it to her." So I said, "In the meantime," I said, "I'll get the tea ready, and the cake, and so on." She said, "Fine." So anyway, I remember distinctly bringing in the little tray with three cups or something, and I'd bring it in and put it down. So Ellie says to me, she said, "You know," she said, "You're great," she says to me. She said, "You know, you'd do well," she said, "In a convent." I said, "A convent?" She said, "Yes." I said, "How do you know?" you know, acting stupid. She says, "Well, the way you walked in," she said, "You just looked like a sister to me." So I said to Ellie, "That's just exactly what I want to do." The eyes—my sister—she said, as she turned and walked out, "Not another word." So I started dishing out the tea, to cover it! [Laughs] So not a word was said; it was dropped. Next morning, I'm going to school, and my sister says to me, she says, "When you come home this afternoon," she says, "Young lady," she says, "I want to see you." I said, "Okay, Ann," I said, "Are we going out for a walk? Are we going out?" So she said, "We'll see. We'll see." I said, "Okay." Came home. The dinner was ready for me, you know. My kid brother and I were eating, and then she says, "Are you ready yet?" So I said, "Okay." So I finished up, and went in to see her. She sat down in the little—we had a little drawing room. We sat down, and we talked. So she said to me, "What's this about the convent?" She said, "Are you serious?" I says, "Yes." I said, "I really wanted to go." She said, "What brought that into your head?" I said, "Nobody," I said, "Myself." I said, "Nobody told me anything about it." I said, "I don't know the first thing about anything yet." So she says, "Well," she says, "If you want to go," she says, "Go." She said, "I won't stop you." I said, "Great." I said, "That's it." Then! [Laughs] I had to go to the Consul. I had to go through this, go through that, da da, da da! All of a sudden I had to go—I went through—my kid brother and I went down to the Consul in Cove, and I had to be there at nine o'clock in the morning. And from nine o'clock until three o'clock, I was sitting in the office all day long, whatever it was, and not even a sip of water did I take! Because I was afraid to go out! If I went out to take anything, I couldn't—my name would be called, and I'd have to wait and wait for another four or five years. So I said, "I'm not moving." So my kid brother went out; he had a good meal outside. But that didn't help me! But anyway, three o'clock came. Three o'clock came, and all of a sudden I saw a big, big sign: Christina O'Neill examined and passed. And that's all I needed! That's all I needed. Then I got ready [unclear]. And every time, everybody knew that I was going. I mean, the folks, and they had these bonfires every time.

SIGRIST: Can you explain that to me? I don't know what that is.

O'NEILL: Did I say that to you?

SIGRIST: I don't know what that is? Explain it.

O'NEILL: They used to make bonfires for anybody leaving the country. It was—in other words, it was like a farewell, or a good-bye, or whatever, you know. And I said, “Oh, God, I has to go through all this!” And the tears—every night I was in tears. So then my sister says to me, she said, “Do you want to go or do you want to stay?” I said, “I don't know.” I said, “I don't know what I want now.” I was betwixt and between. So her advice was, she says, “Look, Chris,” she says, “My advice to you is: go!” She said, “And try it out for two weeks.” And she said, “And if you don't like it after two weeks, just tell them you don't want it; you want to come right home.” She said, “Remember, the door is open!” And I never, never, never, never forgot that advice! Had she had said to me, “Stay home,” I would have been wretched! I would have been miserable, because it wasn't my calling to stay home, and I was fighting it, you know?

SIGRIST: What did you know about America when you were growing up?

O'NEILL: I—the only think I knew about America was one of my brothers was here, and he was doing fine.

SIGRIST: Where was he?

O'NEILL: He was in Boston.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing?

