

EI-623/JOHN BRADY

EI-623

JOHN (JACK) BRENDAN BRADY

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1999

IRELAND, 1929

AGE 6

PASSAGE ON "THE TRANSYLVANIA"

SIGRIST: Good afternoon, this is Paul Sigrist for the National  
Park Service. Today is Thursday, June 22nd, 1995.

I'm at the Ellis Island recording studio with John  
Brady. Mr. Brady came from Ireland in 1929 when  
he was six years old. Mr. Brady, can we begin by  
you giving me your birth date, please?

BRADY: It's July 29th and 1923 I was born.

SIGRIST: And what is your full name, please?

BRADY: John Brendan Brady.

SIGRIST: B-R-E-N-D...

BRADY: A-N.

SIGRIST: A-N, John. And I should say for the sake of the tape that you introduced yourself to me as "Jack" so I assume that's what people know you as.

BRADY: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: Where in Ireland were you born?

BRADY: Ballyhaise, B-A-L-L-Y-H-A-I-S-E. County Cavan.

SIGRIST: Where in the country is that?

BRADY: It's central, very close to the northern border of the six counties that are under English control. And this Ballyhaise was in the free state.

SIGRIST: I see. Were you ever told anything about your birth?  
(Mr. Brady laughs) Any stories?

BRADY: Well, I, I went back there in 1945 when I was in the service and then I've been back a couple of times

since on trips.

SIGRIST: You, but, but did your mother or your father tell you about when you were born? Is there a story about when your mother gave birth to you?

BRADY: Uh, no, other than I was born in a big home that's now a post office. (he laughs) I remember a little bit of the, the town and the area.

SIGRIST: This is Ballyhaise? Can you...

BRADY: Ballyhaise.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what you do remember about the town?

BRADY: Well, there was a pump, a water pump right in the center of the square and the homes were build around it. It was hilly on both sides. It was a dairy farm area. At one time my father was head of the creamery. They called the dairy the creamery and he also was partners with his brother in a pub, so right in the town. And that pub is still there.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections yourself of the house that you lived in?

BRADY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house for me?

BRADY: It, it was a big, stone house, more square, like a, a European-type house. Not, not like an American house. Not like a Cape Cod or anything like that.

SIGRIST: What is the difference between a European-style house versus an America house?

BRADY: Well, they're, they're square. There's no indentations. There's no vestibules, there's, it's just like a, a barn, I guess, with windows.

SIGRIST: You walk in, you're right inside...'

BRADY: Yes, that's it. You're right in.

SIGRIST: You said the house was made out of stone. Do you know what the roof was?

BRADY: It was probably slate, and that is my recollection from a few years ago when I went over and took some pictures of it and, uh, took pictures of the area itself.

SIGRIST: Is there a piece of furniture that sticks out in your mind as a child?

BRADY: Yes, a bed. And I had an aunt, or my mother had an aunt that died and they laid her out in the bed, in the, and I never forgot that. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Are there any other recollections about that particular experience that you can remember about your aunt dying?

BRADY: No, not, not really except that she was a favorite and I was surprised that they laid her out in the, in the bedroom and, on the bed. They dressed her up and laid her out. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about, what are things children do, as young children, in Ireland?

BRADY: I can remember rolling down the hill behind the, behind the house. And I can also remember hitting a, a piling of cow dung (he laughs) and that I never forgot.

SIGRIST: I bet. (he laughs) Tell me, were there games that you played as a young child in Ireland that stick out in your mind?

BRADY: Uh, nothing different than what our children played. Hide And Go Seek or Tag of some kind. And all the people in the, all the children in the area played that game.

SIGRIST: Who were your playmates as a young child in Ireland?

BRADY: I had a lot of first cousins in this area. My father was the oldest of fourteen children and there was a, quite a few of them, uh, had ancestors, you know, there and they had children. And they were in that area.

SIGRIST: Is there a story that you associate with one of your

cousins about when you were young, maybe an experience that you shared with one of your cousins?

BRADY: No. The only thing I know is that I was the oldest grandchild of the, my grandmother was living at that time, too. And of the fourteen children that most of them were married, I was, and still, when I go over there now and, for some reason there's just something to being the oldest son or the oldest grandson or, it puts you on a little plateau by itself. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: A certain privilege.

