

EI-277

JAMES T. GLEESON

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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IRELAND, 1927

AGE 12

PORT OF EMBARCATION: CROSS HAVEN

RESIDENCES: IRELAND: RAFFEEN, COUNTY CORK;

US: BRONX, NY

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm here today with James T. Gleeson. I'm in Naples, Florida at Mr. Gleeson's home. Mr. Gleeson came from Ireland in 1927 when he was twelve years old. Mr. Gleeson is seventy-eight years old at the time of the interview, and it is April 15, 1993. Okay. Well, let's start at the beginning, and maybe you can tell me your birth date.

GLEESON: I was born in Raffeen, R-A-F-F-E-E-N in County Cork, Ireland on July 19th, 1914.

LEVINE: Do you, so you, did you life in Raffeen the entire time before you immigrated?

GLEESON: No. We, uh, after about four years old the family moved to Monkstown and only about two miles away from my place of birth, and we, they then build a home near

Raffeen, between Raffeen and Monkstown, and we lived there until 1927 when we immigrated to the United States.

LEVINE: Are you saying Monkstown, M-O-N-K-S-T-O-N?

GLEESON: T-O-W . . .

LEVINE: W-N?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Okay. So you remember both Raffeen and Monkstown, because they were so close by.

GLEESON: Well, yeah, I do. I went to school in the little town of Shambella, which is in the province of Monkstown.

LEVINE: How do you spell that, Mr. Gleeson?

GLEESON: S-H-A-M-B-E-L-L-A, (?).

LEVINE: What do you remember about that community? I mean, could you describe . . .

GLEESON: Yeah. Monkstown is a parish seat, headquarters for the parish. Takes in Raffeen and Shambella. I went to school in Shambella with my brothers.

LEVINE: Maybe if you describe the family, what the family

consisted of.

GLEESON: My family consisted of seven boys and one girl who, the latter of which she was born in New York City in 1929. The oldest boy was Michael and he was nine years older than me. My oldest, the next oldest was Patrick. He was four years older than I was. Then came Anthony, William, Daniel and Desmond. All the boys born in Ireland. My sister was born in the Bronx.

LEVINE: What was your mother's name? (a telephone rings)
(break in tape) Okay, we're resuming now after a telephone call break. And you, I was just going to ask you your mother's name and her maiden name.

GLEESON: Kathleen, K-A-T-H-L-E-E-N. And her maiden name was O'Mahoney, O-'-M-A-H-O-N-E-Y.

LEVINE: And your father's name?

GLEESON: Michael.

LEVINE: And . . .

GLEESON: (he clears his throat) My father went to sea when he was fourteen and joined the British Navy, and

didn't get out until 1920. That was 1890 he went in the navy, and then he was in there until 1920. They kept him in longer than they had to sign him up for, but he was known, he knew then, and the rest of the world knew, that there was going to be a war, and they kept people in a lot longer than they anticipated. So . . .

LEVINE: So, let's see. Did he marry your mother then, while he was in the navy?

GLEESON: Yes, he did. (he clears his throat) They were married in 1906. And he didn't get out till 1920.

LEVINE: Did, were you living near the sea? Was the town you were living a sea town?

GLEESON: Yes. Tide came in and went out. (he laughs) Right to our front door, really, actually.

LEVINE: Could you describe the town, the whole area?

GLEESON: Well, Raffeen, the town in which I was born, wasn't much of a town. Actually they probably have about six houses on the east side of the road. It was a very, very poor time in Ireland when he got out of the navy. You want that?

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GLEESON: There was probably one man in fifty had a job. As a result, a lot of people emigrated to Australia, Canada, the United States.

LEVINE: What kind of jobs did people normally have in that area?

GLEESON: Well, either they would be going to sea, one of the things, my father did that. There was no work in Ireland really, as such. He was on a ship that went between Liverpool and Buenos Aires taking manufactured goods to Buenos Aires and meat, especially meat from there to England.

LEVINE: So he did that after he left the navy?

GLEESON: Yeah. He stayed in that capacity until 1926 when he, uh, when he emigrated to the United States. I always tell the story about my mother wanted to take the family to America and my father wanted to take the family to Australia or New Zealand, and they compromised. They went to America. (they laugh)

LEVINE: Do you remember why your father wanted to go to

Australia/New Zealand?

GLEESON: Well, he was very much influenced by England and their, what they did. Not that it was any great shakes, but he thought there'd be better opportunities for he and his family in Australia or New Zealand. My mother, who had sisters and brothers in the United States, felt otherwise and I say they compromised and did it her way.