O'NEILL: I don't know. He was doing—he was working, [unclear] working. Oh, he was working on a ship. But I don't know if he ever got working on a ship in Boston; that I don't know. I don't remember. But he had a girlfriend from the other side, and she was over here, too. She was over here, too. And both of them were in Boston. And that was the guy that I met here at the ship, when coming into Ellis Island? Or was it coming into Boston? It might have coming into Boston. I think it was coming into Boston. But anyway, I was allowed to see him, yes. But one of the guys in the ship had to keep on eye on me, because I was alone, I guess. I didn't know what the regulations were. And I said to him, I said, “You don't have to stay here,” I said, “Like that.” I said, “This is my brother.” Because both of us were exactly the same! So he says, “Oh, no,” he said, “That's all right, but I'll stay here. I'll stay here.” That was it.

SIGRIST: What did you pack to take with you to America?

O'NEILL: Very, very little, because I wasn't allowed to bring, except the bare necessities: a couple of changing of underwear, a couple of dresses, and shoes and socks. That's it.

SIGRIST: Did you bring any objects? A thing, an object, from Ireland, as a remembrance or as a gift that someone had given you?

O'NEILL: I don't think I did! I don't think I did. I know I had—I had a beautiful comb set, you know, a comb and a brush, you know? It was a regular set. I had it on my dresser in Amityville. And all of a sudden—all of a sudden the thing disappeared! And I said, "I wonder?" I blamed Mother, because we weren't allowed to have anything like that; it was too fancy, you know. So, but I never thought of it, you know. The little kid that next to me, her mother and father were visiting her that day, so she took it and gave it to her mother and father as a gift! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: [Laughs] Did your father ever remarry in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Did he what?

SIGRIST: Remarry?

O'NEILL: No.

SIGRIST: He didn't?

O'NEILL: No.

SIGRIST: So really, your sister pretty much just filled in?

O'NEILL: He moved over to England then, and he settled down over in England.

SIGRIST: Was that before--?

O'NEILL: With my—I had other brothers in England, two brothers in England, at that time. And they settled down, not exactly together, but near each other. But he was working in England.

SIGRIST: Did he settle—did he go to England after you left for America, or before?

O'NEILL: Before I left?

SIGRIST: Before.

O'NEILL: Before I left.

SIGRIST: How old were you when he went to England?

O'NEILL: When he went to England? Oh, gosh! Oh, well he was—I was in the convent. I was in the convent; I didn't see it! I didn't.

SIGRIST: So that would be in America then?

O'NEILL: I was in America before he left.

SIGRIST: I see.

O'NEILL: I forgot.

SIGRIST: You talked about what you packed, and then they had these bonfires and things?

O'NEILL: Yeah, right, right.

SIGRIST: Was that like, was there a party that went along with that? Did they--?

O'NEILL: Oh, no, the—we, any, all my friends, school friends, my sisters' friends, my boys' friends, my brothers' friends, they'd all have different nights when I'd go up and have tea with them, you know, or something like that, or dinner with them.

SIGRIST: What was the hardest thing for you to leave behind in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Home, home, yeah.

SIGRIST: When you got to America, how did you think about Ireland?

O'NEILL: When I got to America, I was in the novitiate. At that time there were about—I was in a group of sixty, although I only entered in May, but they didn't come in until September.

SIGRIST: Were these like Dominican novices of some sort?

O'NEILL: Yeah, yeah, we're novices and postulants all together.

SIGRIST: I see.

O'NEILL: There were about three or four hundred people there, you know. And the noises drove me bats! You know, because everybody, yap, yap, yap, together! But anyway—