BRADY: Yeah. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: This was your father's mother, yes?

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: What recollections as a child in Ireland do you have of your grandmother?

BRADY: Uh, not so much when I was over there. In 1945 in the service I went to visit her. And she lived in a, in

a                   thatched roof cottage with an open fireplace. And  
                    she, she made tea for me and smoked a cigarette with  
                    me. And she was about eighty nine years old then but  
                    she was very healthy and in good shape.

SIGRIST:       Interesting that even as late as 1945 people are still  
                    living in thatched cottages, yeah.

BRADY:         Yeah. The cottage was five hundred years in the  
                    family and a first cousin of mine sold it a few years  
                    ago, just sold it to a stranger. Never, never asked  
                    any of us over here if we wanted it or anything.

SIGRIST:       Wow, five hundred years in one family, though, wow.

BRADY:         Right.

SIGRIST:       What was your father's name?

BRADY:         John.

SIGRIST:       John. And middle name or...?

BRADY:         Uh, his name was Joseph, John Joseph.

SIGRIST: John Joseph. And tell me a little bit about your father's personality.

BRADY: Well, he's tall, thin. He, uh, when he came here, the first job he had was out of Jersey City driving a truck on the, I think it's the Holland Tunnel. And then he went to outside of Philadelphia and he worked in a foundry and then in a paper mill. And he did that for most of his life.

SIGRIST: Did he come to America prior to the rest of the family coming?

BRADY: He came in 1926.

SIGRIST: So he had been here a few years before you all came.

BRADY: A few years, yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, you said he was a tall, thin man. What was his character like? What was his, his personality like?

BRADY: Oh, he had, he had a nice personality. One thing that I often think about, people that come from some place like that and they're educated there, they all know poetry and prose and they can recite. And both my mother and father could recite poems and different things and, I think it's just something of that era that they can, they could do that. Maybe that all they had to do.

SIGRIST: Is there a poem that you can remember that your father used to recite that you could say for us on tape?

BRADY: (he pauses) He had one and we never knew where it, it came from until a few years ago we found it. And it wasn't that, it's a poem but he would say, "I am monarch of all I survey," and then he was head of the beasts and, the brute and the beasts and, uh, a few years ago we were looking through a book of old sayings and poems and this thing popped out at us. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: (he laughs) Tell me what your mother's name was.

BRADY: Anna, Anna E.

SIGRIST: Anna E.?

BRADY: E., Elizabeth, Anna Elizabeth.

SIGRIST: Anna Elizabeth. And what was her maiden name?

BRADY: Brady. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Oh, that's interesting. (he laughs)

BRADY: Uh, this County Cavan is just full of Bradys and, uh, this Jim Brady who was shot, uh, he was a press secretary for President Reagan? His ancestors came from there. And practically anybody in the United States, and I think there's twenty thousand families of them now, they all emigrated from that, originally from that area.

SIGRIST: Was there a, a relation between your mother and father, though?

BRADY: No.

SIGRIST: No, they were unrelated families...

BRADY: No, right.

SIGRIST: ...but they all had the same last name.

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: Tell me some of the same information about your mother. What was her personality like?

BRADY: Oh, she was very nice. She was a very good pianist. She went to school for music in Dublin and she played all the classical music. She liked to sing. She was a little heavy and very happy, happy-go-lucky.

SIGRIST: Did you have a piano in your house?

BRADY: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do have any recollections of when you were a child in Ireland of anything associated with that piano, or what do you remember about it?

BRADY: No, I, I don't, I don't remember that piano. The only piano I remember was when we were living in Philadelphia during the Depression. We chopped one up for firewood. (he laughs) No, I, I have no recollection of the one in Ireland other than it was a, it wasn't a grand. It was a, what do you call those, spinet, I guess.

SIGRIST: A spinet. Tell me, is there a, what do you know about your mother's family background?

BRADY: Uh, not too much. My grandmother and grandfather were the schoolteachers in Ballyhaise. And after we come over here, both of them died, shortly after that. And other than we fixed up their headstones and stuff a few years ago, I didn't really know them.

SIGRIST: So you have no recollections as a six year of those grandparents?