LEVINE: What kind of a woman was your mother? Can you remember any kind of experiences or things that she did when you were little growing up?

GLEESON: Yeah. She was very close to her mother, my grandmother. And she used to go see her once a week, which is a long, long ways away. She walked, it was a very lonely road, as a matter of fact, and spent the day with her mother.

LEVINE: Did you know your grandmother well?

GLEESON: I knew her, yeah. I didn't know her, well, I guess I just knew her as a normal twelve-year-old would.

LEVINE: Do you remember any experiences with your grandmother?

GLEESON: Only that my grandfather was caretaker of a Franciscan monastery close by to their home. He was really a very accomplished man when it came to horticulture. Ireland at that time was a pretty poor country, and there was no work. I caddied on the golf course with my oldest brother in the town of Monkstown. We had a golf course. We also, he and I used to work on the farms. Well, thinning out turnips and pulling flax and things of that nature, a day's work. That's what it amounted to. I had no knowledge of my other brother's working.

LEVINE: What were your grandmother and grandfather's names?

GLEESON: O'Mahoney.

LEVINE: Their first names?

GLEESON: Uh, Jim, James O'Mahoney. Same as my own.

LEVINE: You were named after him, maybe?

GLEESON: Yeah, I was.

LEVINE: Were you close to him, particularly, in any way?

GLEESON: Oh, no, I wasn't. I knew him, and he was hard working. And I can't say I was really close to him.

LEVINE: No. Did you ever help him with the garden?

GLEESON: Yeah, I used to go out in the garden with him when he was out there working, and he would explain things which were over my head at the time. I mean, explain by grafting one tree to another and so on. He was quite good at that.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the Franciscan monastery where he worked?

GLEESON: Yeah. I remember they, he built a grotto there. It was where the Blessed Virgin is, (he pauses to adjust his microphone) this is where the Blessed Virgin was on a statue, and the whole area, which was about twenty-five feet by ten in depth, all the work was done by him personally with his own hands, and building the whole area.

LEVINE: Was it, what, was it made out of stone?

GLEESON: Stone, yeah.

LEVINE: Was your mother, your, were your grandparents very religious?

GLEESON: Yes, they were. They were Irish Catholics. My

grandmother came from a little town of Ringashetty.

LEVINE: Could you spell it?

GLEESON: R-I-N-G-A-S-H-E-T-T-I, E-T-T-Y. Her name was Tobin, Maryanne Tobin.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents on your father's side as well?

GLEESON: Very seldom did I see them. Only once that I recall. And they were living in Cork City, which is not that great a distance for us to travel. I did this when I was between ten and twelve years old. I bought cornmeal and a donkey and cart and got in Cork City about ten miles where I lived. And we used it for chicken feed, and that kind of thing.

LEVINE: So did you have a small, um, farm, kind of, around your house?

GLEESON: Yeah, we did. We raised chickens. That was about the only thing we raised there. It was, in effect, a farm, a little small one.

LEVINE: Did you have particular chores?

GLEESON: Yeah. I cleaned out the henhouse all the time.

(he laughs) And it was an area, when I was living there in Raffeen, when they had a good deal of trouble with the English. I'm not saying who was right, who was wrong, but they had, then they had a disagreement among themselves, the Irish did. One wanted a free state form of government, the other wanted a Republican form of government. When my father got out of the navy he went looking for work, and one of the jobs he had was joining the army, the Free State Army. Since it paid nothing, or next to nothing, the future was rather indefinite, he decided then to go to sea. As I mentioned before, he went to sea between Liverpool and the Argentine.

LEVINE: And so was he at sea for several years before he came to the U.S.?

GLEESON: Yeah, he was, until, about four or five years.

LEVINE: What would that be like? I mean, would he be away for months at a time, or . . .

GLEESON: Uh-huh. The boats, at that time, going all the way to Argentina, was rather slow. I would think he would be away for two, three months at a time.

LEVINE: Then would he be home for a period of time?

GLEESON: Very, very short periods.

LEVINE: I see. So you didn't really see that much of your father when you were in Ireland.

GLEESON: No, I didn't. And that was one of the real regrets that I have that I didn't see him, or get to know him even. I remember he used to come, when he got out of the navy, or when he was in the navy, when he would come home for a visit he would kick his bag, like a duffle bag, off the train and we'd pick it up, and we'd walk home from the station. But, uh, it was a period of, I guess, my parents' life that was kind of regrettable in a lot of ways that they didn't, they didn't have a normal husband and wife life, put it that way.