SIGRIST: And they're all young ladies, too?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. And, oh, then every night I'd go to bed. I was in tears every night. In the morning I'd get up. You could—my pillow was absolutely wet from the tears! And one of the kids used to sneak in, which we were forbidden, absolutely forbidden! And she tried to console me, and I said I wanted to go home! I wanted to go home. So then I was in until from May until April. April we were supposed to get the white veil, and the beginning of our religious life, the vows. And we were supposed to go on retreat. I fought like the Dickens not to get on that retreat! Not to get on it. I just didn't—I didn't, I just fell apart! So this young novice gets a hold of me, and she says to me, "You seem to be upset." I was in tears! So she says to me, "What is wrong?" I says, "I don't want to go on that retreat." She said, "Why?" I said, "I don't think it's for me." So she said, "Look, do me a favor." I said, "What?" So she sat down and talked to me, which we were absolutely forbidden, which she did on the Q.T., which we [unclear]. So she talked to me. She said, "Look, I'll tell you what you do. Go on retreat." And she says, "Talk to Father on Wednesday. See how you manage from Sunday until Wednesday." I looked at her, [unclear], "I'm going to die between now and then." So anyway, I spoke to him on Wednesday. In fact, I didn't even have to speak to him. Whatever it was disappeared like that! Like a cloud on top of you, and it just broke, and that was the end of it! Never regretted it after that—never!

SIGRIST: When you were leaving Ireland, where did you have to go to get on the ship?

O'NEILL: Cobh, C-O-B-H.

SIGRIST: And how did you get from your town in Cork to Cobh?

O'NEILL: By train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train trip?

O'NEILL: No, I was just excited, all excited.

SIGRIST: Was anyone with you? Did anyone go with you?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, my brothers. A couple of my brothers were there; my sister was there. And then a very, very dear friend of ours. She was coming over here, so I was with more—with her, more or less. She accompanied me on the ship.

SIGRIST: And how long did you stay in Cobh prior to getting on the ship?

O'NEILL: Not too long, maybe—I suppose we were just brought there in time to get on the ship, you know what I mean? And of course, when they were ready to take off, they took off. That was it.

SIGRIST: So you weren't there overnight, or--?

O'NEILL: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: I see, it was all timed so you got there--?

O'NEILL: Yeah, we got from the Tender into the liner. The liner couldn't get in, because the water wasn't that deep enough. So I got on the little boat called the Tender.

SIGRIST: And the Tender then brought--?

O'NEILL: Brought out to the ship.

SIGRIST: Did your family, your brothers, and the people going with you, did they go with you on the Tender to get to the big ship?

O'NEILL: One of them, yes. Yes, one or two of them did, yes.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the ship?

O'NEILL: Cunard.

SIGRIST: It was a Cunard Line ship?

O'NEILL: Cunard Line ship.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh, and had you ever been on a ship before?

O'NEILL: Have I been on the ship?

SIGRIST: Had you ever been on a ship before that?

O'NEILL: Before that? No.

SIGRIST: Okay.

O'NEILL: No.

SIGRIST: We're going to pause just for a second so Kevin can flip the tape over, and then we're going to get you to America.

O'NEILL: Did I keep you too long?

SIGRIST: No, no, no, no, this is great!

O'NEILL: [Unclear]

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: Okay, we're beginning Side Two with Sister Rose Winifred O'Neill. And it's 1928, and we are on the ship. How long did the ship take to get to America? You can speak now.

O'NEILL: Nine days.

SIGRIST: Nine days.

O'NEILL: Nine days.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about being on that ship?

O'NEILL: Oh, boy! First of all, I got on the ship Sunday morning, and I was no sooner—the ship was no sooner navigating—all of a sudden I got sick! I got—I was sick like a dog, from Sunday on 'til Thursday! And I—nothing could I take, did I want. But I had a little bottle of brandy, I think it was, about that size. And I was warned at home to make sure to take at least a teaspoon every once in a while. And that's what kept me going. And I went to the dining room, I think it was on the Thursday morning or Thursday afternoon. And they said to me, "Where'd you come from?" That's the greeting I got! Oh, I was sick!

SIGRIST: What time of the year is it that you're traveling?

O'NEILL: It was in May.

SIGRIST: May.

O'NEILL: It was in May.

SIGRIST: May of 1928. And can you describe for me where you slept on the ship?

O'NEILL: I didn't! I did not sleep.

SIGRIST: Well, what did the room look like? What did your--?

O'NEILL: It was like—it was like a bunker. One bed here, ready. You know, I think that's what it was.