BRADY: I, uh, the grandfather I remember but not, not the grandmother.

SIGRIST: What is it that you remember about the grandfather?

BRADY: Oh, the white hair, the moustache (he laughs), the, uh, and being a schoolteacher, you know, he, he demanded a certain amount of respect and awe. And I would go to school with him some days and even though I wasn't old enough to go to school, I sat in the school.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me what, what the experience of going to school was like at that time?

BRADY: Yeah. The school itself was very, very small and it was a one room school. One room that he had and one room that his, his wife had. And I think that they had all eight grades in the one room and they just, there wasn't that many children around. They just were able to take care of them. I think very similar to the one room schoolhouse here in the States.

SIGRIST: At roughly the same time.

BRADY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Sure. So your father went in 1926.

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of your father in Ireland prior to his leaving?

BRADY: No.

SIGRIST: No. How did your mother support the family? Were there other children?

BRADY: Uh, I had a sister who died. In fact, we both got spinal meningitis and she died and I lived. As far as support, I think the family had enough money. I don't think they lacked for anything. I don't recall them lacking for anything.

SIGRIST: How old, what was your sister's name?

BRADY: The one that died? Her name was Angela.

SIGRIST: And how, is she older or younger than you?

BRADY: She was younger than me by about a year or so. She

was young when, when she died.

SIGRIST: Do you have any specific recollections of that experience when your sister died?

BRADY: No, other than being sick.

SIGRIST: What, what do you remember about being sick?

BRADY: The fever. You get a very high fever and you're warm and I was warm. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Did your mother have communications with your father during those three years?

BRADY: Oh, yes, oh, yes, sure.

SIGRIST: Because your father is sort of moving around a little bit at that time?

BRADY: No, what he did, he come over here and he went to Jersey City first and he was driving a truck and he hurt his back. And when he come out of the hospital, he went to, outside of Philadelphia to his sister's

house and stayed there and worked out of there. And then, when we come over here, that's where we went.

SIGRIST: I see. Do you, do you have any, did you have knowledge of what America was before you got here? When you were a little boy in Ireland, did, what did it mean to you?

BRADY: No, nothing.

SIGRIST: Nothing. Do you remember your mother saying to you, "We're going to America now!"?

BRADY: Oh, yeah, that.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about that whole process, what you had to do to prepare to leave.

BRADY: Uh, the things that I remember the most, we went to Dublin, actually a little town outside of Dublin called Dunleary [ph] and we stayed at a friend of my mother's until the ship arrived. And when the ship arrived, we took a tender out to it. It wasn't a case of the, the ship docking there. We, we had to take

a smaller boat out and get on the, on the ship out in  
the deeper water. I remember the ship itself. I  
remember running up and down the stairs. I have  
a menu at home, that they had a party for the  
children and I still have the, the little menu. It's  
a one sheet menu "Something For Good Little Boys  
And Girls." (he laughs) They were going to give them  
this and that. And I've kept that.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship?

BRADY: I think it's S.S. Transylvania.

SIGRIST: And how did you get from Ballyhaise to Dublin.

BRADY: Bus.

SIGRIST: Do, do you remember the, the process of actually  
getting to Dublin from your town?

BRADY: Yes, uh, not, not clearly but that's how we went.

SIGRIST: Do you know what you took with you? What, what did  
your mother pack to take to America?

BRADY: She had a trunk and I had just a small suitcase, not that, uh, not that much.

SIGRIST: And is it just you and your mother traveling?

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: Did any family members go with you to Dublin?

BRADY: No, no.

SIGRIST: Just the two of...

BRADY: Oh, well, she had family members and friends in Dublin. That's, that's where we stayed until the ship came.

SIGRIST: I see. So the, the ship, you boarded the ship in Dublin, took the tender out...

BRADY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...to the ship in Dublin. What other things stick out

in your mind about the ship and being on the ship and what that experience was like?

BRADY: The thing that, that sticks out the most was the running with other boys and girls, uh, up and down the corridors and up the steps and from deck to the other and, uh, just playing.

SIGRIST: You said that you arrived in August of 1929 before we started the tape going.

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: Does this mean you celebrated your sixth birthday while you were in the process of getting to America or had you turned six before you left?