LEVINE: Were you closest to any particular brother?

GLEESON: Yeah, Michael.

LEVINE: He's the one you worked with.

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, is he the one who is alive?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

GLEESON: Yeah, I would say I was closer to him than anybody else, particularly because he bailed me out every time that I'd fall flat. What I mean by that is when we would work in the field I was so small I wasn't able to keep up with the men. He'd lean over the furrow and let me catch up. Also when we caddied at Monkstown Golf Club, he would take the heavy bag all the time, and I would take the lighter bag. He was a tough kind of fellow but was willing to bail me out, so to speak, every time that I got behind.

LEVINE: Do you remember what you did for fun and enjoyment when you were a child?

GLEESON: Yeah, we played the national game, which was hurling, H-U-R-L-I-N-G. We would get boys in the neighborhood and team up. And hurling is very much like hockey with an indoor baseball stitching on it. And I was small and chunky and I didn't, nothing bothered me as far as competition was concerned. So I got one mark under my eye here which (he gestures), playing with

my oldest brother, whatever I did I put the stick down. And his bat when right off the handle and caught me under the eye. So I was fortunate that I didn't lose my eye then.

LEVINE: So this was a field hockey?

GLEESON: Yeah, very much like we know field hockey.

LEVINE: And did you play, well, let's see, you wouldn't have played in school teams.

GLEESON: No, we didn't have that much time to ourselves. We, it was always something to do, either cleaning up the henhouse or working the garden or doing the outside work, like I mentioned. The gardening, and so on. And selling them what we had to sell. You know, I used to carry, to do that, carry the eggs. Some days we had regular customers for that.

LEVINE: You would take it to their homes.

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember what kinds of things you grew?

GLEESON: Oh, yeah. It was potatoes, brussels sprouts, beans, and we had about two hundred and fifty laying hens, so

we sold a good deal of what we raised.

LEVINE: Did you actually slaughter the chickens?

GLEESON: No, no. Uh-uh. (he laughs) We never did that, at least I didn't. Maybe my mother did, but . . .

LEVINE: Did you sell chickens as well as eggs?

GLEESON: No. We used that for our own consumption.

LEVINE: I see. Do you remember any dishes that your mother made, that you were particularly fond of, or . . .

GLEESON: Well, she just made regular corned beef and cabbage-type of a meal. And Thanksgiving-type of dinner, Christmas dinner, we always had turkey.

LEVINE: Did you eat a lot of fish?

GLEESON: Uh, yeah. My father, when he was home, used to go fishing every night catching what he called goodill, and they were used as they should be been, we eat for regular meals. The sea was, she went in, went out and come in, and so on. We were not more than maybe a hundred feet from the sea itself. The railroad tracks ran between our house and the sea.

LEVINE: Was there, was it called a particular harbor or bay or?

GLEESON: It was a bay, really. There was one instance I recall. My oldest brother and I were going to go to confession in Monkstown, which was the nearest church. And we'd cross on, it was dark, on a Saturday night, and we'd cross onto the railroad tracks and follow them. Well, we didn't get very far when there were shots fired over our heads. And one, the man who was shot at and killed was a soldier in the Free State Army who was patrolling that area. Of course, we ducked back into the house as fast as we could.

LEVINE: So there was, there was actually real violence going on between the Free State and the Republican.

GLEESON: There was. In fact, our house was on piers about that high, (he gestures) about two feet high, and on a spring tide we would get water close by the house. (he pauses) It wasn't an ideal situation for raising a family. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: Can you describe your house more, besides the fact that it was on the stilts?

GLEESON: No.

LEVINE: Is that what . . .

GLEESON: Yeah, on piers. He, the house itself was, it had six rooms to it and a hallway running between the front, the farthest rooms and off the, off a hallway came living area and bedrooms and so on.

LEVINE: All on one floor?

GLEESON: All on one floor.

LEVINE: Do you remember what the kitchen was like?

GLEESON: We had a coal stove and it was a good-sized. It was a large kitchen and a coal stove was what we did the cooking on.

LEVINE: Was there any music involved in your family or . . .

GLEESON: We had a victrola, and the records that went with it. And that was always in the living room-type of room.

LEVINE: So what age did you start school?

GLEESON: At about six.

LEVINE: And do you remember school there?

GLEESON: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: What was it like?