SIGRIST: On top of each other?

O'NEILL: I think that's what it was.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Who was in the room with you?

O'NEILL: This lady friend of mine. I forget her name now. I forget her name. She's dead long ago.

SIGRIST: What are some of the other things that you remember from being on the ship, that made an impression on you? Maybe what, things that you saw on the ship that you had not seen before?

O'NEILL: Well, I didn't—[unclear] we were in—all it was, we were in between icebergs all the way, and all the ship [unclear] was blowing the whistle all the time! And we were scared stiff something was going to happen! And we were really—they informed us we were in danger, in danger a couple of times. But however, we wriggled out of it some way or another.

SIGRIST: Did they have a safety drill that you remember, having to--?

O'NEILL: No, they didn't have anything like that, not that I know of. Not that I remember, anyway.

SIGRIST: What about the food on the ship? Was that different to you in any way?

O'NEILL: It was. It was very different. It was, but I tell you, I had no appetite until Thursday, I probably had something. And Friday, and I think we landed on, I don't know, was it Sat—Friday or Saturday we landed?

SIGRIST: And where did you land?

O'NEILL: I think we went to Boston, and my brother was in Boston. And that's why I took this ship, knowing that it was going to stop at Boston. And then I saw him, because he was waiting for me near, naturally, and his wife. And we stayed there for about a half hour or so. And I was talking with my brother, and then this gentleman from the ship was—he kept an eye on me, in case something would happen, I suppose, you know? And I turned around to him, and I said, "Look," I said, "You don't have to stay here." I said, "This is my brother." I said, "You can see that we're brother and sister." He said, "I know it!" and he laughed, you know. So that was it.

SIGRIST: Well now, you mentioned earlier that you were met by sisters.

O'NEILL: Yeah, two sisters.

SIGRIST: Where did you hook up with the sisters? Where did you meet them?

O'NEILL: I only met them at the boat for the first time, and then we—they were the ones, one of them in particular, was the one that picked up my first letter, when I wanted to, and she kept in touch with me all the time. She kept in touch with me, you know, to see that everything was all right, then I'd have to do this, and I'd have to do that, you know? So then they were both blood sisters. So they met me at the ship.

SIGRIST: And were you allowed to spend time with your brother prior to being taken to--?

O'NEILL: Only just while the boat was docked there for a while. As soon as the boat was ready, we had to go; I had to go. And then that was hard, too, parting from him.

SIGRIST: That was going to be my next question. What was it like to see your brother, and then have to leave?

O'NEILL: Yeah, it was [unclear]. It was hard; it was sad. Sad, but I tried to put the big front on, you know.

SIGRIST: Well now, where did the—these two sisters, where did they take you?

O'NEILL: They took me to their convent.

SIGRIST: Which was where?

O'NEILL: Which was in Queens, Elmhurst.

SIGRIST: So how did you get from Boston back down to New York?

O'NEILL: We came back—the ship, we came back by the ship, by ship. The shipped docked there for some reason, so maybe there were passengers then getting off.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see! It stopped in Boston--

O'NEILL: They could be!

SIGRIST: --then came down, you think?