BRADY: Uh, we had, I had turned six before we left.

SIGRIST: Must have been just before you left.

BRADY: Yeah, uh, I think it's just about a month after my birthday that we arrived here...

SIGRIST: I see.

BRADY: ...near the end of August.

SIGRIST: How long did the ship take to get to New York?

BRADY: I think it took ten days.

SIGRIST: And tell me about what happened when the ship  
approached New York.

BRADY: Well, we did see the Statue of Liberty. That, that I  
remember, I'll always remember. And, uh, that's about  
it. I, there's nothing that really stands out.

SIGRIST: And you had mentioned to me that you were sure that  
you had come through Ellis Island.

BRADY: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Is there any kind of a recollection that you have  
about that experience?

BRADY: Yeah. I remember standing in line. I remember, uh,

leaving here and going to the mainland and then getting a train from, uh, probably Pennsylvania Station into, into Philadelphia. And then it was, we were met there by my aunt and uncle and different people.

SIGRIST: Your, your aunt and your uncle, is this your mother's...

BRADY: It's my father's sister.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother know these people?

BRADY: Oh, yeah, sure. They were all in Ireland together.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you have any recollections of being in New York City or being on the train, seeing things you'd never seen before?

BRADY: Just the train. Just the train station and the train. That was the, the big thing and I, that stuck with me for a long, long time.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember, maybe in retrospect, how, how

your mother acted during this whole process? You know, what was she thinking and, and how did she behave towards you during this whole immigration process?

BRADY: Uh, I didn't think there was anything strange about it. I think she was glad to be here and I think she was happy that the wait was over, that she was finally able, able to come.

SIGRIST: Do you know how she felt about leaving her family in Ballyhaise?

BRADY: She did not have much of a family except the, the mother and father and a brother, and the brother was a policeman. They call them "guards" over there, yeah.

SIGRIST: But she had a number of family members here in the United States?

BRADY: No.

SIGRIST: No.

BRADY: She had a brother in Detroit. That was all.

SIGRIST: I see. She was just happy to get back to her husband.

BRADY: (he laughs) Yeah, I think so.

SIGRIST: Tell me about seeing your father, and this would be more or less for the first conscious time.

BRADY: Uh, one thing sticks out. It was the fact that he smoked a pipe. And he smoked the worst smelling tobacco, Granger Tobacco. (he laughs) And, uh, I can remember running, you know, into his arms and being hugged and smelling this stinking pipe (he laughs) more than anything else. But it gave him an opportunity. He took us to the zoo and, uh...

SIGRIST: Where did you spend your first night in America?  
Where, where did you stay the very first night you arrived?

BRADY: That I don't know. I'm not sure. I think it was at the aunt's place in, when I, when we got out of here and got on the train, I stayed in my aunt's home.

SIGRIST: Where was your father living?

BRADY: At my aunt's.

SIGRIST: Oh, he was living there with your aunt.

BRADY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing? He had left Jersey City where he couldn't be the truck driver anymore. What was he doing when he went to Philadelphia?

BRADY: He was working in a foundry, an aluminum foundry outside of Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay with your aunt?

BRADY: Uh, I would say about a year.

SIGRIST: Oh, so quite a long time actually.

BRADY: Yeah. My mother took a job as a, a housekeeper. And I had a, a cousin about my age, my aunt's daughter,

and we started school together and everything there. Collingdale was the name of the little town outside of Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

BRADY: C-O-L-L-I-N-G-D-A-L-E.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Tell me about starting school and what that experience was like for you.

BRADY: (he laughs) Uh, I think the thing that stands out the most, and as I think back on it, was the fact that we wore high shoes and short pants and stockings almost up, up to your knees. But when you think back, or when I think back or I see an old picture or something, I think, "My God, we all look like immigrants." (he laughs) But that's, that was the, the uniform, the high shoe and the, and the stocking.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any kind of prejudice against you because you were an immigrant?

BRADY: No.

SIGRIST: Maybe from the kids, or...

BRADY: No.

SIGRIST: No. Were there other Irish people at this school?

BRADY: Yeah. I would say it was a mixture. A lot of  
Italian, a lot of Irish.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Did they ever speak of any  
kind of prejudice that they experienced...