GLEESON: We were in a, we had a one-room schoolhouse. One side was the boys and one side of the room was girls. It was divided by a wall. I went from the first to the fifth grade there, and when I came to this country they put me in the fifth grade. I already had algebra and geometry. As far as curriculum was concerned, we were way ahead of what they had in this country.

LEVINE: Was this a parochial school, or was it . . .

GLEESON: It was a national school. A national school is a Catholic school over there. And I remember this family named Johnson that were not Catholic, they were Protestants. They were from a little town close to school. And I remember I used to, they were let out to play during the catechism quiz, and I wished I was a Protestant then. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Were there a lot of Protestants in the area where you were?

GLEESON: A good deal. The Protestants, generally speaking, were wealthy by our standards.

LEVINE: What did they usually do for work?

GLEESON: Farming. Ireland is principally a farming country. A lot of it is, well, their main export is meat and dairy products. They ship them to England and to Holland and places like that.

LEVINE: So the Protestants would mainly, like, own farms?

GLEESON: Yeah. And most of it, going back into history, was land grants from the King of England. They made no bones about taking the land away from the Irish who owned it. It was kind of an unjust thing, when you get right down to it.

LEVINE: So the Protestants, they were Irish, they weren't English.

GLEESON: Well, they came over to Ireland.

LEVINE: From England.

GLEESON: From England, yeah.

LEVINE: And they were the families that got the land grants.

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Was there friction between the Catholics and the Protestants?

GLEESON: Oh, some, some. For example, we had goats and a lot of people there had goats. And they'd round up our goats and lock them up from time to time, you know. But . . .

LEVINE: You mean steal them?

GLEESON: Well, they used to, they were on their, grazing on their property. And they felt they had the right to do it, and we didn't feel that way, and we let them know it.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

GLEESON: (a telephone rings) There is goes again.
(break in tape)

LEVINE: We're resuming now, again, after another phone call from, James Junior, was it?

GLEESON: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: Okay. We were talking about friction and goat stealing. What, were you, I guess you weren't, were you aware politically of some of the situation there?

GLEESON: I was, yeah.

LEVINE: Could you . . .

GLEESON: Well, we knew that there was constant friction between, among the Irish. Once they got the twenty-six counties away from England, England gave them up, England kept six of the colonies that, well, they felt entitled to. But the, once the Irish got their freedom from England, so to speak, they then became two factions of Irish, one against the other.

LEVINE: Were they divided religiously as well as politically, or did those lines kind of fall in the same place?

GLEESON: Well, politically I would say they, it became a religious thing before, there'd never been any reconciliation, really. The Irish, the Republic of Ireland has twenty-six counties in it and they're principally in the southern part, north of Dublin to all the way south, as far as it goes. The Protestant faction, while still prevalent in the south of

Ireland, well, they had the wherewithal to hire people and a lot of the Irish Catholics went to work for Protestants or they didn't eat. (he laughs) So it was always, there's always that friction between. I always say, when the Jews and the Arabs make up, so will the Irish. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Yeah. What was your attitude, or the attitude of people around you at that time toward England?

GLEESON: Well, the only jobs to be had were those of, generated by the wealth of the Protestants. The, I think, I read something the other day that there are more Protestants in Ireland than there are Catholics, which may or may not be true. But Jim also asked me to mention, I told him you were here, that until we left Ireland on the fifth of March 1927, we had to have, go to the baths and be sure you're clean and no lice or anything like that. And we were on the, we boarded at Cross Haven. A tender took us out to the ship, the President Cleveland, with a seventeen thousand ton liner that we boarded. I believe the first landing in the North American continent was Halifax, then Boston and then New York.

LEVINE: And were people getting off at Halifax and Boston?

GLEESON: Yeah. The restrictions on going into Canada were not as rigid as it is going into the United States. A lot of people used to immigrate through Canada and spend some time there, and come into this country.

LEVINE: Well, let's get back to Ireland and perhaps you can tell me a little bit about your religious life as a family. Did you . . .

GLEESON: Oh, yeah. We were fairly good Catholics, as a family. I know I made, I made my First Communion. My younger brother Tony, Anthony, he made his First Communion also. And the rest of the family of boys made their First Communion and in this, and they made their First Communion in Ireland and their Confirmation in Ireland, uh, in America.

LEVINE: So you went to, you went to a Catholic school, and you went to church on Sunday?

GLEESON: Uh-huh. And the schools I went to in this country were public schools. And I thought it was heaven on earth. I didn't get beat up every day of your life when you went to school.