- O'NEILL: Yeah, yeah, because it wouldn't have gone just for me, right? Probably passengers were getting off. So while they were getting off, the ship was probably getting refueled, whatever, and then when they're ready, I had to jump on the ship.
- SIGRIST: But they, the two sisters met you in Boston and came down with you? Am I understanding that?
- O'NEILL: No, they met me here in New York.
- SIGRIST: They met you in New York? I see, okay. I thought they were—
- O'NEILL: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. They met me in New York.
- SIGRIST: I see.
- O'NEILL: And then when I got off the ship, naturally, I see all these beautiful buildings, and I'm looking at them! Everything fascinated me! And I'm looking around, and I think I saw the Statue of Liberty where I—I saw that and everything. That was the first thing I had ever seen, you know, and I was taking everything in! I didn't realize I was holding up all this traffic! [Makes huffing sound] I says, "What's the matter, did I--?" I waved to myself. I wanted to see everything!
- SIGRIST: [Laughs]
- O'NEILL: And they were pulling me! They were mortified! Oh, God! Oh!
- SIGRIST: Before you got off the ship, or when you got off the ship, did you have to undergo any kind of check-out of some sort? Did anyone look at your papers, or a physical exam of some sort, that you can remember?
- O'NEILL: That I don't remember. I don't remember them checking anything.
- SIGRIST: What about before you left Ireland? Did you have to have, like, a physical?
- O'NEILL: Oh, before I left Ireland—my gosh! Forget it! I was examined from here to my toes! I was there for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours, and it was this, that, da, da, da, da—oh!
- SIGRIST: But not once you got here, that you can remember?
- O'NEILL: Yeah, no, I didn't have—I don't remember anything here. I don't remember. No, I don't think so. Maybe—maybe whatever papers I had, that they took a look at them, do you know what I mean? I did have some papers, what they were, I didn't even bother looking at them.

SIGRIST: These two women who were blood sisters, you said—but they were--?

O'NEILL: They were nuns.

SIGRIST: They were nuns, but they were also blood sisters?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes!

SIGRIST: Yes.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, yes, definitely.

SIGRIST: Where did they take you? You said they took you to Queens?

O'NEILL: They took me to their convent, which was at Elmhurst. That's in Queens.

SIGRIST: Were you the only young lady that they were meeting for this purpose?

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I see.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, because they don't get them that—they got one here and one there, you know what I mean? They didn't get them in groups, like they would from the United States.

SIGRIST: Were these nuns in full habit when they came to--?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, they were in full habit! Oh, definitely! Oh, sure! That them, they had the long, long habit.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw these two women who were coming to meet you?

O'NEILL: Oh, I was elated! I was delighted! You know, I really was happy, very, very happy, to see them.

SIGRIST: Yeah, well tell me about your early life, when they took you to the convent in Elmhurst, some of the impressions that you have.

O'NEILL: Well, oh, gosh!

SIGRIST: When you first got here.

O'NEILL: [Sighs] What do you call it? First of all I had to go to the—the credentials that I had over in Ireland in the line of schooling wasn't accepted here. So I had to start all over again, like high school, but a private high school, all right? But that was okay. Then—

SIGRIST: Was that connected to the convent somehow?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes, it was in the convent.

SIGRIST: I see.

O'NEILL: Yes, yes, definitely. Then what do you—oh, so then, all of a sudden one of the sisters took sick, and she needed—they needed a sister to take her place. And the next thing was, they picked me. Me, above all people! Mother calls me; she says, "I want you to get ready tomorrow morning to go into College Point." She says, "Sister So-an-so," I didn't know who the sister was. I'd never met her. "And she's sick and she has to go to an operation," she said. "You can take her class," she says, "Until June." It was a couple of weeks—a couple of months—no, about three or four weeks. I went, and did the best I could, but I said to her, I says, "I don't want to go." She said, "You don't want to go?" I said, "No." I says, "Mother," I said, "I don't even know a classroom looks like." I said, "I've never seen one yet." She says, "That's all right." She said, "You'll be okay!" she said. I didn't think—oh no, I hadn't taken vows yet. So anyway, we went—I went there, and everything went fine. They helped me out, naturally. So that was okay. Then I came home, back to the novitiate, when school closed. Then when school closed, I was another year, canonical year, then in Amityville. I was going to school, and we weren't—that's about all, because we couldn't leave the place. So when June came we were all scattered 'round, and I went to—I went to Elmhurst. I went there for one—for to start teaching, okay? The two sisters, naturally, I knew, were there. So all of a sudden, Sunday morning—Monday morning came. Oh, no, Sunday night, the sister says to me, "Are you all ready for school?" I says, "Well," I says, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I says, like that, I said. So they said to me, "Well, you better learn "My Country 'tis of Thee!" I says, "That? I don't even know it!" They said, "We'll teach you." So three or four of them got together, and taught me "My Country 'tis of Thee." [Unclear] [sings] My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of da, da, da! Regular jazz, you know! And I learned the whole blessed thing! So I was taking—now, this is the first graders. So I go in to school, and we prayed. That I knew about, praying. That was I know—I was confident in that. Then I started "The Star Spangled Banner." Kids are all excited! "Sister, we don't sing it that way!" I says, "No?" I said, "Well, that's the way I'm teaching you now." So I said, "All right." I says, "Forget it!" I say, "Let me hear you sing it your way," and they started. The next thing, we had--the door, had a little bit of glass, that size, in the door going into the classroom,