BRADY: Here? No.

SIGRIST: ...here in America, like in the work place?

BRADY: No, they, they didn't. Uh, of course, during the  
Depression it was hard to keep a job for anybody. My  
father and, he had stretches where he was out of work.  
And my mother did housework and acted more or less  
like a midwife for, for a lot of people.

SIGRIST: Do you know how she would have gotten involved in doing that kind of work?

BRADY: No, I don't but I know she did it (he laughs) and she did it in the Main Line in Philadelphia. They were well-to-do people.

SIGRIST: Did your parents have any other children once they got here?

BRADY: Uh, not until 1936. I had a sister born. And then nine years later I had a brother born.

SIGRIST: My goodness, these long stretches...

BRADY: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...between the children. How, what, what is the name of the sister who was born in '36?

BRADY: Her name was Angela, same as...

SIGRIST: Named after the sister who had died?

BRADY: Right. And she died when she was forty nine, in 1980  
I think it was.

SIGRIST: And your brother's name?

BRADY: His name is Mathias, and we call him "Matt" and he's  
about fifteen years younger than I am.

SIGRIST: Wow. Can you spell Mathias, please?

BRADY: M-A-T-H-I-A-S.

SIGRIST: Thanks. What was the first job you got, the first  
paying job?

BRADY: Uh, I worked in a meat market down the street after  
school cleaning meat blocks and slicing equipment,  
scale equipment, delivering orders.

SIGRIST: And how much did you get paid?

BRADY: Not very much. (they laugh) Actually, when I went to  
high, this is in high school, I worked in the  
cafeteria at lunch time and got fifteen cents a day

for that, got three tokens. And I tried to save those and convert them into real nickels. And then when I got a little older, besides the afternoon job, I set up bowling pins in Jimmy Dyke's [ph] Bowling, one, one of his bowling alleys there. Then, after I graduated high school, I went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad Road until I went into the service.

SIGRIST: What did you do in the railroad?

BRADY: I started out by washing engines (he laughs) and shining bells and, as a laborer. And that was thirty five cents an hour. (he laughs) That I remember.

SIGRIST: What year is this, roughly?

BRADY: That would be 1941.

SIGRIST: Just before the war.

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: And then you went into what branch of the military?

BRADY: I went into the army. I was a combat engineer.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned that it was during this time that  
you went back to Ireland for the first time.

BRADY: In 1945, after the war was over.

SIGRIST: Right.

BRADY: I was in Frankfurt, Germany, or outside of Frankfurt.  
And I had an aunt write a letter saying that if I had  
a leave that they would put me up and take care of me,  
make sure that, uh, I would live within the law, and  
so on. So that letter, actually, got me a pass and  
I was gone for about thirty days.

SIGRIST: What did that feel like, to go, did, did, what kind of  
emotional feeling did you have?

BRADY: I was one, I was only a private, but I was one of the  
first uniformed soldiers in the southern part of  
Ireland. You had to be, have a blood relative:  
mother, father, sister, brother. I had aunts and

a grandmother, so it took a little bit of selling  
(he laughs) to get permission to go.

SIGRIST: That's right. Your grandmother is still living, isn't  
she.

BRADY: Right.

SIGRIST: You said that.

BRADY: So, we were, or I was, sort of the odd ball but people  
would all come up and spoke to you and said, "Hello,  
Yank" or whatever it might be. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself, do you think of yourself  
as being Irish or being American?

BRADY: I think I think of myself as being American.

SIGRIST: What, what do you think about you is Irish, though?  
What, what part of you is truly Irish?

BRADY: Uh, the name for one thing. The other thing is, they  
say I have the map of Ireland (he laughs) for a face.

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SIGRIST: (he laughs) You have a full, ruddy complexion and,  
uh...

BRADY: Yeah. No, I, I consider myself an American.

SIGRIST: Mr. Brady, I want to thank you very much for taking a  
few minutes from visiting...

BRADY: Okay.

SIGRIST: ...from Florida to do this interview.

BRADY: Okay.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off with John Brady on  
Thursday, June 22nd, 1995 at the Ellis Island  
recording studio. Thank you, sir.

BRADY: Thank you.