LEVINE: Was there one teacher for all the boys,
regardless . . .

GLEESON: No, there was a woman, in this one-room schoolhouse,
there was a woman who had the lower classes and a man
who had the upper classes. And he was, he was a mean
individual. He thought nothing about taking out a an
ash cane and bopping you with it across your fingers.
But when I went to school in the Bronx, P.S. 65 it
was, a Ms. Harron was the teacher, and I thought she
was just great because she didn't resort to violence.

LEVINE: What was the attitude that your parents about your
treatment in school being so violent?

GLEESON: Well, I'll tell you. I think, it's been my contention
that he was just a damn coward and he didn't touch the
kids whose fathers were home. It was the ones that,
who's father was away at sea or out of the country or
something that got it, like I did.

LEVINE: What would you be reprimanded for, for example?

GLEESON: Well, my younger brother Tony, Anthony, he got, the
teacher, he went from his end of the schoolroom down

there and pulled him out. He wanted to use a cane on him. And I jumped out of my seat, I went down, and I pushed him away. So I got it instead of my brother. (he laughs) That was harder on me, but it was just plain meanness, I think, that you can trace it to.

LEVINE: So were the boys, well, you were in a family of all boys, but were the boys, as a group of children, treated differently than the girls? Can you think of, for, what were the customs for little boys at that time?

GLEESON: Well, the girls' school was one unit, a big unit which was cut in the middle for girls here, boys here. The girls were treated a lot better. Mrs. Jones was the teacher for the girls, head of the girls' school. And she had, her husband ran the biggest school in the old town of Passage West in Ireland. She seemed to be a much more humane person than we were experiencing.

LEVINE: Did you play games with girls? I mean, did you have friends who were girls, or were you, was it sort of the boys stuck together?

GLEESON: We stuck together pretty well. We used to get into mischief together. And there were, I think it was a

pretty good relationship among the boys.

LEVINE: Can you think of the mischievous, any mischievous types of things that you and your brothers would do?

GLEESON: (he pauses) Yeah. We'd steal fruit from the farmers when they locked up our goats. (he laughs) Made it a point to strip the trees and things there. But that's about the extent of our mischievous conduct.

LEVINE: So why was the decision made that your father would immigrate?

GLEESON: Why? Because things were so bad in Ireland that there was no prospect of jobs and so on. Right now they got twenty-two percent unemployment, which by the standards then, you apply that to what we're talking about, would be pretty good. But there was, I mean, Ireland was just stripped of its youth all the time. People were, couldn't find work, and they knew that there was work in Ireland, I mean, Canada. There was work in New Zealand, Australia and America. There was no reason for them to stay. There were certain, there were no prospects that enabled them to count on, (?). I always think my father, he was a master rigger in

the navy, and when he came to this country he was one of the people who worked putting up the steel and so on and in the Empire State Building and Chanin Building. All the big buildings went on in the late '20s. He was employed by them. And then came the Depression, and he lost his job. And I feel that he gave up one Hell of a lot just for his family.

LEVINE: How do you mean?

GLEESON: I mean in other words he moved to America to give us the opportunity to achieve a good education and decent jobs and so on which were not available in Ireland at that time. I remember this one man, the only one I knew who had a job, he would ride his bike over a mile, get into a ferry boat, row across there, and then ride a bike to another building or complex where he was a watchman, and that was the only work I knew of that was available in Ireland, which was a pretty sad situation.

LEVINE: Well, so you're, why was it that your oldest two brothers went at the same time? Do you remember that?

GLEESON: Well, it was to accumulate enough money to get them there. My father would send home the money to

Ireland. When there was enough there, Michael, he left in July of 1926 and Patrick left in October of the same year, and then there was enough left between October and March when there was enough money to bring my mother and five boys. It was pretty, a pretty damn tough existence.

LEVINE: Do you remember letters from Michael and Patrick? Do you remember what you knew about life in the United States before you actually . . .

GLEESON: No, I didn't. Patrick went to work for the New York Telephone Company. He was only sixteen or seventeen. and Michael, who was two years older, he went to work for Seaman Brothers, a big food chain supplier. You know, they were. They didn't, I don't recall any letters from them during that period of time.

LEVINE: Where, did your brothers and father live together?

GLEESON: Yeah. They lived with an aunt, my mother's sister. She had a couple of rooms and she rented it out to them.

LEVINE: Was this in the Bronx?

GLEESON: Uh-huh.

LEVINE: So do you remember getting packed up and . . .