in every classroom. There were three or four of the nuns, right outside the door, listening to what's going on! All of a sudden I caught their eye! I said, "[Unclear]" like that. So I couldn't go out of my classroom! Oh, I would be killed—I was only a novice, you know! So I had to wait until dinner and afterward. It was killing them at dinnertime. You should have heard! They were hysterical laughing at me! Then, when it came for to, I had to collect stationery money, I had to collect school fee, and whatever, I had to. I didn't know one thing from the other! Nothing! I should have known, because my brother taught me, but I—because I wasn't handling it, I wasn't—you know, you'd forget it after a couple of months. So I stuck everything in a box! [Laughs] So kids would come up to me and say, "Sister Rose, you didn't give me the right change." I said, "Oh, I'm sorry." I said, "Here, take your right change," I said. Now they were the first graders!

SIGRIST: One thing I do want to ask you—how was life different, your everyday life different, in America, than it had been in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Oh, entirely different.

SIGRIST: Well, what were some of the major differences?

O'NEILL: Well, what you have to do, what you do today, you plan to do today—it has to be done. In Ireland, you'd take three or four days to do it. You know what I mean?

SIGRIST: Why is that? Why?

O'NEILL: It was just, everything was done so fast here! Here, the element was very, very, very slow.

SIGRIST: In Ireland?

O'NEILL: Yeah. Same way with the food. Food was altogether different from Ireland than it was here.

SIGRIST: What were some of the foods that you had in America that you had never eaten in Ireland?

O'NEILL: I never had anything in the line of Italian food. I never had sausages, you know!

SIGRIST: What did you think of these things?

O'NEILL: You know what I used to do? I used to put it on my plate, and fool around with the plate, make believe I was eating it. And I didn't realize, where I was sitting, there were—Mother Prioress was up there, or the Mistress, and she could see that I wasn't eating. So she comes down to me this day, and

she says, "Christina, why aren't you eating?" I says, "I'm eating, Mother!" I said, "I'm eating," and so I showed her my plate. She said, "You are not eating." Takes my plate, she fills it up. She said, "Now finish this!" So while she was going, I dumped it into somebody else's plate! [Laughs] I couldn't eat it! I couldn't eat it. I couldn't, I'd be deadly sick! So she thought I ate everything. Well dear, I think we better go, do you think?

SIGRIST: We're going to end in just a minute, yeah.

O'NEILL: I'm sorry.

SIGRIST: Oh, no, that's quite all right! Were you keeping contact with your family in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Do I?

SIGRIST: Were you then, when you first came here? Were you in contact with them?

O'NEILL: Yes, oh, yes! Definitely. Oh, just by mail, though.

SIGRIST: What were you telling them about your life here? I mean, how did you want—how did you want them to know about your life in America?

O'NEILL: Well, first of all, I would tell them how I was feeling, and how I missed them all. I remember telling them that. And I said, "I hope I will see you some day, but I don't know when." And, I said, "I don't like the food." I told them that I didn't like the food, and see, all the letters were censored! Every letter we sent out was censored! So they knew everything.

SIGRIST: Who read them?

O'NEILL: The Superior!

SIGRIST: The Mother Superior?