GLEESON: Oh, yeah. We couldn't take very much with us because it wasn't that kind of room. And we came that we all, way down in the bilges on the ship. We were steerage. Lucky to get out. (he laughs) I know that night we left Queenstown it was midnight. We boarded the ship then.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving the town, leaving . . .

GLEESON: Yeah. Well, we stayed over in, we went over to Queenstown, now known as Cobh, C-O-B-H, on the morning of the fifth of March. And we stayed there all day and all night until midnight to catch the tender to go out to the ship, because there were no facilities to dock a ship of that size.

LEVINE: Now, how did you get to Queenstown, or Cobh?

GLEESON: Well, we got a donkey and cart. (he laughs) We were supplied with transportation.

LEVINE: Do you remember goodbyes in the town? I mean, how did you feel about leaving?

GLEESON: Well, we were kind of excited about it. We were looking forward to seeing our father, my brothers and so on. And the people of that town, little as it was, they were all family. That's what it really amounted to, and you didn't, every time that I used to caddy on Sunday morning on the golf course, and I'd know, I'd see these liners come in, one, two, three, maybe four of them sometimes. And you knew that you were never going to see them again. I always thought it was a pretty sad thing in our lives when you say goodbye to somebody knowing now you'll never see them again as long as you live. (he is moved)

LEVINE: Did you have examinations by the steamship company before you left Ireland?

GLEESON: Yes. We had to go, undergo a health examination and, we didn't have to go through the baths where they cleaned you up. We were not, we didn't have to do that, but we did take a thorough physical. They didn't want anybody coming in. I always think about Ellis Island, though, and that long staircase going up to the second floor where how many poor people never made it beyond the island, had to go back. That was the saddest thing of all I thought about Ellis Island.

I can just imagine, you know, a certain percentage go back, period. That's why America is such a great, great country. (he pauses) People, murals they have in Ellis Island, people with all their belongings in a handkerchief draped over their shoulder.

LEVINE: Do you remember your luggage or baggage or anything your mother took that she wanted to have in this country?

GLEESON: Just a few bags that we had our belongings in. That's all.

LEVINE: Well, you were the oldest son, really, traveling with your mother.

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Did that place any particular responsibility on your shoulders?

GLEESON: Oh, yeah, it sure did. In fact, that was, some German family on the boat that tried to push one of my brothers down the stairs. They were kind of nervy. But the wrong one went down the stairs, let's put it that way. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Do your mother was excited to come, because she had family.

GLEESON: Yeah, she did have family. And again she said she was excited. We moved several times in the period of time that I lived in the Bronx, but there was such a difference in the way we were forced to live over in Ireland.

LEVINE: What were the, what would you notice strikingly different when you first came here to what you had been used to?

GLEESON: Well, we had more than we had before. It was three wage-earners in the family. And while we never went hungry in Ireland, we certainly didn't have an abundance either.

LEVINE: Do you remember coming, do you remember, well, first of all, was there anything about the voyage itself that you recall?

GLEESON: Yeah, the first, the first day out of Queenstown we had some real rough weather. It was, everybody got sick. And us being down in the bottom of the boat didn't help, either.

LEVINE: How about describing steerage, what your experience in steerage was.

GLEESON: What was that again?

LEVINE: Would you describe being in that, in the hold and steerage in the ship?

GLEESON: Did I like it?

LEVINE: Yeah. What was it like down there?

GLEESON: (he coughs) It was hot and it was bunk beds. So being the oldest of the youngest, I had to watch out for them pretty much. My youngest brother, he got very, very sick, he was the one who was killed in Guam during World War II.

LEVINE: Do you remember when the ship came into the New York Harbor?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: What was that like?

GLEESON: It was a real thrill to see the Statue of Liberty.

LEVINE: Had you learned about that in school?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Do you remember what kind of day it was and what people . . .

GLEESON: It was in the morning, in the morning. Well, morning, I'd say about eleven o'clock. And the, my father was waiting for us. I had two older brothers who were waiting, and it was, like a lot of other people, very happy to be there.

LEVINE: Do you remember, when you first got to Ellis Island what was your impression of that place?

GLEESON: One thing about Ellis Island, we were cleared before we got there, and didn't stop off in Ellis Island. I hope that doesn't confuse anybody. But there was, I think we were about the last ones, or the first ones not to have to go clear through Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Now, why was it that you did not have to go?

GLEESON: I guess that some law was put into effect. I didn't know.

LEVINE: So where did you meet your father and brothers?

GLEESON: At the dock.

LEVINE: Oh, when the ship came in. Did you see them from when you, from aboard ship?

GLEESON: Yeah. See, I can still picture them now.

LEVINE: What did they look like?

GLEESON: Well, it was pretty exciting to see them, I'll tell you. My younger brother, or second oldest brother, had gone up through a season of flu, I think it was, and he looked scrawnier. It looked like he didn't have a meal in two months. (a telephone rings)
(break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming again after a phone call. You were describing when you first saw your father and brothers from the ship, what was, what did you think or feel, or what did they look like?

GLEESON: Well, we were really happy about it, you know, and it was really an exciting period.

LEVINE: So you came off the ship and you had a reunion with your brothers and father.

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And then what took place?

GLEESON: Well, then we got a cab and took us all the way to St. Ann's Avenue, our new home.

LEVINE: In the Bronx.

GLEESON: In the Bronx, yeah.

LEVINE: And what were your first few days or weeks like? Can you remember what struck you?

GLEESON: I felt, in Ireland, when you were dressed up as a young child like I was, you wore ha-ha pants, or shorts. And I, we had those at, you know, kids my age then wore long pants. And I was razzed continually by the others, the young fellows my own age in this country. But I passed.

LEVINE: Did you start school right away?

GLEESON: Yeah. It was a public school, and I'm very happy to be there, I'll tell you. Of course, I couldn't quite understand why they were putting me on fractions instead of geometry. I just accepted it.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of other children who had immigrated in your class in school?

GLEESON: No, uh-uh. They were mostly all natives.

LEVINE: So were you, did you experience, besides from your short pants, any of the greenhorn phenomenon.

GLEESON: Oh, yeah. (he laughs) We got told about that quite frequently. No, it's just usual. We had some scuffles with kids that were pouring it on, but nothing serious.

LEVINE: So did you maintain the sort of "oldest of the youngest . . ."

GLEESON: Pretty much.

LEVINE: . . . kind of role in the family?

GLEESON: Yeah. I think . . . (people can be heard entering the room) (break in tape)

LEVINE: Okay, we're resuming now. Mrs. Gleeson has come in and gone, and a telephone call again. So we were saying, you were saying you were razzed quite a bit when you first got here.

GLEESON: We came in March, and Confirmation was in June at St. Luke's Church in the Bronx, 138th Street in the

Bronx. I was a candidate for Confirmation and so I got dressed up with a straw hat and short pants and off I went to be confirmed. And, of course, that greenhorn was what, I guess, you could really call us in those days. My mother thought it was all right to be dressed like that, but I didn't think so, and I'm the one who had to get dressed, so . . .

(he laughs)

LEVINE: I think what we'll do here is pause briefly while I change the tape.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and this is Tape Two of an interview with James Gleeson at his home in Naples, Florida on April 15, 1993. Okay. So, was there anything else that struck you as different in this country when you first came?

GLEESON: Well, the only thing is, I can say is the kindness that was evidenced by people you met, in school or neighbors and so on. It made a big difference as far as I was concerned to have people as nice and as kind as they were.

LEVINE: In what way, can you remember any instances of kindness shown to you early on?

GLEESON: (he pauses) Offhand there was, we lived near St. Mary's Park in the Bronx. And we went over there and played and participated in games and so on. And there was always that feeling of kindness that permeated the activities there. There seemed to be quite a number of children our own age that caused to feel like we were quite welcome in the area.

LEVINE: What was your mother's experience coming to this area?

GLEESON: Well, she was happy to be with her family. She was, uncles and aunts of mine that were, my mother's family in Ireland who had emigrated here to America before we did. So she was quite in her element to when people were, they were quite, very nice to us in every way.

LEVINE: And, let's see. So what did you do, then? You stayed in school for how long?

GLEESON: I was in school until about 1930, '31 when I was, when my family was in a little financial trouble, my father out of work. I went to work for Cressey, S.S. Cressey in Mount Vernon, New York. And also I worked briefly

for F.W. Woolworth's.

LEVINE: Were you selling?

GLEESON: I was a janitor. Then I got a job with Atlantic Gypsum Company shoveling rock out of a boat in the Bronx, and I stayed on. The pay was a whole lot better than it was with the Cressey's and Woolworth's.