O'NEILL: Or the Mother General, whoever was in charge. Oh, yes, yes, yes! So you had to be very cagy, what you'd say, you know. But I said—and then I said, "I don't like some of the people," I said, like that. I said, "They're always talking here," I said. "I don't know what they're talking about—they go so fast," you know? And I wasn't used to that! Now I'm worse! I'm as bad! [Laughs]

SIGRIST: Those are very interesting observations, really. You know, that your life here was so fast, and yet you're in a somewhat sheltered community!

O'NEILL: That's it! That's it! That's it!

SIGRIST: Yeah. All right, well we'll end in a second, but let me ask you: what did you do in your life that you are the most proud of? The thing that you feel the best about, that you've done in your life?

O'NEILL: Well, the teaching, I guess, would be it.

SIGRIST: How long did you teach?

O'NEILL: I taught, I would say, a good seventy-five years—no, sixty-five. Seventy! Seventy, seventy! [Unclear] And I was every solitary day, except if anytime I took sick. So I had the first to the eighth grade, anywhere along the line.

SIGRIST: Where did you teach?

O'NEILL: Oh, in different convents, different schools.

SIGRIST: But in what states?

O'NEILL: New York.

SIGRIST: Always in New York?

O'NEILL: Yeah, I'd never go outside of New York. So it was in New York.

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had answered that solicitation, you know, for people to go over to join? How do you think your life would have been different if you'd stayed in Ireland?

O'NEILL: Say that again?

SIGRIST: How do you think your life would have been different if you had stayed in Ireland, and not come to the United States?

O'NEILL: I had no desire to stay in Ireland. First of all, I may as well be honest with you. I think what was uppermost in my mind, which of course I didn't know at the time, it was just something that hit me. They were always asking for a very, very large dowry over in Ireland. And I know my sister couldn't afford it, because she was only a working girl herself, you know. And the others were out, too, on their own, you know? I mean, my other brothers, and my sister—they were all out. And I couldn't see asking her. And then, but it didn't dawn on me in asking in the United States! But I knew eventually that if I had to pay anything in the United States, they would all chip together. Do you know what I mean? I had no regret there; I no fear of anything. But over there, I just wasn't called to do it. For some reason or other, though I had a first cousin who was a Monsignor over there, and I

had another second cousin. Well, he's not a Monsignor yet, but he will be one of these days. So, you know what I mean? The religious was over there, not here. I never followed them.

SIGRIST: If you had to give a young person some advice about how to live their life in a satisfying way, what would that advice be?

O'NEILL: Well, I would—first of all, I would have to find out what their intention was. How did they feel? What did they want to do? Then I would tell them—then I would mention to them gradually—not right away—is that, I'd say, "You know, there are three—the marriage, the religious, or the single. Either one of those three you'll have to make—you'll make the decision. Nobody has the right to tell you what to do. You have to do that on your own." Nobody can say, "Well, you have to be religious. You have to get married, da, da." I'd say, "That's entirely up to you. Then when you have an idea—not that you have decided, have an idea—then you talk about that particular thing to the individual person that you would have confidence in. You would have to have confidence in the person to talk to them. You couldn't talk to them otherwise."

SIGRIST: So let them make up their own mind?

O'NEILL: And build that up, then, accordingly!

SIGRIST: Great! Well, that's good advice. Sister Rose, thank you very much.

O'NEILL: Thank you, Paul!

SIGRIST: This has been a tremendous pleasure, and I'm very happy that—

O'NEILL: Oh, I hope I didn't bore you to death!

SIGRIST: No, no, no! Let me just sign off. This is Paul Sigrist, signing off, with Sister Rose Winifred O'Neill.

O'NEILL: You got it!

SIGRIST: On Wednesday, June 3rd, 1998, here at the Ellis Island Recording Studio, with Kevin Daley running the equipment. Thank you very much!

O'NEILL: Okay, all right, I'm sorry if I kept you.

END OF INTERVIEW