So I took a chance and took a job, a temporary job with them, and stayed there for twenty-eight years. Shoveling rock out of a boat was kind of a back-breaking job. Because they used to bring rock from Nova Scotia down to seaboard plants and making wallboard of it. That was my job with them. Like I say, it lasted twenty-eight years. And then I jumped around, I guess. I could recall being transferred to New Jersey and then to Buffalo, New York, and then I left National Gypsum. There, from Atlantic Gypsum was bought by National. So when I left there, I came out to Monroe, Michigan. And I was in . . . (Mrs. Gleeson can be heard in the background talking on the telephone) Up the ladder a little bit there with jobs. I was in charge of purchasing and transportation for that company.

LEVINE: For National Gypsum?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Well!

GLEESON: So I think a temporary job was a good thing to do.

LEVINE: So is that where you retired from?

GLEESON: I didn't retire from them. In 1970 my oldest son and I formed a company, and we started out by selling wastepaper, and then we got into pulp and plastics and items of that nature, mostly in the paper business. Then I retired in 1986.

LEVINE: But the company continued.

GLEESON: Yes. I have two boys now in the company. The oldest one is the president, and the youngest boy is a, is also an officer of the company. The two I haven't mentioned, my son is a lawyer in Chicago and . . .

LEVINE: And what's his name?

GLEESON: William. And Mary is married to a fellow who has his own accounting business. So that's the four children I have.

LEVINE: Now James is the oldest?

GLEESON: Yeah.

LEVINE: And who is the youngest?

GLEESON: Paul.

LEVINE: Paul.

GLEESON: Yeah. (?) So they seem to be getting on all right.

LEVINE: And how about your wife? What is her name and maiden name?

GLEESON: Mary. And her name was McCarthy, Mary McCarthy.

LEVINE: And when did you meet?

GLEESON: 1985.

LEVINE: So do you have grandchildren?

GLEESON: Yeah. We have five, seven, thirteen.

LEVINE: Wow, wonderful. Well, looking back on your life of starting out in Ireland and coming here and sort of starting again, do you think that that experience of being an immigrant or immigrating to this country sort of had an influence on you throughout your life?

GLEESON: To the extent that I was fortunate to have the opportunities I had. Well, I went through, all through high school and college at night. CCNY was where I went to. And it was real work to get through. CCNY was a tough school, which you're probably familiar with. It's been, America has been awfully good to me.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of that you've achieved?

GLEESON: Oh, my family. They've never given me a minute's trouble.

LEVINE: Wow, that's saying something!

GLEESON: That's saying a whole lot. They've been excellent. They've been no problems of drugs or whatever that goes along with it. They've always done good. Bill, as a matter of fact, is waiting for his second trip to Russia. He went to the Ukraine about two months ago and, with the blessing of the Department of Commerce, they want him to sell, the Russians do, five million tons of coal, no cement. (he laughs) That's what it is. Five million tons of cement a year. Plus he's not a trader, but they're also after him to sell other

items out there which . . .

LEVINE: Well, he's on the forefront of . . .

GLEESON: Oh, they're having, of course, some people would argue that why send all our money over there, but I think we're doing the right thing.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything else that you can think of that either popped into your mind during the course of this or that you'd like to say before we close?

GLEESON: No. I can't try and go reconstruct my existence. I think that the only opportunities in this country are just mammoth as far as I'm concerned. I mean, where in the world would a greenhorn like me get a chance to do what I've done. Nowhere else in the world do you find the opportunity you have here.

LEVINE: Well, I think you're one of the people that make the country what it is. You can think of it that way, too.

GLEESON: Well, the opportunity was there. I was in charge of transportation and purchasing for Consolidated Packaging, and the Chairman of the Board had me for breakfast one morning in Chicago right next to the

Drake. And he said, "I want you to arrange your work life now so you're going to move to Chicago." He said, "You're going to have to pack up and come out here." So I tried to gentle him out of that. It didn't work. I said, "Mr. Gibbitz, I work for, I've lived in New York twenty years, I've lived in Buffalo fourteen years. I am never again going to live in a big city." Of course, he wouldn't accept that, but I made it stick. I wasn't going to, I had enough lousy weather in Buffalo. (he laughs)

LEVINE: Is that when you moved to Florida?

GLEESON: No, I moved to Michigan from there.

LEVINE: Oh, Michigan, huh.

GLEESON: But anything is better than Buffalo, I'll tell you that.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, I think maybe this is a good point to close. I want to thank you very much.

GLEESON: Thank you for coming.

LEVINE: It's been very enjoyable talking with you. And this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've

EI-277/GLEESON

been speaking with James Gleeson at his home in
Naples, Florida on April 15, 1993, and I'm signing
off.